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# *Alternation*

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**Interdisciplinary Journal for the Study of the  
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Southern Africa**

## **Birds In and Out of Literature**

**Guest Editors**  
*Pat Louw and Travis V. Mason*

2009

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# Editorial

**Johannes A. Smit**

Since ancient times, birds have been associated with aesthetics. Bird plumage and bird song have become part and parcel of the human cultural heritage. Together with humanity's capacity to identify and ascribe a large variety of symbolic meanings to birds, the characteristic features of bird species as well as their association with natural habitats, and their diverse roles in the food chain and biosphere, make them one of the most significant and awe-inspiring of cosmic phenomena.

In Africa, birds range from the large birds of prey like the African fish eagle with its remarkable call—often called ‘the voice of Africa’—through the large variety of birds such as pelicans, blue cranes, secretary birds, and owls to smaller seagulls, parrots and the wide variety of finch. This diversity is matched by an equally rich variety of traditions, legends, stories, anecdotes, and symbolic meanings ascribed to birds and emblems portraying birds. Birds form one of the rich sources of our global ecosystems and ecology, also significantly impacting on humanity's creative and imaginative engagements and interactions with nature.

Due to the excesses of non-eco-friendly industrialisation, a variety of poisons impacting on natural health, and humanity's encroachment on the environment, many bird species are threatened with extinction. In a study released in May 2009, Birdlife International, on behalf of the International Union for Conservation of Nature, revealed that 1,227 species of birds—12% of bird life on the planet—are now threatened with extinction. An additional 192 bird species are on the critically endangered list<sup>1</sup>. As a very significant part of our global environment, birds and the habitat of birds need to be

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.arkive.org/news/20090514-more-birds-threatened-with-extinction-than-ever-before.html>.

protected<sup>2</sup>—the future of the jackass penguin is a case in point<sup>3</sup>. And in spite of conflict of opinion between global warming denialists, sceptics, and green advocacy it is an incontrovertible fact that industrialisation and different forms of pollution have severely impacted animal life, including bird life habitats and bird health over the last few hundred years<sup>4</sup>. In the South African context, we need to consider the variety and rich heritage of birdlife we accommodate, and are responsible for<sup>5</sup>.

In addition to the literary studies of birds and bird life it is especially in the interdisciplinary biodiversity domain that critical reflection on the rich heritage of birds and bird life is important for human life and prosperity. The celebration of *Birds: In and Out of Literature* makes a not insignificant contribution to the continuation of awareness raising in this direction.

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<sup>2</sup> See [http://www.wildwatch.com/book\\_reviews/birds-2/the-eskom-red-data-book-of-birds-of-south-africa-lesotho-and-swaziland](http://www.wildwatch.com/book_reviews/birds-2/the-eskom-red-data-book-of-birds-of-south-africa-lesotho-and-swaziland) for more information on threatened bird species and related critical perspectives in southern Africa.

<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.catalogs.com/info/bestof/top-10-most-endangered-species-on-earth>: 'Jackass Penguins face a myriad of threats, from oil spills and pollution to a dwindling seal food supply, which makes this penguin prey rather than peer. Once the most common sea bird in South Africa, the Jackass Penguin is one of the 10 most endangered species on earth'.

<sup>4</sup> On November 3 2009, IUCN revealed that more than a third of the animal species of 47,677 assessed thus far are threatened with extinction. See <http://www.arkive.org/news/20091103-2009-iucn-red-list-of-threatened-species.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Of the +/- 850 bird species recorded in South Africa, about 725 are resident or annual visitors, and 50 of these are endemic or near-endemic and can only be seen in South Africa. Apart from resident birds, South Africa hosts a number of intra-African migrants such as cuckoos and kingfishers, as well as birds from the Arctic, Europe, Central Asia, China and Antarctica during the year' (see [http://www.sa-venues.com/wildlife/south\\_africa\\_birdlife.htm](http://www.sa-venues.com/wildlife/south_africa_birdlife.htm)).

# Introduction

## Birds: In and Out of Literature

Pat Louw and  
Travis V. Mason

### 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 (7<sup>th</sup> 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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# **Bird Metaphors in Jack Mapanje's *The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison and Skipping Without Ropes***

**Syned Mthatiwa**

## **Abstract**

It is a notable feature of Jack Mapanje's poetry that it represents creatures from the world of nature—mammals, birds, amphibians, reptiles and insects—for close association with life experiences in various contexts and situations and with people he views with contempt and disgust and those he regards with tenderness and compassion. Through his use of animals in his poetry Mapanje seeks to comment on social and political affairs in his society. This essay focuses on bird metaphors or the symbolic import of birds, which Mapanje depicts in the poems dealing with his imprisonment, release from prison and the associated experiences. I argue in the essay that Mapanje uses birds as metaphors for the poetic voice (or himself), fellow prisoners at Mikuyu Maximum Security Prison, exiled Malawians and other victims of Malawi's dictator Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda, as well as victims of other oppressors and despots around the world. Where metaphors are used in this way the aim is to underscore the harmlessness, victimhood, and suffering of these victims, while emphasising the oppressors' evil and injustice. In cases where the metaphor is for the poetic voice it also highlights the creativity and ingenuity of the poet. Besides representing birds as images for certain individuals, the poet also represents them as symbols of events in his life.

**Key Concepts:** metaphor, representation, dictatorship, harmlessness, victimisation.

Master, you talked with bows,  
Arrows and catapults once  
Your hands steaming with hawk blood  
To protect your chicken.

Why do you talk with knives now,  
Your hands teaming with eggshells  
And hot blood from your own chicken?  
Is it to impress your visitors? (Mapanje 1981:4).

In Jack Mapanje's poem 'Song of Chickens', the chickens accuse their master, a human, of duplicity for protecting them from predators but later killing them for food. This is an instance of a typical human-animal relationship (especially between a farmer and his/ her domestic animals) where a human protects his/ her livestock from predators only to be the predator him/ herself later on. However, in the context of the poem, as some critics have rightly observed, the poem's extra-poetic referent is Malawian dictator Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda who ruled the country from independence in 1964 to 1994. The allegorical persona of the chicken collectively represents ordinary Malawians (Nazombe 1983:176; Chirambo 2007a:82-83; 2007b:144-146). Banda came as a liberator of his people from colonial bondage. He championed the struggle against colonialism, but when freedom was won, he turned against his own people—oppressing them.

The mention of blood in the poem evokes the 'Chilobwe Murders' of the 1960s and 1970s. Accompanied by various rumours, these were mysterious murders that took place in 'several townships in the country's southern and central regions' (Mapanje 2007:63), particularly in Chilobwe township in the commercial city of Blantyre. According to Paul Brietzke (1974: 362):

One rumour held that the Government was responsible for the murders, and was draining the victims' blood and sending it to South Africa to repay a loan, since white men are believed to drink African blood and manufacture money from it.

In the poem the collective persona of the chicken represents the victims of oppression, although they themselves are harmless. It is typical in

Malawi to have a host slaughter a chicken for a visitor. Having a chicken slaughtered for you as a visitor is one of the greatest symbols of welcome and honour. In the poem the visitor could be South African Prime Minister John Vorster who paid a state visit to Malawi in 1970, the year the poem was written (Chirambo 2007a:82; 2007b:144). The visit followed on South Africa's agreement to finance Banda's project of moving Malawi's capital from Zomba to Lilongwe (see Potts 1985:188f). It was around the time after Banda had struck the deal with the South African government that the mysterious murders in Chilobwe and other townships in Malawi began to take place and rumours began to make the rounds that South Africa had agreed to fund Banda's project in exchange for blood. Besides, during the 1960s and 1970s, the period Mapanje deals with in 'A Song of Chickens', up to the 1980s, the Banda regime 'arrested, tortured, and killed hundreds of Jehovah's Witnesses' who refused to buy the Malawi Congress Party (MCP) membership card, 'salute the flag, or attend [Banda's] official functions' (Chirambo 2007a:83; see also *Africa Watch* 1990:64ff). Many of them were forced into exile in Zambia and Mozambique.

In the poem the chickens are portrayed as harmless victims of the whims of their master. Similarly, Malawians whom the chickens represent were victims of Banda's despotism. Mapanje's tendency to highlight the victimhood and suffering of harmless people by using bird imagery that begins here continues in the two collections which form the textual focus of this essay, namely *The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison* (CWMP, 1993) and *Skippping Without Ropes* (SWR, 1998). Dating from 1981, 'Song of Chickens' formed part of his collection, *Of Chameleons and Gods*, which was,

neither officially proscribed nor cleared for sale. Thus bookshops were not allowed to display it, but no one could be prosecuted for possessing a copy. In 1985 the Ministry of Education and Culture issued a circular banning its use in schools and colleges (Human Rights Watch/ Africa Watch 1990:76).

This volume set the stage for the critical politically loaded poetry of Jack Mapanje. Mapanje was incarcerated in 1987 without trial and released more than three years later. CWMP and SWR contain some of this poetry on his

prison experiences and their aftermath. The main reason for focusing on these two volumes concerns his use of bird metaphors relevant to the topic of this colloquium. Reflecting on his use of metaphor less than a year prior to his imprisonment, he quoted,

the Polish novelist Tadeusz Konwicki to the effect that censorship ‘forces the writer to employ metaphors which raise the piece of writing to a higher level’. He is amused that the Malawi Censorship board may have actually improved his poems (Human Rights Watch/Africa Watch 1990:76).

This essay then focuses on bird metaphors<sup>1</sup> or the symbolic import of birds, which Mapanje depicts in the poems dealing with his imprisonment, release from prison and the associated experiences. For this purpose, I have identified a number of themes related to Mapanje’s bird metaphors which are significant for our focus. In general this derives from his familiarity with birds and their ubiquity in Malawi and in Malawi’s oral tradition, but also his actual encounter with them during his imprisonment and thereafter. From within his own context, he has drawn on what Leonard Lutwack (1994:xii) refers to when he points out that birds,

are used more frequently in poetry than in any other genre because they can be incorporated more easily in the minute imagery that makes up the basic stuff of poetry than in the broader elements of plot and character upon which drama and fiction depend.

Lutwack also observes that ‘[f]amiliarity and transcendence have given birds a wider range of meaning and symbol in literature than any other animal’ (1994:xi). It is no doubt his familiarity with birds and their common presence in Malawi that inspired Mapanje’s use of them in his poetry.

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<sup>1</sup> For purposes of brevity, the minimalistic understanding of ‘metaphor’ is used, e.g. as the application of ‘a word or expression which in literal usage denotes one kind of thing or action [...] to a distinctly different kind of thing or action, without asserting a comparison’ (Abrams 1993:65). It stands to reason that the metaphoric meanings so produced would often be more than one as they are generated in metaphoric usage.

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## 1 The 'Song of Chickens' in Context

'Song of Chickens' appeared in Mapanje's first collection of poetry *Of Chameleons and Gods (OCAG)*, which appeared in 1981, and it is the only poem from that collection that so explicitly uses bird metaphors. *OCAG* appeared at a time when the excesses of the notorious dictatorial leadership of Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda were at their peak. During this time Malawians experienced a regime characterised by terror and repression. Those who opposed or were suspected of holding contrary views to those of Banda and the MCP suffered long detentions without trial or were murdered (Africa Watch/ Africa Watch 1990).

To engage in creative writing that was critical of Banda's style of leadership under such circumstances would be considered foolhardy. Not surprisingly, other well-known Malawian writers such as Frank Chipasula, Lupenga Mphande, Felix Mnthali, and Legson Kayira, among others, went into exile. Those

authors operating from within Malawi had to resort to a private and cryptic mode of expression in [their] writing in order to elude both the tough censorship laws of the country and the real possibility of political persecution (Nazombe 1995:139).

Animals such as chameleons, lizards, flies, cockroaches, and their associated myths, and the mythical subterranean serpent Napolo, came in handy for some Malawian poets.

However, despite his attempts to mask his political messages in *OCAG*, Mapanje spent three years, seven months and sixteen days in Kamuzu Banda's notorious Mikuyu Maximum Security Prison without charge or trial. Although the real reasons for his detention still remain unknown, it is indisputable that they had something to do with the politics of the time (see Chirambo 2007 a & b; Mapanje 1989; 1997 a & b). Mapanje himself suspects that his lunch-hour arrest at Gymkhana Club in Zomba on the 25<sup>th</sup> of September, 1987, which led to his detention in Mikuyu Prison until May 1991, came as a result of what he calls his 'peeping into the dictator's drawer'—exposing the evils of the Banda regime through his writing (Mapanje 1997c:219).

Unlike in *OCAG*, Mapanje makes no attempt to obscure the victims

of his sardonic humour, satire and lampoon in subsequent poems. This can be attributed to the fact that all his poetry collections after *OCAG* appeared while he was in exile in the United Kingdom. In the subsequent collections he dispenses with cryptic language and myths but maintains his use of metaphors, especially animal metaphors. It is also in these subsequent collections, especially in *The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison* and *Skiping Without Ropes*, where the ‘rhetoric of animality’<sup>2</sup> and animal metaphors are most prevalent.

The fact that Mapanje maintains the use of animal metaphors in his post-Banda poetry also reveals the deep influence of Malawi’s oral narratives, in which animals act as mirrors of human society and behaviour. His use of animals also proves the validity of Claude Levi-Strauss’s observation that animals are ‘good to think with’ and Kate Soper’s (2005:307) observation that:

In animals we discover our own loathsome and most laudable qualities, projecting on to them both that with which we most closely identify, and that which we are most keen to be distanced from.

I should hasten to mention that the use of animals in poetry as demonstrated by Mapanje in ‘Song of Chickens’, and in literature in general, is as old as humanity itself. Animals have appeared in written and oral literature, both African and Western, since time immemorial. Mary Allen starts an introduction to her book *Animals in American Literature* with the cogent observation that ‘Animals have served literature well’. She goes on to say, ‘They have stood as allegorical figures to represent human nature and as a rich body of metaphors for the inanimate as well as the animate’ (Allen 1983:3). Animals have been used as examples for humans to follow or avoid in fables that serve as standards of moral didacticism, they have represented various human and godly attributes, they have been used to teach moral and religious lessons, and in satire they have held up mirrors that serve to ridicule human foibles and political corruption.

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<sup>2</sup> The tendency to give people, institutions, or societies that we do not like or despise derogatory animal names such as ‘beast’ or ‘brute’, or to refer to them using names of particular animals as a crude tactic of name-calling (Baker 1993:77ff).

Three notable ways of representing animals in literature can, according to Soper, be termed naturalistic, allegorical and compassionate. In the naturalistic mode animals 'are described in a fairly straightforward way and figure as part of the narrative situation and environmental context' (Soper 2005:303), while the allegorical register depicts animals not as natural beings but as metaphors for human beings or registers of human forms of behaviour'. The compassionate mode of animal representation, on the other hand, uses literary works 'as a way of meditating upon or bringing us to think about our treatment of animals' (Soper 2005:307). But, as Allen (1983:6) also observes, 'The metaphorical [read the allegorical] far outnumber the literal animals in literature'. It is in fact these metaphorical uses of animals that we encounter most often in the poetry of Jack Mapanje.

## **2 'Song of Chickens' and Harmlessness**

In addition to the predetention context 'Song of Chickens' creates for the volumes *CWMP* and *SWR*, it is also significant that it uses the figure of a domestic bird. More often than not, the birds and mammals that feature in Mapanje's poetry are wild rather than domestic ones. References to domestic birds are very rare in his poetry. This perhaps owes to the fact that his representation of animals in general is influenced by oral literature and, as Brian Morris observes, 'domestic animals play a minor role in [Malawian] folk tales' (1998:181). Leroy Vail and Landeg White rightly observe that Mapanje is attracted by the oral aesthetic and uses aspects of it in his poetry (1990:30-32; see also Nazombe 1983:161). Vail and White (1990:31) say,

To Mapanje, the language of the oral poet is sophisticated and mischievous, dense with history refined to metaphor, yet capable of dynamic effects of communication precisely because those metaphors are understood and have achieved currency. To recreate in Malawian English a language of such local resonance, recapturing the toughness and complexity of oral poetry and especially its capacity for intellectual rebellion, has become his literary programme

It is a notable feature of Jack Mapanje's poetry that it represents creatures from the world of nature—mammals, birds, amphibians, reptiles and insects—for 'close association' (Uledi-Kamanga 1998:42) with life experiences in various contexts and situations and with people he views with contempt and disgust and those he regards with tenderness and compassion. Through his use of animals in his poetry Mapanje seeks to comment on social and political affairs in his society.

Mapanje uses birds as metaphors for the poetic voice (or himself), fellow prisoners at Mikuyu Maximum Security Prison, exiled Malawians and other victims of Banda, as well as victims of other oppressors and despots around the world. Where metaphors are used in this way the aim is to underscore the harmlessness, victimhood, and suffering of these victims, while emphasising the oppressors' evil and injustice. In cases where the metaphor is for the poetic voice it also highlights the creativity and ingenuity of the poet. Besides representing birds as images for certain individuals, the poet also represents them as symbols of events in his life.

In literary works more generally birds have featured as, for instance, 'harbingers of the time of day and seasons of the year' (Lutwack 1994:23). Their songs are associated with intense sorrow and joy, while a lone black bird or crow in a tree in winter has been seen by many poets as an image of forlornness (Lutwack 1994:29). Whereas the nightingale is a favourite muse of the poet as its song has been a pre-eminent symbol of poetic inspiration, the dove has featured as a favourite Christian or biblical symbol of the Holy Spirit and of purity. Night birds, large black-plumaged birds and birds with carrion-eating proclivities, such as ravens, crows and vultures, are seen as villains, supernatural agents of evil or prophets of doom.

In some of his portrayals of birds, Mapanje rejects traditional conceptions by selecting small and vulnerable species that are generally viewed as harmless, such as wagtails, and by extending a tender attitude towards birds that are normally reviled, such as the marabou stork. These portrayals are perhaps influenced by the dynamism of oral literature where a narrator may decide to alter the role of otherwise stock characters, challenging his/her listeners' expectations in the process, to suit the moral s/he intends to attach to the narrative.

In his representation of animals Mapanje exploits his society's wealth of knowledge about animals and the associations and attributes it



assigns to some of them. He does not always do this as thoroughly with birds. He omits from his poetry traditionally controversial birds such as the owl, and big birds such as the ostrich<sup>3</sup>. He also, unusually, shows the negative effects of the behaviour of birds traditionally considered harmless on the lives of prisoners in Mikuyu<sup>4</sup>.

Mapanje also uses bird metaphors and symbols to emphasise the harmlessness of Banda's presumed political enemies and their experiences of victimhood and suffering. In his article 'The Symbolism of Bondage and Freedom: Jack Mapanje's *The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison*' (1998) Brighton Uledi-Kamanga argues that Mapanje associates harmless animals (including birds) with freedom. This might be the case in a few instances in *CWMP*, but in Mapanje's poetry in general, and especially in *CWMP* and *SWR*, he associates these birds rather with harmlessness, defencelessness, victimhood and suffering. By the strategy of using these harmless birds (wagtails, sparrows, geese and swallows), Mapanje seeks to show that those who were persecuted during Banda's regime were harmless people who fell victim to the excesses of a despotic leader. Further, the bird imagery helps to expose the great physical and psychological suffering that detainees in Banda's prisons such as Mikuyu faced (Uledi-Kamanga 1998:44-45).

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<sup>3</sup> Malawians, like other peoples of Africa and the world at large, have interacted with animals since time immemorial (see Morris *The Power of Animals: An Ethnography* [1998], and *Animals and Ancestors: An Ethnography* [2000]). The intimate relationship between humans and animals in Malawi is demonstrated in, among other things, oral literature where animals, especially in folk stories, are humanised. As a result of their long interaction with animals, which dates back to antiquity, Malawians connect certain attributes and behavioural traits epistemologically with particular animals. For example the lion is associated with bravery and cruelty, the elephant with strength, and the owl with witchcraft, death and misfortune.

<sup>4</sup> The reader will notice that there are more negative images of birds in Mapanje's poetry as discussed here than positive ones. Although positive images of birds do also appear in Mapanje's oeuvre, it is beyond the purpose of this essay to attempt to balance the negative and positive images of birds in the poetry.

Those portrayed as harmless victims of Banda's paranoiac fear of rebellion are Malawians in general, prisoners in the various detention centres in the country (Mikuyu, in particular, Dzeleka, and Nsanje, among others), and the poet himself. Mostly, wherever the poet uses a metaphor for himself, he is pointing to his creativity, inventiveness and cunning. In the link with harmlessness, it is ironic that these detainees are mostly non-threatening individuals. For instance, the killing of Malawians whose only crime was holding a contrary view to that of the ruling clique is alluded to in 'Where Dissent is Meat for Crocodiles' (1993:80-81). The poem refers to the tendency to suppress dissenting views by imprisoning, exiling or killing those who held such views and feeding them to crocodiles in the River Shire. But in the same poem Banda (who is called 'this monster' or 'this beast') is said to have 'persistently blatantly wrung / And squelched nimble necks of sparrows' (1993:80). The violence underlined by the word 'wrung' emphasises Banda's insensitivity and evil while the innocence of his victims is emphasised by their depiction as sparrows.

Significantly, the threads of harmlessness and how harmless people are physically and psychologically abused as victims are carried forward through various related motifs in *CWMP* and *SWR*.

### **3 Bird Metaphors and Harmlessness**

#### **3.1 Wagtails**

Mapanje continues to expose the harmlessness and victimhood of Malawians who found themselves in prison in his poem 'The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison' (1993:48-52). As Uledi-Kamanga notes, Mapanje uses in this poem 'the technique of literary self-effacement as a strategy for excluding his own physical and emotional reaction to his situation by presenting the poem from the point of view of another inmate' of Mikuyu Prison (1998:43). The speaker in the poem welcomes the poet, who is moved from the wing of Mikuyu called 'New Building', to the section of the prison called D4:

Welcome to the chattering wagtails of  
D4. Before your Gymkhana Club story,  
Let's begin with the history of the wing  
You've come from. They call it the New

*Bird Metaphors in Jack Mapanje's The Chattering Wagtails...*

Building, which is so marvellously blank  
As you saw, that you'd have cracked up  
Within months, however tough-willed;  
Thank these D4s for moving you here (1993:48).

In the poem the wagtails are both real and metaphorical. The metaphorical wagtails are the prisoners who are introduced to the poet by the speaker as 'these chattering wagtails of D4' and are later referred to as 'these / sparrows in D4' or 'swallows':

We won't bother you with cases of these  
Sparrows in D4, talk to them to share  
Their humour; but let not the years some  
Swallows have clocked here horrify you  
(Sixteen, eleven, seven, that's nothing) [...] (1993:50).

The real wagtails are introduced to the addressee as 'the other wagtails / Of Mikuyu Prison; these that chatter in / Circles showing off their fluffy wings / To you' (1993:51). The features of the human wagtails, sparrows or swallows that stand out in the poem are their kindness (they helped facilitate the addressee's move from an isolation cell in the 'New Building' to the general section called D4), their humour (the poet is advised to 'talk to them to share / Their humour') and the injustice done to them by their long detention (the poet is advised not to let 'the years some / Swallows have clocked here horrify [him] / [Sixteen, eleven, seven ...]'). The prisoners are called 'chattering wagtails' because, like the real wagtails that sing all day, they have a great sense of humour and chatter a lot as they share life and prison experiences and jokes<sup>5</sup>. However, the bird metaphors here (especially

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<sup>5</sup> In reply to an interview question from Landeg White as to why he uses wagtails in *CWMP*, Mapanje said about the real birds: 'When I was in prison wagtails annoyed me and all the other inmates. They disturbed my creative and my spiritual life—initially, every aspect of my life in prison was irritated by the wagtails' (1994:54). About his wagtail metaphor, he said: 'I discovered that the majority of the inmates were, if you like, chattering wagtails. They are chattering away about their own little story, why they

the particular birds used—wagtails, swallows and sparrows) emphasise the prisoners' harmlessness and accentuate their victimhood. Wagtails, swallows and sparrows are generally perceived as harmless birds.

The real wagtails have both positive and negative aspects for the prisoners. Their chattering in circles, their 'showing off [of] their fluffy wings' and their splendour are said to presage visitors for those prisoners that are allowed any at Mikuyu. Moreover, they are referred to as inmates of the prison, since, as Uledi-Kamanga observes, they share the same 'filthy Mikuyu environment' (1998:49)—they are fellow sufferers with the prisoners in the confines of Mikuyu Prison. Nowhere is the similar identity and fellowship that is shared between the real and the metaphorical wagtails clearer than in the belief that these wagtails could follow prisoners admitted 'to Central Prison Sick Bay' to minister to them (Mapanje 1993:51). Here Mapanje alludes to a story he heard from a fellow inmate who claimed that when at one point he was very sick and was moved from Mikuyu to Zomba Central Prison for treatment, one of the wagtails followed him there. 'The wagtail just sat in the corner of his cell. Every morning he got up the little wagtail was there, sort of ministering to him and talking to him and he inwardly talked to it' (Mapanje 1994:54).

Nevertheless, the relationship between the prisoners and the wagtails is not always rosy as the poet tells us that,

When the day locks up, these wagtails  
Twitter another tale; you won't laugh  
When this courtyard wiregauze fills with  
Thousands of wagtails that sleep standing  
On one leg, head under wings, snoring  
About today, fabricating their stinking  
Shit on the courtyard below for us to mop  
Tomorrow; and everyday you must mop this  
Courtyard to survive the stench; D4 has  
Even devised wagtail shit-mopping rosters,  
The best in the land [...] (1993:51).

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came here, why they weren't taken to court, what the government has done to them' (1994:54).

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The above lines show that the wagtails accentuate the suffering of the prisoners. The stench in Mikuyu is another recurrent cause of discomfort for the prisoners. In this case, wagtails feature as agents of the prisoners' suffering<sup>6</sup>. Nevertheless, the mopping of the wagtails' droppings was not perhaps absolutely bad as the prisoners could also exercise as they cleaned. In the poem, therefore, the poet shows an ambivalent attitude towards the wagtails—they are both fellow sufferers or victims and enemies or victimisers.

The last line of the poem collapses the identities of the real wagtails and the metaphorical ones by simply welcoming the addressee 'To these chattering wagtails of Mikuyu!' after briefing him on the other evils of prison such as bites from ticks, fleas and mosquitoes, stings from scorpions and noise from hyenas. This emphasises the fact that the real wagtails are just as much victims of human cruelty and brutality as the prisoners themselves.

### *3.2 Marabous*

Mapanje also makes reference to the victimhood and suffering of his fellow prisoners in 'Hector's Slapping of Mama's Brother' (1998:20-21), where he refers to them as 'marabous'. The poem itself deals with the poet's recollection of the release from prison of Hector who was arrested for slapping Cecilia Kadzamira's<sup>7</sup> ('mama' in the poem) brother, and other prisoners. These are prisoners with whom Mapanje shared the trying experiences of detention in Mikuyu. One such experience was insomnia, which necessitated the discreet acquisition of valium to help them get some sleep. Hector and more than twenty other prisoners were released, leaving Mapanje (who was 'prisoner *never* to be released') behind bars as we hear him lament:

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<sup>6</sup> The shit is a symbol for evil in the phrases 'Mopping the wagtail shit of their creation' (1993:50) and 'confronting the wagtail shit of Mikuyu Prison' (1993:47) in the same poem.

<sup>7</sup> Cecilia Kadzamira (Mama C. Tamanda Kadzamira to many Malawians) whom Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda simply and fondly called Mama, was the bachelor president's official hostess and long time confidante. Some Malawians speculate that she was Banda's mistress.

[...] now that Hector and more  
Than twenty marabouts have been liberated  
Leaving us alone, unwanted, sterile, I dread  
The time our turn will come [...] (1998:20) <sup>8</sup>.

One experience Mapanje had with these ‘marabouts’ involved Hector’s request for valiums from Mapanje. When Mapanje tells him that he no longer has any, Hector barks: ‘Use your influence then’ (1998:20). This hurts Mapanje who withdraws into his cell to, as he puts it, ‘cry the hurt to sleep’ (1998:20). Later, possibly frustrated by the lack of valiums, Hector picks a fight with another prisoner. The immediate cause of the fight is Hector’s boasting that ‘only he was / The man in Mikuyu for plucking the temper / To bruise life-despot’s concubine’s brother in / A brawl’ (1998:21). The two combatants are separated by irate guards who

Lock them in punishment cells chained to  
The stocks, handcuffed, leg-ironed and naked  
No water, no food, three buckets of cold water  
Poured onto their frigid bodies, then felled on  
The cold cement floor to swim for three days (1998:20).

At the time of these recollections the poet could ‘still hear Hector’s comrade in his cell / Shrieking, remembering his mother’ (1998:21). The excessiveness of the punishment on these prisoners horrifies. The marabou stork is a victim of human contempt and ridicule as it ‘is commonly portrayed as being mean and ugly and as lacking good motive’ (*Awake!* nd). Like the marabou, the prisoners were the objects of contempt and scorn from their incarcerators. But, in addition to their victimhood, Hector’s and the other inmates’ selfish tendencies probably help to persuade Mapanje to call them ‘marabouts’. The marabou ‘is a carrion eater’ that would kill other birds to satisfy its hunger when carcasses are scarce’ (*Awake* np). Hector’s poor

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<sup>8</sup> When the Inspector General of Police recommended to Banda that Mapanje, along with four other prisoners, be considered for release, Banda approved the release of the other prisoners and inscribed ‘never’ against Mapanje’s name. See ‘Our Friend Police Inspector General’ (1998:23-24).

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public relations and selfish behaviour in the poem is therefore marabout-like.

### *3.3 Pigeon and Swallow*

In 'Guilty of Nipping Her Pumpkin Leaves' (1998:66-67) the poet refers to himself variously as a 'pigeon', a 'swallow', and a 'turtle'. All these birds are normally regarded as harmless creatures and one suspects that the poet seeks to emphasise his own innocence by invoking them. The pigeon, like its near relative the dove, is considered a symbol of peace. Moreover, in the bible Noah relied on a dove to bring him the message about the end of the flood after the ravens had abandoned their mission (Genesis 8.11). The dove, therefore, like the poet, is a messenger. As a bird it is also an appropriate metaphor in the sense that in one of the most popular folktales in Malawi, that of Sikusinja and Gwenembe, it is a bird that reveals Gwenembe's secretive killing of his brother Sikusinja to his parents and the whole village. Like the bird in the story of *Sikusinja ndi Gwenembe*, in his poetry the poet exposes unwelcome truths for the powers that be. Besides, in an earlier poem, 'Glory Be to Chingwe's Hole' (1981:44), in which Mapanje uses another Malawian folktale, a pigeon's melodious song attracts the attention of a cruel chief and his guards who momentarily forget their duty of guarding Frog's beautiful wife (from wood which he carved and gave life to by inserting a pin on its head) whom the chief had abducted. Their momentary lapse of concentration enables Eagle to snatch the pin from the woman's head to render her lifeless as planned by Frog and his helpers. The pigeon's creativity enables Frog to execute his revenge on the chief.

In the poem 'Guilty of Nipping Her Pumpkin Leaves' Mapanje who has returned home in October 1994, after the removal of Banda in a democratic election, 'with a film crew from Diverse Productions of London to record for the BBC's TV programme *Africa '95*' (Mapanje 1998:78) decides to pay a woman vegetable seller for the pumpkin leaves he borrowed from her seven years before—that is before his detention and exile. In the ensuing conversation we hear that the woman 'cannot recall / When the pigeon was 'taken' [detained] or the swallow / Wafted to those dissonant frosty habitats [...]' (1998:66). The 'frosty habitats' here refers to the West where the poet migrated to after his release and the 'swallow', which is well

known for its migratory behaviour or its ability to fly long distances, is an appropriate metaphor for the poet as migrant to faraway places. The ‘turtle’ on the other hand is known for its long memory, especially its ability to return to the place of its birth to lay its eggs after an absence of many years. It therefore serves as the right animal to associate with Mapanje’s ability to remember the debt he owed the woman vegetable seller after seven long years.

## **4 Bird Metaphors and Suffering**

### **4.1 Ravens**

Furthermore, Jack Mapanje uses animal metaphors and symbolism to expose the physical and psychological suffering of the prisoners in Mikuyu, the kind of suffering that induces him to call the lowly existence of prisoners ‘our cockroach lives’ and ‘our gecko lives’<sup>9</sup> in ‘The Trip of Chief Commissioner of Police (1990)’ (1993:64). Like the wagtails in ‘The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison’, ravens or crows are also architects of suffering for the prisoners in Mikuyu, as we see in ‘The Famished Stubborn Ravens of Mikuyu’ (1993:55). These ravens cause a racket on the roof of the prison, making the poet suspect that they are sent by the prisoners’ adversaries<sup>10</sup>. For him,

[t]hese could not be Noah’s ravens, these crows  
of Mikuyu Prison groaning on our roof-tops each  
day [...]  
Noah’s ravens could not have landed  
Here (they never returned to their master’s ark) (1993:55).

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<sup>9</sup> The comparison of the prisoners’ lives of deprivation to those of these creatures degrades the creatures’ lives. And yet human life is normally seen as superior to that of the creatures.

<sup>10</sup> The poet here exploits a traditional belief that some animals such as owls, lions, hyenas, even rats, are owned through magic by some people who use them to victimise their enemies. The frustrating behaviour of the ravens strengthens such a belief in the poet.

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They could not be Elijah's either for, as the poet puts it,

however  
stubbornly this nation might challenge  
Lord Almighty's frogs, these devouring locusts,  
the endless droughts and plagues<sup>11</sup> today there's  
no prophet God so loves as to want to rescue  
(with the bread and meat from messenger ravens!) (1993:55)

This recalls Elijah. For Mapanje these ravens at Mikuyu

can only be from the heathen stock of  
famished crows and carrion vultures sent here  
to peck at our insomnia and agony-blood eyes  
and to club the peace of this desert cell with  
their tough knocking beaks (1993:55).

The fact that the ravens are bothersome comes out clearly when we hear the bitter poet asking in consternation:

And why don't they  
choose some place and some other time?  
Why must these crows happen at Mikuyu Prison,  
always at dawn, hammering at the corrugated  
iron of this cell, drilling at the marrow of our  
fragile bones and picking at the fishbones  
thieved from the dust bins we ditched outside? (1993:55)

The two phrases 'to peck at our insomnia and agony-blood eyes' and

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<sup>11</sup> Signs of God's anger with his people. Elijah was fed by ravens in the wilderness (1 Kings 17:2-7). As a Christian, Mapanje could have been aware of these biblical stories before his detention or he may have come across them from his reading of the bible in prison. Bibles were the only books allowed in prison; however, they were in short supply as there would only be three bibles for ninety prisoners.

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‘drilling at the marrow of our / fragile bones’ emphasises the deep psychological torture that the ravens’ behaviour causes for the prisoners.

#### *4.2 Bats*

Yet another cause of the prisoners’ suffering is the stench from bats and their droppings as well as the prison walls described as ‘fetid walls of these / Cold cells’ in ‘To the Unknown Dutch Postcard-Sender (1988)’ (1993:58) and ‘reeking walls’ in ‘The Stench of Porridge’ (2004:191-192). The stench in prison, from the walls, human urine, wagtail shit, and from bats in particular, stands out as perhaps the most constantly oppressive thing in prison, judging from the poet’s regular reference to it. For instance, there is mention of ‘stinking bats of Mikuyu’ in ‘The Trip of Chief Commissioner of Prisons (1990)’ (1993:64), ‘The stench of Mikuyu bats’ in ‘In Memoriam (For Orton Chirwa, 20 October 1992)’ (1993:93), and ‘stinking bats’ in ‘Warm Thoughts for Ken Saro-Wiwa’ (1998:46).

#### *4.3 Vultures*

Another interesting thing in ‘Warm Thoughts for Ken Saro-Wiwa’ is the fact that Mapanje uses a bird metaphor (that of a vulture) to scorn the police or security forces that help despots cling on to power by abusing other citizens. In the poem the forces who abducted Ken Saro-Wiwa, the Nigerian author, television producer, environmentalist and president of the [Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People](#) (MOSOP), following directives from the military dictator Sani Abacha, are called ‘The armed vultures’ (1998:46). The vulture is another bird that is held in great contempt by many people and is, as a bird of misfortune, associated with death. It is seen as ugly and its scavenging behaviour invites similar scorn to that visited upon the marabout stork. By calling the armed forces ‘armed vultures’, therefore, Mapanje is characterising these forces as contemptuous and hideous.

### **5 Birds—Positive and Negative**

From the above discussion the reader might be forgiven for thinking that Mapanje only associates birds with negative experiences. This view,

however, is not entirely true since birds and insects (animals that fly), as Uledi-Kamanga (1998) observes, also serve as symbols of freedom from bondage—they presage the release of prisoners from Mikuyu. The speaker in 'The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison' tells the poet that the wagtails and 'the dragon flies, hundreds of moths / In golden robes, the geese flying over [the prison] and more', bring messages of cheer, and foretell 'releases to come' (1993:51). Not surprisingly, the sight of dragon flies 'swarming over the prison yard' stirs hope in the poet especially upon hearing 'nyapala'<sup>12</sup> Disi' declare that such a spectacle had been witnessed in Mikuyu once over the fourteen years he had been there and on that occasion two hundred prisoners were released. Again the sight of hundreds of moths in the cell and on the walls awakens hope for release from bondage. We also notice that when Mapanje is finally released and is in exile, the sight of Canada geese flying 'high above' Alison's house prompts him to tell his friends that:

[...] that chain  
Of geese flying thus over Mikuyu Prison  
From Lake Chilwa towards Zomba mountain  
Ranges, gently criss-crossing, meant  
Release of many political prisoners  
Within weeks ('Canadian Geese Flying Over Alison's House'  
[1993:82])<sup>13</sup>.

And as if in confirmation of this prophecy he gets news that 'the last eight political prisoners' he had 'Left at Mikuyu Prison' (1993:82) had been released. The number of the prisoners is similar to the number of geese he had seen flying over Alison's house. Here the birds, unlike their counterparts elsewhere in Mapanje's poetry, play a positive, prophetic role for the prisoners.

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<sup>12</sup> 'A kind of "prefect" in a cell' (Mapanje 1993:99).

<sup>13</sup> There seems to be a discrepancy between the titular geese and the common name of the actual geese that Mapanje refers to here, which he saw during a visit to Toronto, Canada. The common name for these birds is 'Canada Geese', not 'Canadian Geese'.

Birds therefore play both a negative and positive role in Mapanje's poems on his imprisonment and later release. As I have attempted to demonstrate in the preceding discussion, Mapanje uses birds as metaphors for the poetic voice (or himself), for his fellow prisoners at Mikuyu Maximum Security Prison, for exiled Malawians and other victims of Banda, as well as for victims of oppressors and despots around the world. By using birds in this way he seeks to underscore the harmlessness, victimhood, and suffering of these victims while emphasising the evil and injustice of oppressors, in Malawi and beyond. Mapanje also represents birds as symbols of release from prison. In some cases the negative attitudes that society takes towards some birds such as the vulture and the marabou stork are replicated, thereby revealing his indebtedness to his society's attitudes to animals in general, and birds in particular, in his representations of them in the poetry.

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# Popular Predictor Birds in Zulu Culture

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## **Abstract**

Birds, which live close and parallel lives to the human community, have long enjoyed a pre-eminent reputation by lending themselves to human observation. Their perky habits, melodious songs and the magic of flight render them as objects of fascination to humans. Some are of historical or national significance, for example the Indwa, (Blue Crane), which is now the South African national bird and in the past was chosen by King Shaka who used its plumage for his head-feather. The subject of this paper concerns the social behaviour of popular predictor birds. Some predictor birds are drawn from folklore and religion, in which they often constitute the moral or easily remembered core. The selected predictor birds constitute the ideal ground for the formulation of figurative language to highlight human reality as language is both an expression and a symbolic representation of meaning. This paper focuses on the uses and meanings of birds in Zulu culture and language. Proverbial bird metaphors are used as a paradigm to regulate the conduct of persons in their facilitation of the protection of the avian community.

**Keywords:** Zulu culture, proverbs, social behaviour, predictor birds

## **Introduction**

Language is both an expression and a symbolic representation of meaning. Oral cultures strive to create new facets of such meaning by the use of metaphors and symbols based on natural phenomena, the great book

available to any intelligent observer. The avian community, often existing in close proximity to the human one, constitutes the ideal ground for the formulation of metaphors, which make use of bird symbols in order to highlight human realities. Birds provide human beings everywhere with a rich set of possibilities for constructing meaning, and for commenting on the nature of human social life. Birds such as *Igwalagwala* (loerie or *Turacus corythaix*) and *indwa* (Blue Crane) are associated with historical events and their names convey historical allusions. In the Zulu royal house, these two birds still hold a prestigious status because of their bright and glossy feathers, which form part of the Zulu king's regalia. Tradition has it that all the Zulu kings prior to King Shaka, wore a head-feather from *Igwalagwala*. King Shaka chose his from the *Indwa*. It was probably its beautiful, superb and imposing posture, adorned with silvery bluish grey plumage, together with its long, dark tertial wing-feathers, which dangle nearly to the ground, that attracted Shaka.

The present Zulu King, Goodwill Zwelithini, has followed in the footsteps of King Shaka by wearing a head-feather from the Blue Crane. According to Mlindeli Gcumisa (1993:89), the present Zulu King has also preserved the Blue Crane as a Zulu royal heritage on his farm at Thokazi in Nongoma. This historical bird still enjoys a very high status in the new democratic South Africa, since it is the national bird and its image is engraved on the five-cent coin.

This paper is not so much concerned with birds as historical or national symbols as with the behaviour of and beliefs about specific predictor birds in Zulu culture. Birds are very popular characters in Zulu proverbial expressions and folktales. Zulu proverbs make abundant use of bird metaphors, drawn both from empirical knowledge and symbolic stock and selected by their suitability for specific situations and socio-cultural contexts. For example, when a person is not intelligent, the Zulu will say to that individual: *zakhala kanye kwasa*, which literally means that the 'fowls' crowed only once and it was dawn. In the folktales, 'uDumudumu', the king, called uDumudumu, marries a queen who turns out to be barren. As a result, the queen, uNyumbakatali, is relegated and she is then ostracised by other wives. Other wives are better because they can at least bear crow-children that in turn laugh at her: *Namagwababa angene, adle nokudla akubekile; achithe umlotha yonke indlu* (Canonnici 1993:85) (even crows would enter and eat the food she had reserved; they would scatter ashes all over her hut).



In this folktale, crows receive a higher status than some humans in the royal house because the king prefers to stay with them than with his barren queen, uNyumbakatali.

The objective referent, namely, birds and their social behaviour, is there for all to see, but the use one makes of it, or the sense one derives from it, depends to a great extent on the cultural background of the group to which one belongs, which acts as a filter for the interpretation of nature. The selection of popular predictor birds made for this study also arises from observation of birds' social behaviour, which is in turn interpreted according to the socio-cultural traditions of the Zulu people.

It is appropriate to mention here that the wealth of information gathered for this article regarding the socio-cultural interpretation of birds and their habits is the contribution of a number of informants interviewed in deep-rural areas such as Nkandla, Mahlabathini and KwaMthethwa in eMpangeni. A still camera, an audio tape-recorder and video-recorders were extensively used in the interviews. Outstanding amongst the informants, for their wide knowledge of birds and hunting skills, were senior shepherds, park rangers, herbalists and oral historians. Their names were recorded during interviews, but in this article, they will be referred to anonymously and generically as 'informants'. With the exception of a few of them who were over 90 and some merely in their twenties, the majority of my informants ranged in age from 40 to 85.

In the following discussion, I will show that birds are not only admired in Zulu culture, but are also cared for and protected from unnecessary harassment. I will also look at how the family as a base of society trains its youth to overcome their basic urges and become responsible and environmentally friendly citizens as far as their relationship with birds is concerned. Without the care and protection of birds by our predecessors, the research for this article would not been possible.

## **1 Family Ethics as the Foundation of Birds' Protection in the Wild**

The family is the place where children are initiated into the systems of relations and brought up in accordance with society's ethical demands. Adults have the responsibility of assisting the youth in sifting good from bad.

Achieving these results requires hard work and restraint from parents, using discipline to instil a code of good behaviour into their children to avoid irresponsible behaviour, which can become a cause of social hostility. The culture of caring for the environment, sharing food and showing gratitude does not come automatically; these values need to be implemented and promoted amongst members of society, especially among those of a young age, so that children grow up with these ethics for the maintenance of healthy social relationships. Such values have to be internalised in the child's mind by adult members of the family as early as possible. According to Edwin J. and Alice B. Delattre (1993:2), if proper attitudes and behaviour are not learned early, problems can mushroom with possibly dire consequences when children are older. Many parents also want to share with children their most deeply held religious, cultural and moral convictions as a foundation for ethical behaviour.

During traditional times, there were no formal institutions of education as we have them today, where children could attend classes to develop knowledge they have already acquired from home about different aspects of life. In the past, boys used to spend much of the day in the veld where they were taught advanced life skills such as herding, hunting and protecting livestock as well as the art of playing games and familiarity with customs and traditions. According to the informants, bird hunting was the most popular activity that boys enjoyed in the wild as both an educational and recreational adventure. Lindy Stiebel (2007:12) highlights the potential values in hunting when she affirms:

The great positive virtue then of the wilderness is the potential it offers for adventure. In its recreational form, adventure for the hero involves hunting wild animals in which the wilderness abounds.

Killing a bird made a young boy a hero; he would have something to take home on that day, as the proverb maintains that *inyoni ishayelwa abakhulu* (a bird is killed for the superiors). Informants testify that it was not pleasing for the boy to take home a small bird like *ungcede* (fantail warbler). Larger birds such as *isagwaca* (quail) were taken home with pride to impress the adults. Killing a big bird was a sign that a boy was growing up towards manhood.

In almost every African family, grandparents enjoy staying with their grandchildren, sharing food with them and telling them stories. As a result, children often communicate more openly with their grandparents than their own parents. I still remember that when my brothers and my cousins came with their birds, they would first show them to my grandfather, even though their mothers were in the house. Each of the boys who came with a bird would receive the head of his bird and my grandfather would take the rest and divide it amongst other small children who were not yet capable of hunting. Jeffrey Masson (1994:157) observes the essence of sharing amongst animals:

Another form of altruistic behaviour is to feed another animal or allow it to share one's food. Lion-watchers have pointed out that old lionesses that no longer bear young and have worn or missing teeth can survive for years because the younger lions share their kills with them.

'Sharing food forms community harmony' (Carol Pottow 1990:137). This statement alludes to the fact that in a truly altruistic relationship there should always be someone who is caring, sensitive and willing to provide for those who are less fortunate. Although hunting birds was a popular adventure in traditional Zulu society, hunting brooding birds was forbidden. In a Zulu family, a boy would be taught that if he found a brooding bird, he had to treat it as his own 'property' and protect it from any kind of harassment. Boys were told that they had to be very careful in dealing with brooding birds because a mother-bird, in particular, is very sensitive to human scent. If it suspects that people are interfering with its surroundings, it flees. Since bird hunting involved a lot of competition, a boy had to keep the whereabouts of his bird in his own heart, lest other boys stole it. Having a brooding bird to look after was a sign of achievement, showing that a boy was growing in understanding the vulnerability of the brooding bird.

This reminds me of what I used to hear from my brothers when they were going to check on their brooding birds. They would say that they were going to *ukondla*, to feed; however, they never said exactly where their birds were. They also did not specify whether they actually fed their birds with wild fruits or suchlike, or whether they only checked on their safety. They

were very secretive about their brooding birds even when our grandmother, sitting around the fireplace, asked us in the evening to tell her about our experiences of the day.

At present, something comes to my mind. We were told, as children, that a brooding bird flees when someone talks about it around the fireplace. The following proverb gives us the background of its origin as well as an allusion to the reason behind this confidentiality amongst the boys: *Inyon'ayikhulunyelw'eziko*, which literally means 'it is not right to talk about a bird around the fireplace'. According to this supposition, a fireplace represents danger to the birds, which means that birds are scared of it, as humans fear the gallows. However, the underlying message decoded from the proverb teaches people to keep a secret, at all costs.

Why did the Zulu society come up with this theory, and was there an underlying problem that the adults faced with regard to boys and their relationship with birds? Probably, the theory of a bird fleeing from its nest when one talks about it around the fireplace came up with adults who had problems with boys. Boys start hunting birds when they are still inexperienced regarding the life of birds. As a result, they may not be aware that their interference with birds in nests is a severe harassment, which can cause the bird to flee or to die. The departure of a mother-bird leaving its young behind puts young chicks in jeopardy. The adults might have come up with this theory, which has developed into a proverb for two reasons. Firstly, they wanted to curb the boys' harassment of the birds during their brooding season through curiosity.

Secondly, it was a psychological strategy, adopted to train both young bird hunters and young herdsman to keep a secret from one another and from others. The challenging situation that the bird faces after leaving its warm nest and friendly environment is meant to illustrate to us the degree of destruction caused by the reckless handling of delicate and sensitive information and matters of importance in our social relationships. The revealing of secret information prematurely, and without the consent of the person involved is a crime, which leads to the breaking of the bond of trust in most social relationships. When the bond of trust is broken, love is automatically threatened, since true love is based on trust. It is presumed that the use of the metaphor of a fleeing bird was a means to teach youngsters, prior to their going to the veld, the importance of handling delicate matters

with absolute care and to train the youth to act responsibly when dealing with issues that might degrade other peoples' reputations.

In the following section, it is brought to light that besides brooding mother-birds of many species, there were specific types of noble birds, which growing hunters were strongly advised, before going to the wild, to take care of, for their own safety as well as that of the birds. Mapopa Mtonga (1994:335) says that when boys go hunting birds, they are warned not to kill the Diderick Cuckoo or rain bird (*Cyrusococcyx Caprius*), to save society from severe misfortune, probably caused by natural disasters like severe drought.

The next section focuses on the proverbs, which warn hunters about the *inhlava ebizelayo*, commonly known as *ingede* (honey-guide).

## **2 Birds of Fortune in Zulu Proverbs**

### **2.1 The Honey Indicator**

Proverbs in a sense permit, prohibit, or require the performance of acts according to the ethics of conduct. Some of the proverbs selected for this section reflect habits and practices of society that seem to be tradition-based. For example, the following proverbs give some guidelines to those who encounter the famous honey foreteller bird, called *inhlava* or *ingede* (honey-guide):

*Ungayishayi inhlava ngoju.* (Never throw honey in the face of the honey-guide).

*Ungayishayi ingede ngoju.* (Never throw honey in the face of the honey-guide)

*Inhlava ayishaywa.* (The honey-guide is never beaten).

*Inhlava iyabekelwa.* (One must keep something for the honey-guide).

Some experienced herdsman and hunters shared their knowledge about the above stipulations concerning the honey-guide. Most informants tell us that when the honey-guide wants honey, it looks for a place near humans. In most cases, it finds either hunters or herdboys, as they are often

found in the veld. To draw their attention, it sings in a loud voice until someone pays attention to its sweet-sounding song. A person has to follow it until it stops at a certain place, only known to it. When it reaches its destination, it starts signalling with its wings and bowing its head upon the exact location of the beehive:

We followed the dipping flight of the honey-guide, which summoned us in sharp impatient tones; we called back to him when he paused, so that we would not lose him, until he finally led us to a wild bees' nest (Adulphe Delegorgue 1990:248).

The reader should not have an impression that the Zulu do not have specialist honey seekers. The informants mentioned that the people usually follow the calls of the honey guide because it usually leads them to honeycombs of guaranteed and exquisite taste and its signals are reliable and are followed by fortune, namely, honeycombs. Bryant (1949:349) explains the relationship between the honey seekers and the honey-guide as he maintains that the Zulu people loved their honey and that their herdboys were quite diligent in their search for it and always rewarded it with fragments of the comb. Probably, it is due to its strong sense and vision that it earns the title of a beehive predictor or a foreteller. Cyril Walker (1974:19) highlights the importance and contribution made by the birds' senses for signalling or warning purposes:

The species depend on keen, all-round vision to warn of approaching danger. Lacking any sophisticated verbal language, birds communicate largely by signal, and keen vision is necessary to catch, and correctly interpret, a fleeting danger signal.

It appears that the sharing of this gift of nature between Zulu society and the honey-guide community has been a long-standing tradition, which sustained a healthy relationship between the two communities as Hes (1991:21) observed:

The honey-guide's favourite food is the larvae of the honeybee. But he cannot get all the larvae because they are safely hidden inside the bee-hive, which is usually in a hollow of a tree. African people who

find the hive in this way take the honey for themselves and then always make sure that they leave the larvae outside the hive for the honey-guide to eat. Both the honey-guide and the people benefit from the relationship.

The informants emphasise that this kind of relationship has to be maintained to avoid what Mtonga (1998:336) alludes to when he writes:

The popular names that both Tumbuka and Chewa give to the honey-guides are Solo and Nsolo respectively. But because of the unpredictability of this bird's call whether to fortune (a bees' nest) or to misfortune (a snake), it is both a friend and an enemy to humans in this regard.

Clearly, if human beings live by the values of honesty, sharing and gratitude, the honey-guide does not make ambiguous calls. However, when provoked, it might make unpredictable calls with an intention to promote justice as Noverino Canonici (1995:110) asserts:

Justice is a leveling factor: those who have must share, since mother-nature provides for all. The greedy who try to take advantage of the 'small fry' are digging their own grave.

In this context, a snake symbolises the hand of justice, and the unjust forfeit fortune. The above proverbs and the oral testimonies, forewarning us about the honey-guide, have one element in common, which is showing appreciation to the honey-guide by giving it pieces of honeycomb in return for its prediction for the place of honey.

The next section discusses the types of wild bird chosen by humans to be their symbols of love or companionship.

## *2.2 Loneliness versus Companionship*

As children, there were things that we used to sing or say when certain birds passed by. For example, when a pair of doves crossed in front of us, the one who saw it first had to shout: 'Two for joy! Good luck for me!' The rest of the group would envy the one who saw these two birds first because it meant

that some luck was on its way to him or her. We had been told that a pair of doves was a sign of good fortune. Accordingly, a pair of doves left us with a bright representation of hope and happiness. However, when a single dove crossed in front of us nobody would own up to having seen it first because the whole group would confront her or him shouting: 'One for sorrow!' This meant that something bad was going to befall that particular individual. As a result, a single dove left us with a gloomy image because it was like an orphan or a destitute.

Let us consider the image of a pair of doves from a courtship point of view. This image is often used by young men when proposing love to girls. A young man would say to his beloved: *asibe njengamajuba* (let us be like doves). In other words, he attempts to form a pair that will make people rejoice as they do when they see a pair of doves. It is assumed that he wants to belong to a pair that represents joy and peace like the Namaqua Dove that Mtonga (1998:323) claims to be always portrayed as quiet, meek and well-behaved, as opposed to other creatures that are noisy and quarrelsome.

When people see a dove flying without its partner, they always think that there is no peace and safety where it comes from which could be the cause of the loss of its partner. For the onlookers, a single dove represents sorrow. It appears that without a partner of the opposite sex, a young man feels uncomfortable and incomplete because he has no one with whom to share his romantic feelings.

There is another pair of birds called *ubucwibi*, which is of interest amongst courting males in Zulu society. *Ubucwib' obuhle buhamba ngabubili* (the good small grass-seed-eating birds are those that go in pairs) is one of the proverbs used by young Zulu men when they propose love to girls. *Ubucwibi* are species of small grass-seed-eating birds, which are usually found in crop-fields. This proverb tells us that these little birds are mostly admired for their going around together. According to the informants, the pair of *ubucwibi* which consists of a male and a female represents an ideal intimate couple because most of the time the two birds are found together in finding food and shelter, and grooming each other with absolute care. It is also said that during the brooding season, the male protects and defends the territory from invading enemies that might interfere with the mother-bird on the nest. These are highly admired characteristics of *ubucwibi*, as birds like



eagles and owls act differently because they are only seen together in a pair during the mating season.

In the next section, the discussion is on the cock, the traditional night ‘watchman’, perceived as the predictor of dawn. The subsection focuses on rain/weather or thunderbirds.

### **3 Time and Season Indicators**

The cock and its night alarm crowing has invoked man’s interest in almost all cultures. According to the estimation of Zulu society, the night is divided into four parts, namely, *ukuhlwa*, (dusk) *phakathi kwamabili* (mid-night), *ukukhala kwezinkukhu* (cockcrowing) or *emva kwamabili* (after mid-night) and *intathakusa* (dawn). Referring to the night cockcrows, people speak of the *izinkukhu zokuqala*, *zesibili nezesithathu*, literally meaning first, second and third fowls. Probably, people use the plural noun, *izinkukhu* (fowls) because almost all adult roosters in the rural villages crow in turns at one-hour intervals during cockcrowing. Using the clock approximation, it is estimated that the first crow is heard around about 2 o’clock, the second at 3 o’clock and the third at 4 o’clock.

These three calls are regarded as the most important signals of the new day, and travellers mark them for starting their journeys. However, the signals made by the cock do not mean that the time for the Zulu people was solely fixed by the instincts of a rooster. This domestic bird was used as a common chronometer or as a public alarm clock, probably, like Big Ben of the Westminster tower in London. Besides the three cockcrows, it has also been observed that in both rural and urban areas domestic and wild birds often start making noise and movements and coming down from trees or housetops around 4:15 to 5 o’clock, before the break of dawn, depending upon the season. However, it does not mean that if the cock does not crow, dawn does not come. In this context, the cock is used as a sign interpreted by humans to represent the coming of dawn.

In modern times, the crowing of a cock is not only used to mark the coming of dawn, it also reminds Christians about the historical incident narrated in the Gospel of St. Mark 14:30, where Jesus Christ predicted that Peter, his disciple, would have denied him three times before the second cockcrow. The prediction came true and Peter cried bitterly for it. Blose

Ndelu, quoted in Nyembezi (1963:142), reflects in his poem about this incident and confronts the cock for its historical crow: *Ukuqopha kwakho kuyangishumayeza nxashan'uPetro ekhala yedwa ngasese* (Your mark preaches to me as Peter cries alone in privacy). One needs to pity the cock for being on guard every night. It is an all-season alarm, unlike the following birds whose predictions are merely seasonal.

In the province of Kwazulu-Natal, the bird paradise, there is no spring without the resounding call of the *uPhezukomkhono* (Red-chested Cuckoo), which is interpreted by humans as encouraging people to start ploughing and as mocking those who ate up their seeds prior to the sowing season. About *uPhezukomkhono*, Sibusiso Nyembezi (1966:86) gives us an illuminating explanation, saying:

UPhezukomkhono-umnyama. Uvela ngokuthwasa kwehlobo. Kuthiwa le nyoni ibikezela ukwethwasa kwehlobo, ikhumbuza abantu ithi: 'Phezu komkhono, wadl'imbewu'. (The Red-chested Cuckoo is black. It appears in spring. It is said that this bird predicts the coming of spring; it reminds the people saying: 'On your arm, you ate the seeds').

Adrian Koopman (2002:247) claims that the call of this bird in spring marks the beginning of the ploughing season. However, this does mean that if these calls are not heard, there will be no summer. It is the people's observation and interpretation that associate this bird's calls with summer and people have believed that its calls carry messages to remind them of the change of time and to encourage them to appreciate the beauty of the new season. Jo Oliver (2003:35) elaborates about *uPhezukomkhono*:

*Le nyoni enamahloni ivela ezindaweni ezishisayo maphakathi ne-Afrika. Zifika ngoSeptemba zihambe futhi ngoMashi. Izwakala ithi 'Phezu komkhono' ilanga lonke ehlobo.* (This shy bird comes from hot areas in Central Africa. They arrive in September and leave in March. It is heard saying: 'On your arm', the whole day in summer).

After *uPhezukomkhono*, comes another predictor, namely, *iJubantondo* or *iJubantonto*, (African Green Pigeon), the harbinger of full summer, with its melodious call of *Amdokwe! Amdokwe amabele! Avuthiwe*. (They look like

millet porridge! They look like millet porridge—the millet! They are ripe!) The people interpret this call as a powerful invitation by this dove to other birds to come to the millet buffet, which according to its understanding is provided by nature gratis for the avian community to devour. From the human point of view, this call is understood as saying, ‘Be on your guard, your millet is at stake’.

Other popular summer signs are the rain birds known as *amahlolamvula* (rock swifts) and *izinkonjane* (swallows). Informants mentioned that the Zulu name *amahlolamvula* is associated with rain because it literally means to examine or check rain and it is also derived from the swifts’ collective and swift movements, which they display above the landscape prior to the coming of rain. Charles & Julia Botha (2003:70) explain that *isivakashi esijwayele ukufika ehlobo, sivela eYurophu sibizwa ngokuthi yihlolamvula* (A visitor that often arrives in summer coming from Europe is a rock swift). Many of the rock swifts that come to stay in mid-KwaZulu-Natal use Itshelikantunjambili Rock in Kranskop area as their ‘lodge’ during their summer stay. This place is not far from the home of the present president, the honourable Mr Jacob G. Zuma. When the people see rock swifts flocking to this rock, they know that summer rains are inevitable. *Izinkonjane* (swallows) are local rain predictor birds that are often seen flying low near the homesteads when it is about to rain. This behaviour of the swallow family was a key sign for my grandmother that rain was coming, as she would advise us to quickly bring in firewood before it got wet.

The following discussion is about two categories of birds that are often considered to be omens of peril or death as well as weather/rain predictors or thunderbirds.

#### **4 Birds Carrying the Stigma of Misfortune**

In the first category, the most feared weather or thunder forecaster is *ingududu* or *insingizi* (Southern ground hornbill). Due to its size and beauty, this hornbill might be supposed to be a common target for bird hunters. On the contrary, hornbills are often seen in pairs or groups roaming freely near homesteads without anyone daring to harm them. In addition to the freedom that these birds enjoy, there is also a maxim that says: *insingizi/ingududu ayibulawa* (the hornbill is never killed). Some informants mentioned that this

bird should not be harassed or killed because it is regarded as *inyoni yezulu* (thunder bird), which means that if one kills this bird, the thunder strikes in the area where it was killed. The moaning of the surviving birds is believed to sympathetically awaken the weather. Z. W. Gule (1993:66) alludes to such moaning when he writes: *Kwakhal'insingizi madoda, izulu seliyaduduma* (Men, the hornbill is crying, it is now thundering). This statement gives us a notion that the tears of these birds can open the storm gates of heaven to wreak vengeance on the killer and his or her surroundings. Mlindeli Gcumisa (1993:101) has an unforgettable experience of this bird:

*Yinyoni yezulu lena. Ayilokothi ingene ekhaya. Uma ike yangena ibika umhlola ozokwehla kulowo muzi. Yinyoni eyiswili lena uma igconiwe. Nensizwa eyisiqhanga ihlome iphelele idlela ogageni. USikweleti umfo wakwaNgcobo iqhawe elalidumile endaweni yakwaGcumisa (KwaSwayimana) wadlela ogageni ngelinye ilanga etholene phezulu nale nyoni.* (This is a thunder bird. It never enters a home. If it enters the home, it is there to bring bad news that is going to befall that home. This is a ferocious fighter when teased. A young man by the name of Sikweleti Ngcobo, a famous fighter of Gcumisa area at Swayimana almost died; well-armed when he dared to fight with it.)

Informants interviewed concerning the killing of the hornbill said that when a person kills a hornbill, other hornbills in the area come to the home of the killer to grieve for their dead comrade. They also said that the howling and the fighting that take place at the home concerned are unbearable because the hornbill is a fatal fighter. After a destructive drama, it is said that they gather together to moan bitterly.

It should be mentioned that wailing is also common amongst other animals such as cattle and elephants if there is death amongst the members of a herd. I have observed the elephants of Namibia on National Geographical Channel on television, assembling around the dry bone of a long dead elephant. After a bitter wailing, one of the elephants picked up the bone and went away.

Cattle often assemble around *umswane* (chyme) of the dead beast and growl in a very touching manner. They also show an element of violence when starting to assemble for the groaning; however, their growling cannot

be compared to that of the hornbills, which is said to be followed by heavy storms.

In the maxim that restricts the killing of the hornbill, one sees the Zulu society's perception of natural life. This maxim seems to be customarily used in a single special situation, and elevated to the dignity of a principle, which arose from the symbolic or metaphoric use of an incident. It is easily used in passing judgment and can, therefore, appear in social contexts to protect people from natural disasters caused by the irresponsible behaviour of humans. Irresponsible behaviour, which can cause hostility as well as such disasters, is severely reprimanded by deeply-thought maxims like this one. The maxim appears to be an observation regarding experience from which one may learn how to live and behave. Though some people who are outside the culture might see these folk testimonies as superstition, maintaining that hornbills have been killed without thunder effect, the Zulu will say: once bitten twice shy. However, some of these beliefs or myths seem to be culture- or context-bound, as Ruth Finnegan (1977:116) states:

Some knowledge of the locally accepted symbolic associations of words and objects is essential. There may be some symbols which have universal reference, but for the most part, local symbolism, whether it is to do with colours, numbers, places, phenomena of the natural world or social forms, is culturally defined.

Jan Vansina (1965:66) further explains the essence of a context for decoding a culture-based meaning:

The meaning of a word only becomes intelligible when the total context in which it has been uttered is taken into account. One has to be thoroughly acquainted with the society in question. Key words which express cultural values are untranslatable.

Birds such as *isikhova* (owl) and *uthekwane* (hamerkop) fall into the second category of harbingers of misfortune and are labelled as familiars sent by witches, especially at night, to suck blood and kill their victims.

For example, the Zulu see no wisdom in the owl because it has a bad

habit of sleeping by day, so that by night it dispenses omens and death. Christian T. Msimang (1982:73) maintains that in Zulu culture, *isikhova* (the owl) represents that which causes misfortune. In most African countries, an owl carries this stigma.

*UThekwane*, commonly known as the water bird, is also not trusted, and its presence near homesteads is always met with suspicion as Jo Oliver (2003:43) states:

*UThekwane* (Hamerkop) unomlozi ongajwayelekile awenza lapho kukhona okumphazamisile. . . Umsindo wayo othusayo wenza abaNsundu bayibuke ngezinkolelo ezihambisana nokuthakatha, baze bathuthe imizi yabo uma uThekwane edlule phezu kwayo ehamba ekhala. (The Hamerkop has an unusual whistle, which it makes when disturbed ... This frightening noise makes Black people associate it with witchcraft; people end up leaving their homes when the Hamerkop passes over their homes crying.)

Nzimande (1963:139), in his poem, 'Thekwane Nyoni Yamashwa' (Hamerkop, the Bird of Misfortunes), strongly interrogates this bird:

Kungabe kuliqiniso yini  
Lokhu okukhulunywa ngabantu?  
Ukuthi uyinyoni yamashwa... ?  
Um'udabul'umuzi womuntu  
Kulandela izulu namashwa.

(Hamerkop, the bird of misfortunes,  
Is it true?  
What I hear people say about you ... ?  
That you are a bird of misfortune?  
You cross-over a person's home, and thunder and misfortunes follow.)

When we apply a word to an object or event in nature we are not always designating what the thing is; the word is often used only as a symbol. Sometimes we react to words as if they were the thing itself because

words are powerful symbols that can produce striking images and pleasant or unpleasant associations in a particular context. This is probably the reason why people label certain birds with the stigma of misfortune, which in turn scares them because these labels become powerful beyond their expectation.

## **Conclusion**

Gule (1993:74) asserts that *inyoni iwusizo, ingaletha izindaba ezinhle noma ezimbi* (a bird is useful; it can bring either good or bad news). This paper, therefore, pursued a cultural thread, searching for the predictor birds labelled as heralds either of doom or of good tidings. These selected predictor birds constitute the ideal ground for the formulation of figurative language to highlight the human reality, as language is both an expression and a symbolic representation of meaning. The symbol is expressed by the word, which conveys an image. Special attention was paid to bird images as metaphors of human interpretation; focusing on the 'sign', the 'thing' and the 'meaning' and metaphors as part of language.

The paper analysed a number of proverbial metaphors, symbols and maxims with themes reflecting socio-cultural values, philosophical ideas, and attitudes of Zulu society towards the welfare of the avian community. The Zulu use proverbs dealing with birds as paradigms to regulate the conduct of young herdsmen and bird hunters as these proverbs take the form of decrees, tenets and statutes or principles.

By researching the meanings attached by our elders to birds' social behaviour, one should be able to decipher some aspects of the maxims that constitute the heritage of the Zulu language, which in turn shapes cultural attitudes.

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# **The Role of Bird Characters in African Story and Myth**

**Ruth Babra Gora**

## **Abstract**

The paper explores the role of bird characters in African story and myth. Birds are ecological beacons in the environment. Their sight impresses humankind visually and their music is aesthetically important. Birds signal the coming of mornings and the setting of the sun. The aim is to show that African societies attach different beliefs to different birds. Some birds are viewed as signs of bad omen yet others as the reverse. For instance, the vulture is regarded as a sign of death whereas the dove is seen as a bird of grace or good fortune. In addition, some African societies believe that certain birds possess significance for specific occasions or ceremonies like circumcision. The argument shows that such beliefs are mirrored in African story and myth. Traditional African narratives include many bird characters, demonstrating the widespread idea that birds are closely related to humans. Since birds are generally appreciated as guardians of human life, they play a positive role in African story and myth, often appearing in times of crisis. Birds resolve conflicts and protect protagonists. In some instances they are personified and take on even more important roles than animals. Birds can carry urgent and important messages about a protagonist, hence opening up possibilities of salvation for the latter. Human characters in African story and myth can be counselled by and saved from danger by birds. In addition, birds can also reveal human character by testing for such virtues as patience and faithfulness. Ultimately, there is a certain reciprocity between birds and humankind in African story and myth.

**Key concepts:** Bird characters, Traditional African narratives

## **Introduction**

In many cultures birds are believed to carry a meaning. As far as African philosophy and religion are concerned, birds are important modes of communication from the spirit world and must be interpreted properly. In other words, birds are winged messiahs from divine sources. Ingersoll (1923:4) contends that primitive man 'regarded birds as supernaturally wise'; hence they were treated with great respect by early men. Biblically too, birds of the air were expected to convey important messages; for instance in the book of Luke chapter 32 verse 34, the crowing of a cock ushers in the momentous tragedy that closed the earthly career of Jesus of Nazareth. For these reasons, the actions of birds have been watched with great interest the world over in the hopes that they might express a revelation.

This paper aims to examine the role of different bird characters in selected African stories. As already mentioned, in African beliefs birds do not just appear because they are part of nature; rather, they are treated as a guiding light from the ancestors to the living. This paper hence attempts to answer the central question: What is the significance of birds in the African story?

For the purposes of this paper, an African story will be defined as a traditional story which is transmitted from one generation to another or from place to place by oral means. However, it is worthwhile to note that most of these traditional stories have been recorded in print. This paper also concurs with Lusweti (1984:123) that African stories include myths (stories believed to be true and concerned with the origin of things or activities of God), legends (true stories dealing with culture and history of people) and fairy tales (artistic stories meant to entertain listeners).

## **Background**

Like any other story, African stories have characters. A character may be human, animal, bird, object or spirit. Literature studies have shown that narrative characters in African stories are usually symbolic. Since most African stories are allegorical there are certain behaviour patterns that can be repeated by specific characters. With just a line up of characters in a story and no synopsis of the story, one can easily guess the story line basing on character behaviour in other known narratives.

A lot has been written and said concerning human, animal and ogre (a monstrous human) story characters. Particular scholars to mention include Lusweti (1984), Finnegan (1984), Nandwa and Bukenya (1986), Kahari (1990), and Miruka (1994). By contrast there is scanty research on birds as story characters. This absence has encouraged the writer to explore the significance of birds in African stories. However, it is first important to show the relationship between traditional stories and society in order to gauge the influence of bird stories on the human world.

## **Oral Literature and Society**

In literary circles it is widely known that a story reproduces the concerns of the society that creates or composes it. A story recreates in symbolic or allegorical form a society's beliefs, customs and accepted norms. Through narratives or folktales a society develops its own self awareness.

Most African societies have similar values although the details may differ. There is a striking resemblance among stories in Zulu, Shona, Chewa and Kikuyu, to mention but a few ethnic groups whose customs have been examined by scholars. An African story could have different versions in different African languages but the theme, story line, characters and purpose will be almost the same in all of them. This paper therefore agrees with Nandwa and Bukenya (1986:24) who claim that 'African religious, philosophical, legal and political concepts and precepts are expressed' in any African story. In the same vein Ingersoll (1923:1) believes that when we say, 'A little bird told me....,' we are making use of legend, folklore and superstition at the same time.' So narrative characters, birds included, may be mythical products of the pre-literate folktale world and as such are symbolic in African story and myth.

## **Why Birds are Symbolic in Stories**

Birds have various qualities which make them peculiar in an African story. Some birds are gentle in nature. For this reason humans feel relatively safe when interacting with them. Birds are usually benevolent, so if they are to perform tasks they carry them out to perfection. Unlike human and animal characters, birds have the ability to fly and so can transcend the spatial limits

by which other creatures are bound. This means that birds are associated with freedom; they seem to have no limits. Most birds do not speak, but psycholinguistic studies have shown that they can communicate, through mating and alarm sounds, for example. And some birds like the parrot are even believed to be able to 'talk'. In addition, birds seem to be unconquerable. Farmers who specialize in the growing of small grain can testify that birds can 'harvest' for them. Closely linked to this is the importunity of birds; naturally they confront and nag, especially antagonists, until justice is done.

It is these unique characteristics of birds that make them symbolic in their own way, particularly in the African story. Stories of human life and relationships are enhanced by the magical element which is introduced by the bird character. Most importantly because birds can fly they seem to be able to occupy several realms and therefore closely resemble our construction of spirits.

## **Significance of Birds in the African Story**

The bird is symbolic in many ways and this paper will draw up some of these as they are reflected in selected African stories.

### ❖ *Birds as Messengers*

African stories often portray birds as emissaries of urgent and important news. They may convey information about the suffering or death of the protagonist. This is evident in a number of African tales as illustrated in the following examples.

In a 'Gikuyu Ogre Folktale' (Lusweti, 1984:115) a man and his wife build their hut in the middle of the forest. When the wife gets pregnant, the husband goes away blacksmithing. An ogre comes, eats all their food and torments the woman. The woman's time to deliver comes and the ogre helps her but goes on to starve her and the baby. Incidentally, a dove often comes by to eat castor seeds which the woman uses for preparing the baby's oil. One day the woman decides to send the dove to the blacksmith. At the blacksmith the dove sings a song until the husband gets the message. He then returns home and kills the ogre. If it was not for the dove, the woman and her child could have starved to death.

In another story, 'Nyange and His Father' (Nandwa & Bukenya, 1986:75), a father used to trap wild animals. One day his son, Nyange, and his friends release the animal that has been trapped. The father gets so angry on hearing that it was Nyange and friends who had done this that that he decides to punish Nyange severely. He invites Nyange on a honey-collecting spree. The father helps his son to climb up to a bee-hive using a ladder. When Nyange is up the tree, the father removes the ladder and leaves Nyange stuck up the tree for days. Luckily, a buffalo passes by and helps Nyange down. Nyange goes away with the buffalo to lands afar. He later becomes wealthy and marries two wives, but is never happy. He is homesick; so one day he sends a bird to his home to report that he is still alive. In response his relatives also send the bird to tell him to come back home. Nyange is thus able to become happy again with the help of a bird.

The two stories show that the bird is a medium of communication. The woman in the 'Gikuyu Ogre Story' is able to get in touch with her husband who is very far away because of a bird. The bird also relieves her of suffering from torture by the ogre and hunger. The same kind of meaning can be drawn from the second folktale, in which Nyange is re-united with his family by a bird. In both instances the bird utilizes its abilities to fly and 'talk' in carrying the protagonists' messages.

### ❖ *Birds as Bridges between Two Spheres of Action*

Because of their ability to fly, birds can make the impossible become possible. They can reach places which are inaccessible to other story characters, both protagonists and antagonists. Therefore they bridge the gap between characters and desired destinations.

In the 'Gikuyu Ogre' folktale, whose synopsis has already been given, the bird bridges the distance between the wife and her husband. So, besides carrying an important message, the bird also closes the gap between the two. It is virtually impossible for the wife to get to the blacksmith in the thick of the forest because she is emaciated by hunger and pain. Where there is pain and suffering, the bird is able to bring peace and safety.

Again in the other folktale, 'Nyange and His Father', a bird manages to bridge both the physical and sociological spaces between Nyange and his family. The relationship between Nyange and his father had turned sour and

a bird helped in healing the son's loneliness and the father's anger. The distance between Nyange and family was also shortened by the bird.

From these two stories and many others, it can be argued that birds symbolize bridges physical, sociological and psychological distances between different camps. The impossible is made possible.

### ❖ *Birds as Sentinels*

Sentinels are soldiers on guard and birds in some African stories stand up as such to prevent fatalities. African people believe that the appearance of certain types of birds symbolizes or warns of danger or even death. A Kipsigis legend, 'The Battle of Migori' (Nandwa & Bukenya 1984:48) illustrates this.

This is a story about war, based on a historical event which occurred in the 1830s. The Kipsigis and the Gusii are great enemies who habitually raid each other's territories. At times battles are fought to prove which tribe is stronger than the other. One day the Kipsigis organize a raid on the Gusii, but on their way they see vultures following them. However, they choose to ignore the presence of this symbolic bird, the vulture, and proceed on their way. Since the Gusii are well prepared for the battle, they manage to trap the Kipsigis who are slain in large numbers.

The Kipsigis should have taken heed of the presence of vultures as they are a sign of misfortune. This tribe ought to have returned home and forgotten about the battle. Vultures are birds that eat the dead; hence they symbolize death. In this legend or story, these birds paradoxically represent guardian spirits which potentially protect humans from monsters or death.

### ❖ *Birds as Counsellors/ Advisors or Teachers*

In the African story the bird character also comes out as a moral voice. Birds can reveal deceptions among humans and can even test virtues like patience and tolerance. Many folktales conform to this since the main purpose of oral literature among Africans was and is to mould a person who fits perfectly into the society.

Fortune (1982:5) records a story 'Shungu Dzinokunda Ronda' ('Mental Anguish is Worse than Pain') in which boy triplets are orphaned at birth. Later their caregivers send them away to wander in the forests. On the

way one of the boys kills a buck. He then orders the other two to continue hunting. The second boy kills another buck and so the third boy has to continue on his own. As he wanders about, he finds a dead hare but a bird appears singing to discourage him from eating the hare. He again comes across a dead buck and the bird repeats its song promising him that better things were to come. After walking for a long distance he stumbles into a homestead whose dwellers take good care of him. He stays there, eventually marries and lives happily ever after.

In this story, the bird symbolizes a counsellor. The third boy is taught by the bird not to rely on other people's belongings, not to feed on carcasses and to persevere in times of trouble. In this way the boy's character is shaped for the better.

In a similar story, '*Rungano Rwenherera Mbiri*' ('The Story of Two Orphans') recorded by Fortune (1982:72), orphaned twins Matirasa and Matinga set out to search food during a year of drought. They find themselves in a cave that belongs to a certain old woman and her ogre son; fortunately the son is away at that time. The old woman warns the twins of her ogre son, advising them to go away immediately and keep watching out for him. The orphans walk for a long distance before the ogre appears behind them. They have to walk faster to increase the distance between them and him. At times they feel too tired to walk, experiencing a strong desire to take a rest, but each time they try to do so, two birds appear and urge them to keep going. This situation continues until the ogre is too tired to follow and the orphans are thus saved from danger.

The two birds in this story serve the same purpose as that of the one in '*Shungu Dzinokunda Ronda*'. The birds counsel the orphans by encouraging them to persevere, since 'hard times never kill', as the old adage goes. Such virtues are expected in any human being.

Another folktale, '*Shiri Yaimutsa Miti*' ('The Bird that Regenerated Stumps') in Fortune (1982:55), has a similar impact. In this story a man wantonly clears the forest in a bid to turn it into a field. During the night a bird sings a song until all the stumps regenerate into trees. The man is amazed the following morning, but goes on to cut down the trees again. One night the man decides to guard the field and discovers what takes place. He kills the bird, takes it home and feeds on it together with his family. All the members of the family transform into birds.

This particular bird teaches the importance of conserving the environment. Humans need to realize that trees and birds as part of the environment are very important and must be conserved. Deforestation causes soil erosion and formation of deserts, whilst killing birds may lead to their extinction. As such the bird has a purpose in the story.

‘The Vulture and the Hen’, recorded by Finnegan (1984:338), also portrays the bird as a teacher. Hen borrows a razor from Vulture to shave her little ones. Hen does not return the razor and she forgets where she has placed it. After some time Vulture comes demanding his razor, but Hen cannot locate it. Vulture decides to be compensated for the loss each time he ‘visits’ Hen. Vulture is still getting his compensation even today.

The two different types of birds in this folktale symbolize different qualities. As already mentioned, a vulture is a sign of danger and death. On the other hand Hen as an example to society teaches people to be responsible, wise and self-sufficient. Hen represents thoughtless carelessness with other people’s property which could destroy faith among neighbours. So the two birds have lessons to teach in this story.

### ❖ *Birds as Part of Conflict Resolution*

In African story and myth, birds sometimes appear on the scene and open up possibilities of salvation when protagonists are in dire trouble. They appear at times of crisis to rescue people. Zondi (2005:25) records James Stuart’s folktale, ‘*Udumudumu*’ in which King Dumudumu has four wives who produce crow children. Consequently he decides to marry a fifth one but unfortunately she cannot produce any child. This earns her the name ‘the barren one’ and the other four wives laugh at and despise her. Eventually the King wants nothing to do with her, so she stops making herself presentable and she cries every day. One day, two doves appear as she works in her field. The doves promise to help her and she feeds them. Thereafter the doves take a blade, make an incision on her left leg and with a reed draw out a blood clot. They do the same with her right leg and place the clots in a pot. After some days the doves fly back, take out two babies from the pot, give them to the woman and fly away. On hearing that his fifth wife now has two children the king becomes very happy. He kills all the crow children and the fifth wife is pronounced the senior wife from that time onwards.



The two doves change the fortunes of ‘the barren one.’ In African culture, fertility is expected of a wife and at the same time regarded as a blessing. On the other hand sterility is a curse; childlessness is great affliction for a married woman. The woman in the story has problems with her husband because she cannot conceive. This being the case, the dove restores honor and dignity to the woman who is in a crisis. In African tradition, as reflected in this story, the dove generally symbolizes good luck, family concord, productiveness and peace.

### ❖ *Birds in Reciprocation or Bargaining*

All the incidents cited above show that birds provide a service of some sort to human characters in African stories. However, it is important to also note that at times birds do not just serve others for nothing. Though in most cases they benefit only from the gratitude of their beneficiaries, birds do sometimes try to strike a bargain. In doing good, they are also portrayed as bargaining. Three stories will be used to illustrate this point.

In ‘*Rungano Rwemukoma nemunin’ina*’ (‘The Story of Two Brothers’) recorded by Fortune (1980:64), the younger brother offers food to a bird when it asks for it, whereas the elder brother refuses. After some time, the two brothers happen to marry women from the same family. The father-in-law declares that the brothers may take his daughters away only after passing some tests. The tests are quite challenging and the younger brother is helped to accomplish his tasks by the bird he fed earlier on. The elder brother fails and so has to leave his bride while the younger brother takes his. The bird acts in reciprocation, for one good turn deserves another. The elder brother gives the bird nothing and receives nothing in return.

Finnegan (1984: 347) records a story entitled ‘Hyena, Hare and Crow’ which also portrays birds in a bargaining situation. Mr Hare and Mrs Hyena eat a lot of honey. Mr Hare ‘advises’ Mrs Hyena not to lose such sweet food and so he stitches her anus together with her tail using sharp thorns. After that they go separate ways. When Mrs. Hyena wants to evacuate, all the other animals except Crow refuse to help her. Crow has to undo the stitching and Mrs. Hyena is able to defecate. In the process, pieces of meat also came out and Crow eats them. Crow gets the prize for helping Mrs. Hyena, thus benefitting from the bargain.

Reciprocation involving birds in the African folktale is also found in the 'Gikuyu Ogre' story whose synopsis has been given already. The dove habitually feeds on castor oil seeds provided by the woman. In return the dove carries the woman's message to her husband who has gone blacksmithing.

The African story thus emphasizes social interaction between birds and people. However, at times a negative image may be given in the bargaining process.

### ❖ *Negative Portrayal of Birds*

Generally birds have been positively portrayed, but occasionally they appear in a negative light. When this happens, it is usually meant to emphasize a human vice.

Fortune (1982: 29) records '*Chishiri Chainzi Chinyamungune*' ('A Bird Called Chinyamungune'), in which a man abducts and hides a girl. A weird bird is responsible for keeping a key for the door to the room where the abducted beautiful girl is kept. The bird is the man's accomplice and so is viewed in bad light.

The crow children in '*Udumudumu*', referred to earlier on, are killed when the 'once barren' wife 'gives birth' to twins. According to African tradition, crows are birds of bad luck. When one sees a crow flying past, one must spit to dispel bad luck and prevent it from coming one's way. In '*Udumudumu*', the crow is thus negatively imaged to heighten the fact that man, represented by King Dumudumu, is very unreliable. Humankind changes with changing situations.

Again in '*Shiri Yaimutsa Miti*' (Fortune, 1982:55) the same bird that magically regenerates the forest also magically transforms family members into birds. In regenerating trees, the bird is positively portrayed, but in transforming the family it is some what negative, however justified the punishment that it enacts.

## **Conclusion**

Bird characters in African culture and tradition deserve special scrutiny because literary scholars need to appreciate and understand their symbolic

meaning. The symbolic function of different birds may vary according to the contours of specific stories. However, the portrayal of each class of birds is fairly stable in most stories. For instance the eagle is identified with vigilance, the dove with good luck, the crow with bad luck, the cock with new beginnings and so on. This paper, therefore, advocates that literature scholars read or hear African stories not at the level of nursery school children, who look at bird characters as part of mere entertaining tales; rather they should interpret the role of birds in as complex a way as they do human and animal characters.

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# Birds in the life of KhoeSan; With Particular Reference to Healing and Ostriches

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## Abstract

The paper examines birds within the everyday and healing life of recent and historical KhoeSan of southern Africa. Following a brief review of academic interest in KhoeSan bird knowledge and evidence for the recent social salience of birds, I describe how KhoeSan exhibit a 'listening disposition' or a particularly tuned awareness to their environment, within which birds are accorded certain kinds of significance. The second half of the paper links this significance to how and why birds are used in medicine. I draw particular attention to the widespread use of the ostrich and, drawing on historical ethnography and recent anthropological findings, attribute this to its potent qualities. The paper argues for subtlety in delineating and understanding KhoeSan relationships with birds. In particular it highlights the dangers of approaching analysis through familiar 'Western' categories of enquiry.

**Keywords:** KhoeSan, birds, historical ethnography, anthropology

*Our land is our mother. It has brought us up and so gave us life. When you wake up in the Kalahari you hear the birds in the trees as they stir and sing to a new day. You hear the*

*powerful wings of the dove as it flies off to drink water. And as you walk outside, the rain and wind touches your heart*  
(Hardbattle in Saugestad 2001:212).

John Hardbattle was co-founder of the Botswanan Bushman activist organisation 'First People of the Kalahari'. He was son of a half-Bushman mother, Khwa, whose language he spoke fluently, and an English father, Tom. Tom had travelled to Africa in 1899 and by 1920 bought a cattle farm in Ghanzi (Gall 2001:172)<sup>1</sup>. John Hardbattle's narrative of approximately 2000 words, from which my epigraph is taken, is a deliberate attempt to capture truths, value, and meaning about 'traditional' Kalahari Bushman life. As a piece of advocacy, John's writing is polemical, romantic, and essentialist. Nevertheless, realities of life in the Kalahari are made up of particularly striking ingredients. For John the essence of Bushman life lay in environmental relationships, particularly Bushman life with birds. His narrative is striking because it relates so many of the key phenomenological and ideational themes that inform my work on KhoeSan medicine<sup>2</sup>.

The introductory paragraph begins with the songs of birds and moves on to the sound-scape of doves' wings. In the subsequent narrative, amongst other references to birds, Hardbattle claims that 'God gave us the Kori Bustard' and, further on, that ostrich beads represent wealth to the Naro (Saugestad 2001:212,214). Hardbattle's emphasis on birds might be surprising in view of their relatively poor representation in Bushman rock art and academic accounts of Bushman life and beliefs. As we shall see, though, birds lie at the core of Bushman and Nama and Damara origin beliefs and everyday life alike, and considering birds leads us to key facets of KhoeSan ontology and epistemology.

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<sup>1</sup> See also <http://kalaharisunset.com/history.html>.

<sup>2</sup> I use KhoeSan as a derivative of the European word 'Khoisan'. Khoisan is a useful way of referring to the culturally affiliated Khoekhoegowab speaking peoples and non Khoekhoegowab speaking Bushmen groups. KhoeSan updates the now old-fashioned spelling of 'Khoi' to 'Khoe'. Capitalizing the 's' is an attempt to emphasize the political equality of the two groups.

In this account I hope to give an impression of how recent KhoeSan have lived with birds and how bird relationships feed into the KhoeSan healing world and have done so in historical, if not pre-historical, times. At the core of my perspective lies an idea that I develop from Gibson's 'education of attention'. I term it a 'listening disposition'. I envisage this characteristic as something intrinsic to all people but particularly those who are sensitively tuned to local 'nature' and rural social African life amongst the KhoeSan, as distinct from those from beyond the region and those who are far more embedded in the formal economy and, most importantly, in imposed Western education practices. On the coat tails of Hardbattle and building on Bieseles ideas of environmentally and culturally situated continuity, I relate this listening disposition to birds by exploring themes of song and behaviour and the particular relevance of big birds, the kori bustard and the ostrich. I develop my interpretation in terms of how birds move in and out of people both in a somatic sense and as mediators between the material and immaterial or 'spiritual' domains of life.

My discussion uses specific examples drawn from my long-term regional comparison of a variety of KhoeSan peoples ranging across Namibia, western Botswana and South Africa's Northern Cape. During 2001 and 2007/2008, I carried out two years of fieldwork, including oral history and participant observation, amongst Nama, Damara, Hai//om, Ju/'hoansi, Naro, and Khomani. The methodological validity of my regional comparison draws on Alan Barnard's *Hunters and Herders of Southern Africa* (1992). Within his 'regional structural comparison', Barnard highlights the validity of considering the 'Khoisan' as a useful and distinctive category of enquiry based on cultural continuities. My findings regarding KhoeSan medicine have furthermore overlapped with Barnard's consideration of KhoeSan religion, and my research very much supports his identification of structure and fluidity across the region (Barnard 1988), a phenomenon further indicated in Schmidt's work on KhoeSan folklore. Despite the historical and geographical variety of settings, Schmidt demonstrates the recurrence across the region of the same or very similar beings, stories, cosmology, and trickster-related inversions of the everyday (Schmidt 1986 & 1989). Megan Bieseles has recognised a similar continuity in Bushman folklore but argues further for a historical dimension. By analysing nineteenth-century ethnography alongside her own research,

Biesele demonstrates that, despite linguistic divisions, ‘a thousand miles of Africa and a century of time’, the narrative framework of particular stories persists (Biesele 1993:3). Biesele partly accounts for this continuity by proposing the existence of a persistent ‘imaginative substrate’, a way of thinking about and working with life that is founded on long and profound relationships with the environment and related strategies of resource use (Biesele 1993:13). Biesele suggests that ideational continuities, linked to continuities in a hunter-gatherer lifestyle, might validate pushing current aspects of Bushman life back into distant centuries. The archaeologist David Lewis-Williams has made further influential claims for envisaging ritual and ideational continuities across Bushmen of southern Africa for thousands of years (Lewis-Williams 1984). He has based this on perceived cultural continuities between historical rock art across southern Africa, nineteenth century ethnography of /Xam Bushmen, and elements of recent Bushman trance dancing.

Academics have recognised that continuities in environment and experience lead to continuities in regional practices, beliefs, strategies, and responses (Carruthers 2003:258; Feierman 2006:187; Omofolabo 1996:182). In this paper I build on these broader arguments for continuity and the more specific findings of Barnard, Biesele, Lewis-Williams, and Schmidt to try and present key themes of KhoeSan bird relationships supplemented by localised variations and understandings where they add to both the bigger and the smaller picture. I propose that one can extend a regional ‘grammar of understanding’ to KhoeSan animal relations; in other words, that people relate to animals in like ways and share persistent knowledge, stories, and beliefs concerning animals. At the core of this regional continuity lie ideas of animal personhood. Without supporting a simplistic and naïve notion of a clear dichotomy between educated urban and rural ‘traditional’ KhoeSan, I assert that the KhoeSan I encountered in rural areas relate overwhelmingly to animals as organisms granted personhood. Ingold’s account of hunter-gatherer relationships ‘in’ nature most aptly captures KhoeSan relationships with birds. Ingold has observed that one must distinguish hunter-gatherer relationships in nature from the ontological dualism of the nature/society and animal/human ‘Western’ intellectual tradition. To hunter-gatherers, many phenomena, including rain and animals, are considered to be like people. They act intelligently, wilfully, and idiosyncratically. When encountering

animals, KhoeSan, like other hunter-gatherers, will ask ‘who did it’ and ‘why’ rather than ‘how does that work’. Whilst awareness of differences exist, to meet a bird is to meet not an ontologically separate organism but a related organism-person (Ingold 2000:48-72).

Despite the geographical, socio-economic, and historical variety that underscores KhoeSan life, fundamental continuities have persisted in KhoeSan relationships with the environment. This continuity is ably represented by the prescience of the eland in historical Bushman life, from the Western Cape nineteenth-century /Xam ethnography and the possibly ancient rock art of the Drakensburg to the readily articulated special status of the eland in the lives and thoughts of recent Hai//om, Ju/'hoansi, and ≠Khomani. This is more than coincidence. In a related sense, the Nama and Damara similarly utilise the eland as a particularly powerful animal in their medicines. As we shall see, this sort of continuity is played out in relationships with birds.

In response to criticism of his suggestion that ideas and practices might be ‘pan-San’, Lewis-Williams has drawn attention to the fact that this statement does not preclude these beliefs being shared with non-San in southern Africa (Lewis-Williams 1998:86). Similarly, many of the notions I identify here within KhoeSan rubrics might well apply to KhoeSan neighbours. What perhaps needs highlighting (considering anthropologists’ current preoccupation with problematising cultural boundaries and wariness of essentialising) is that a regional study such as this sets out to delineate useful frames of reference from which one can develop further useful fields of study<sup>3</sup>. The challenge remains how to describe patterns whilst providing accurate and contextualized detail.

In this paper I have chosen to try and best represent the feel of KhoeSan bird relationships by moving between a broad range of examples. I realize that by doing so I risk accusations of essentialism and historical, environmental, and social decontextualisation. However, I am deliberately using this old-style Frazer (1911) or Schapera (1930) looking approach as a device for capturing what I perceive as fundamental commonalities in ways of thinking and relationships with both environment and knowledge. The cross-KhoeSan commonalities I point towards are based on continuities of experience and ways of working with that experience. As I have explored

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<sup>3</sup> For problems of boundaries and essentialising see Bashkow (2004).



elsewhere (Low 2008:46), I see KhoeSan cultural continuity not in terms of continuity in absolute details but as persistent themes often involving the same or very similar details framed in local contexts and ebbing and fluxing through time. I have suggested such continuity might be likened to a patchwork quilt that maintains its appearance although individual patches are worn out and replaced with patch segments similar enough for the quilt to maintain its pattern or identity.

One particularly important theme of KhoeSan bird relationships concerns their potent and, in Turner's terms, 'liminal' status. In his work on Ndembu ritual Victor Turner ([1969]1995) suggests that anomalies, or things that do not fit normal conventions and constraints, hold the power to articulate some of the profoundest knowledge within human societies. The betwixt and between quality of liminal events is essential to movement of birds from the periphery to the centre of one's focus. This characteristic of bird arrival is attributed a meaningful status by KhoeSan, predominantly in contexts of birds as messengers, and, in this respect at least, many KhoeSan ideas of birds map closely with those found in all manner of human cultures recent and ancient. Nadia Lovell provides an insightful explanation of how such commonality and longevity might be understood:

certain features of the natural environment seem to be acted upon universally, not so much because they act as archetypes (in a Jungian sense) but rather because human sociality appears to focus ontologically on certain key features of the environment which become conducive to the emergence and development of social praxis (Lovell 1998:72).

Thinking about birds provides a good example of exactly why and how the environment might be arresting cross-culturally. Particularly in terms of a 'listening disposition', birds are distinctively interactive in their character, which goes some way to explaining why the way they mingle with humans, in mind and body, is exceptional. Many birds seem inquisitive as they arrive, sometimes as if from nowhere, and insert themselves into our conscious space. Their behaviour and their voices can demand attention, and it is undeniable that, particularly in semi-desert terrain that characterises so much of KhoeSan life, their apparent investment seems meaningful in a profoundly

interactive manner. Like a whirlwind that comes from nowhere and runs through your hut, the only hut for a considerable distance in an ‘empty’ landscape, birds demand attention in a way many other animals or phenomena do not. In terrain which is often quiet, birds are striking companions; some of the Kalahari birds are amongst the most striking for their behaviour, colouring, and size.

Amongst the KhoeSan, animals and other phenomena, such as thunder, are humanised or, more accurately, given personal will that can intercede in everyday life and may become embedded in people and hence fully human. Many KhoeSan are aware, although in slightly different ways and to different extents, that natural phenomena can become part of people. Birds, or bird qualities, can become part of a person. To most KhoeSan the world is not bound in scientific cause-and-effect principles but lived by people who are sensually and psychologically attuned to both its ‘giving’ nature, in a Bird-David sense (Bird-David 1990), and its ‘natural’ complexity<sup>4</sup>. How they work with birds is revealing of how they deal with life’s complexity.

## **Investigating Knowledge of Birds**

Anthropological study of bird knowledge amongst the KhoeSan has not been extensive and pertains almost exclusively to Bushmen. Schapera (1930) includes snippets from the older ethnographic literature, which he has framed largely within contexts of omens and superstitions. Overwhelmingly, more recent researchers, principally Blurton Jones and Konner, Heinz, Guenther, and Silberbauer, conclude that knowledge is impressive. Heinz noted 65 names for 77 birds seen during his fieldwork amongst the !Ko, south of Ghanzi in Botswana (Heinz 1978:151-153) and a similarly impressive level of recognition is recorded by Guenther (2009 pers.com.). Collectively, research indicates that knowledge goes beyond what is required simply to hunt and that some bird species receive more attention than others. Knowledge is led by what is practically useful but also by where attention is

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<sup>4</sup> While Bird-David (1990) provides a useful idea in the notion of a giving environment, Ingold’s critique provides an essential caveat (Ingold 2000: 40-60).

ascribed within a culture in which birds inform the day-to-day. Attention is, as importantly, a reflection of personal interest as much as cultural prescription.

As in other fields of KhoeSan knowledge, bird knowledge may be highly variable, fluid, and inchoate; even in small communities it is not at all unusual to find that different people know different things or know similar things in different ways. Knowledge of birds is widespread across the community and not easily divisible across gender divides although it may possibly be slanted such that men know more of hunting birds or of reading bird behaviour when out hunting and women more about birds in relation to child health. Indicative of the problems of pinning down gender distinctions, Bieseles notes the overlooked role of Ju/'hoan women in tracking and hunting and cites references to G/ui women and women from eastern Botswana setting bird snares (Bieseles and Barclay 2001:77).

Ongoing artwork from Naro who have participated in a community art project at D'kar, Botswana, (commenced 1990)—similarly from !Xun and Khwe at a project in Schmidtdrift (1994) and subsequently Platfontaine (South Africa)—points to a considerable imaginative presence of birds amongst both male and female artists. This, like Hardbattles narrative, presents good evidence of the importance and nature of bird interaction with Bushmen in recent years. Often, painted birds are large species, especially the ostrich, or otherwise distinctive species, such as falcon or guinea fowl. In the mid 1990s, Mathias Guenther determined that at D'kar when artists painted animals, men preferred to paint large veld animals, especially antelopes, whilst the women preferred plants, birds, insects, snakes, lizards, and frogs, all of which he identifies as part of a San woman's gatherable food repertoire (Guenther 2003:165). This distinction might well still hold, but the small numbers of artists at work since 2007, when I first observed them, is not conducive to drawing overly meaningful conclusions. Guenther particularly noted the prominence of the kori bustard and suggests this may reflect its importance in San mythology. The ostrich and the kori bustard are key birds of KhoeSan mythology and medicine. Their strong presence in recent artwork is therefore not perhaps surprising. Equally, the ostrich is one of the few birds to appear fairly regularly in KhoeSan rock art, notably followed by swallows or swifts (see Hollman 2005) and vultures.

Alongside artwork, another clear indicator of the significant role of birds in KhoeSan imaginative life is their presence in folktales. Although the actual number of tales that include birds is not strikingly high (see Schmidt 1989), where they do feature they occupy a special cosmological status. This is particularly true of the ostrich and kori bustard. The folktales recorded amongst historical and recent KhoeSan by Wilhelm Heinrich Immanuel Bleek, Sigrid Schmidt, Megan Bieseke, and others provide significant insight into the sort of ideas and medicinal ingredients that still permeate KhoeSan life.

In the context of folk knowledge, one must also acknowledge a role for birds in folk sayings or song, phenomena that tend to be less-well studied by anthropologists. A Sesfontein Damara woman unusually recited ‘praises’ sometimes sung when eating. One of these included /*ami*, the ostrich: ‘the ostrich jumps the net with its feet’; this is a revealing snippet of old-style ostrich hunting. As a reminder of Ju/’hoan social tendencies to mock pride and encourage equality, a Hai//om elder further related that, when younger, he and others sang a song: ‘why do you walk like the bird with the black and white chest’. The bird’s chest marking and posture reminded these Hai//om of a man in a suit. The song was sung when someone was strutting too proudly. It demonstrates how continued life ‘in nature’ provides metaphors in urbanising environments. That he no longer sings this song also suggests that birds can cease to become the reference points they were in older rural contexts.

## Listening to Birds

Meaning for KhoeSan is intimately related to their ‘listening disposition’ by which they read and participate in myriad phenomena. KhoeSan environmental relationships resonate with Paul Radin’s observation of North American (Winnebago) Indians for whom, he comments, nature ‘blazes’ with information (in Berman 2000:11). I would not wish to generalise this disposition across the KhoeSan because of their social diversity at regional and very local levels. Equally, a blaze seems to detract from the everyday nature of this knowledge, exceedingly rich though it is amongst certain individuals. Nonetheless, as George Silberbauer observed of the G/ui, knowing what is normal and abnormal behaviour makes up ‘one part of the

G/ui environmental information spectrum, which is under constant, if automatic, observation' (Silberbauer 1981:72).

The way meaning is ascribed by KhoeSan to the day-to-day echoes Evans-Pritchard's observations amongst the Azande of the 'why did I trip over this root?' variety (Evans-Pritchard 1937). The KhoeSan are not superstitious; they simply have different explanations, and one must be wary when reasoning looks obvious. Some Hai//om, for instance, read the circling of vultures as an indication of a possible food source. From the perspective of my education, I can easily understand why vultures are telling me about a possible food source, but in this simple act I am blurring and collapsing important cultural boundaries. In contexts of meaning, Silberbauer relates how amongst the G/ui, animals are thought of in anthropomorphic terms that imbue certain types of animals with special knowledge, some of which is thought to be better than that of humans. The notion that vultures, for example, have special knowledge overlaps with one I have presented elsewhere (Low 2007a:S87) concerning how people are considered, and consider themselves, in terms of gifts or potency. The gift is essentially an aspect of who a person is. A man who massages well has that quality, or gift. Such gifts are God-given and can be transferred between people and, in an extension of the idea, between people and animals. Birds provide a particularly good example of this potency transference. What is transferred, or how this potency is referred to, varies with context but revolves primarily around linked ideas of people's or animal's smell and wind giving strength or causing illness.

The idea that wind, gifts, or personal qualities can be transferred between organisms points to a central way of thinking in which one animal or person can hold the essence of another. A person given the gift of healing by a healer is an 'owner' of that gift. KhoeSan can similarly own or possess animal essences that give them the abilities of, and establish an affinity with, particular animals. Ju/'hoansi are well known for turning into lions and doing lion things such as scaring other lions and people or travelling long distances to observe a distant village. It is not commonly reported that people turn into birds, but the notion is a possibility for many KhoeSan and is a feature of historical ethnography. In the late-nineteenth-century Bleek and Lloyd archive of /Xam Bushmen, we find healers, *!giten*, who could change into animals, taking such forms as jackals and birds (Hewitt 1986:296). One of

Bleek's informant's related a story of the wind that was formerly a man becoming a bird and living in the mountains (Skotnes 1999:40). The story captures ideas of transference and links between birds and wind that might be dismissed as folklore but that are revealing of actual past and current perceptions of transformational realities or possibilities.

Indicative of the detailed day-to-day knowledge of birds, abnormal or distinctive behaviour is often attributed to a bird being a person in animal form. Typically this would be a dead person. One Damara man told Dagmar Wagner-Robertz that his deceased father would appear to him as either a snake or a bird<sup>5</sup>. Lorna Marshall recorded in the 1950s that the Ju/'hoansi believed dead people, *//gauwasi*, sometimes changed into small birds, *!gwara*, that came to eat people's meat hanging in the branches beside their shelters (Marshall 1962:243).

Set against a disposition that is well-represented by the question 'what is this telling me?', birds carry meaning, which may be found in surrounding phenomena in space and time including weather, danger, bad luck, visitors, or other events. To KhoeSan, bird behaviour that tells them about visitors coming, or of secret information such as pregnancy or 'witchcraft' activity, is no different from bird behaviour that tells them about what is going on in the bush or with the weather. It is a significant distortion and fragmentation of KhoeSan thinking to start to try and dissemble these different types of observations and understandings into categories that are understandable in terms of ethology, based, on the one hand, on better or worse biological knowledge of nature, and, on the other hand, examples of superstitious knowledge.

The most common reading of bird behaviour relates to vocal chatter. Amongst the Hai//om, for instance, hearing the */hōness* bird and the owl at night tells of imminent or distant visitors, as does hearing the *//gauseb* amongst Naro. Death and pregnancy are also key themes informed by bird presence. Amongst Naro, *//gaus* give messages of death and a brown bird (unspecified) settling in a nearby tree means someone is pregnant in the house. The */khai ah* bird, known by the Ju/'hoansi, provides a particularly

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<sup>5</sup> Wagner-Robertz, 52 '*//Gamagu*'. Unpublished, typed, and indexed fieldwork notes of Dagmar Wagner-Robertz, held in 2001 by W. Haacke at The University of Namibia. Consulted with kind permission from Dr. Rudiger Wagner, Otterfing, Germany.

good example of the multiple roles of bird calls. The bird makes a pitiful noise if it is telling you something bad, like a relative has died and a good sound if something good is going to happen. It also warns you if something is near<sup>6</sup>.

What is meaningful to these KhoeSan relates intrinsically to their specific and general lifestyles. That death and pregnancy are meaningful is hardly surprising. It is also not surprising that one's safety on a hunting or collecting mission in the veld is of paramount importance. Weather, including lightning, and animals, including lions, elephants, puff adders, and cobras, continue to be a real threat. Indeed, as in the case of Ju/'hoansi and elephants, successful conservation initiatives are now blamed for making bush life more dangerous. For many KhoeSan, birds continue to play a key role when venturing into the bush.

It is tempting to frame KhoeSan linking of bird behaviour with environmental events as familiar empirical observation. Amongst some Naro, for instance, it is believed that if the francolin makes a 'kokoro' sound, it will be windy at night or if the *!nōroh* bird is 'playing or whistling too much', clouds will come and rain will soon follow. Both these examples seem to demonstrate keen observation and a pragmatic knowledge of nature. Undoubtedly, such knowledge does reveal a profound awareness of nature; it would, however, be fundamentally distorting to set this way of knowing apart from its wider context. What is characteristically KhoeSan about such observations is that causation is reversed on the basis of accepted observation. The bird does not whistle in response to rain. It is the bird whistling that brings the rain. This is empirical knowledge, but it is not formed by the same scientific understanding that backgrounds a Western notion of empiricism.

Opening the web of thinking still further, I suggest that the way birds are listened to fits within an unquestioning acceptance of the validity of intuition and feelings. Across the KhoeSan and beyond to their African neighbours, it is well-known that the body tells you things. KhoeSan hunters talk of feeling the quarry inside themselves. Bleek referred to these feelings as 'presentiments' (Bleek 1876:17). KhoeSan participate in a regional social-

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<sup>6</sup> I have not been able to identify all the birds I mention but am happy that this movement in and out of KhoeSan names serves to emphasise KhoeSan perspectives and requires us to think more about the relevance of names.

isation of sensations in which people recognise that twitches relate the death of a friend, the arrival of someone you have carried or, in the case of itchy thighs, the possibility of an imminent car journey. The body is accordingly listened to and socialised just as the veld and the birds within it are.

A related dimension of this intuitive listening propensity concerns how birds act as mediums for messages into the mind, not just in everyday terms but in healing contexts. While a Damara healer sleeps in his hut, for instance, those seeking solutions to illness place a stick with money attached to it into the outside wall. By morning the healer will be aware of the problem and the solution. The stick is called an *anib*, or a 'kind of ancestor or spirit'. In the 1970s Wagner-Robertz recorded a Damara healing-dance song in which birds were praised as expeditious messengers (Wagner-Robertz 2000). In a dance I recorded in 2001, the powerful healer danced in the form of a bird. In view of the currency of birds in these contexts, I strongly suspect that the root of the word *anib* lies in its other meaning as a male bird, the implication being that the bird flies from the ancestors or deity bearing the solution.

## **Bird Medicine and Bird Sickness**

Whilst birds are broadly distinctive for their flight and vocal communication, and while these aspects feature strongly in links between liminal states and messages (both practical and prophetic), the medical relevance of birds relates more specifically to their size and eating habits. In medicine, it is not so much songbirds but big birds that count, namely the ostrich and the kori bustard. The ostrich is undoubtedly the most significant bird in KhoeSan medicine. The parts used include the dung, eggshell, fat, feathers, and leg tendons. Historical ethnography and folktales provide good evidence for the historical significance of the ostrich and kori bustard and some details of earlier use. Most importantly, earlier stories provide evidence for ways of thinking about these birds in relation to the nature of life, the meaning of animals, and the role of animals in causing or curing sickness. This historical material dovetails with ideas and practices current amongst most KhoeSan I encountered.

Ostrich eggshell is the strongest contender for a universal KhoeSan medicine. Amongst Damara, Nama, Hai//om, and Khamani, it is a key



ingredient in a formulaic mixture given as a first line of treatment for illness of children. The Damara refer to this illness as /gôaron //ob(s), literally children's sickness (Low 2007b:796). Biomedical diagnosis for /gôaron //ob includes dehydration, meningitis, gastroenteritis, and malaria. Ingredients in the medicine vary between groups but commonly include ground aardwolf anal gland, jackal liver, and bat-eared fox kidney. Some Naro women just fed eggshell powder on its own to babies, combined it with giraffe or eland fat as a chest rub in cases of flu, or rubbed the fat and eggshell all over a child's body to enhance its strength. Numerous Naro and Ju/hoansi give their children ties of ostrich eggshell beads to make them 'strong'. Young and old alike also wear them to encourage strong joints, particularly of the neck or back.

Ostrich fat is used by some Naro within their general massage strategies. Amongst Ju/'hoansi, fat is sometimes drunk if they are feeling tired or sick. Some Nama use applications of ostrich dung for burns on children. For sore eyes, Tsodilo Ju/'hoansi gave eggshell in water to drink, whilst Nama and Damara rubbed burnt feathers into the eyes. Far more commonly, feathers are used as 'ritual' accoutrements of KhoeSan dancing healers when they are bound together in a 'fly whisk' and used to waft the air or swat recipients of potency. This swatting is part of the process of 'opening' a person to receive potency or to align potency already in them. The final significant category of medicinal ostrich use concerns use of leg tendons which the Damara tie around knees and lower limbs to help sore and stiff legs. The problem is referred to as *≠gurub*.

Other than the ostrich, the most significant medicinal bird is the kori bustard. As with the ostrich, kori bustard parts are mixed with a varying range of organic ingredients. Damara use both the stomach contents and the dung of the bird. One woman mixed the stomach contents with a small *!hutubi* insect and gave the mixture to children either in water solution (as a drink) or by rubbing it into small 'medicinal cuts'. Another woman mixed the stomach contents with ground acacia beetle and tree gum, and still another with ostrich eggshell and aardwolf dung, which she rubbed on the body of children to protect them from strong *≠oab*, or the wind of other children or people. The fact that much kori bustard use also relates to treating children's sicknesses points to an overlap in ideas about these two distinctively large bird species.

Beyond the kori bustard and the ostrich, I encountered very little further reference to bird medicine. One Damara man reported cooking the nest of the *≠ereb* bird (*Prinia* species) in water and drinking the concoction for stomach pain. Another Damara roasted a nest, also probably of the *≠ereb*, put it into his mouth, and blew it into the mouth of a child with mouth sores. A Ju/'hoansi man washed a child with the soup of a boiled *!ga* bird to treat excessive crying. Although I have little additional evidence, I suspect that more birds are occasionally used, but such use is probably quite idiosyncratic and inconsistent<sup>7</sup>.

Indicative of broader ideas of potency exchange, although uncommon in other KhoeSan-animal relations, there exists a widespread idea amongst the Bushmen that children's sickness may be caused by the shadow of a bird or by walking under a bird's nest. This belief is also found amongst other Africans of the region but is not obvious amongst the Nama and Damara. Wagner-Robertz does, however, identify the belief amongst Damara that if birds build a nest from your hair you will go mad; this claim is highly suggestive of wider bird potency ideas<sup>8</sup>. For the other KhoeSan, the idiom of the idea varies across and amongst groups, but there is a clear underlying theme that the shadow or wind of a bird or its nest enters a child and the child consequently manifests malignant bird characteristics. Some Hai//om described how the shadow of the *//gores* bird will *!goo* a baby. The name of the bird translates as 'claw' bird. The illness is identified when a baby coughs in a manner that sounds like the bird. Haacke translates *!goo* as 'bellow (of: cattle on smelling blood)' (Haacke and Eiseb 2002:320). I strongly suspect *!goo* relates to the bird call going into the baby in the sense of sound or voice equating to wind transference. It is an idea semantically tied to Damara bad thoughts, *≠ais*, that clog the throat. Equally it resonates with a Naro idea of *kgaba* (*khaba*) that one of my 'informants' described as 'something that gets into you that is still angry and gets into your heart'; he used this expression specifically to describe how a bird 'covers' a child with its shadow. The shadow will *//gai*, or 'sit on', the baby and *khaba* it. Guenther similarly described 'kgaba' as an illness caused by someone's bad thoughts. He relates that it comes from their heart and is exuded in saliva and

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<sup>7</sup> For a more complete account of animal use see 'Tables of animals used in KhoeSan medicine' on the author's website [www.thinkingthreads.com](http://www.thinkingthreads.com).

<sup>8</sup> Wagner-Robertz, MS, 65.

breath. It is not deliberate, it just happens (Guenther 1992:86-88). Unlike Guenther, who frames *kgaba* in contexts of acculturated ‘witchcraft’ beliefs, as I have discussed (Low 2008:220), it seems a thoroughly KhoeSan concept, if not word. In this complex of bird, wind, shadow, and bad thoughts lies a very KhoeSan explanation for illness.

An accompanying sign of the //gores bird sickness is stasis or depression of the anterior fontanel, a medical sign of dehydration. One Hai//om man reported the sickness could be passed from the mother, through her milk, to the baby. One treatment for the illness is to rub sweat or soil on the anterior fontanel, or to place a piece of grass there. In a similar manner, Ju/'hoansi spoke of the *subbah* or *tsaba* (eagle?) bird causing depression of the anterior fontanel. To protect children, parents rub a mixture of white ash and mother's milk onto the child's head. Other Ju/'hoansi referred to a sickness-causing bird as //gam, and the anterior fontanel sickness as /na /num. One Ju/'hoansi man described how a big bird shouts over a baby and ‘puts its body into the baby’. The sickness is commonly recognised when the fingers of the afflicted child begin clawing like bird feet.

## **Why are Birds Used in Medicine?**

The evidence for medicinal bird use lies not in asking KhoeSan directly, which is fruitless, but in pulling together examples of birds being used medicinally from habits, references, and understandings. Untangling the web of relations that informs practice leaves us with two primary themes, although these, it must be recognised, merely serve as ways into the far more complex web of relations in which medical actions operate. The first theme relates to what kori bustards and ostriches eat, the second to the significance of ostrich strength and size (including egg size).

Numerous KhoeSan related that the porcupine is an exceptional medicine animal because it eats a variety of highly medicinal plants. Porcupine stomach is well known for its potency and is deemed a very strong medicine across the KhoeSan groups I have encountered. The efficacy of elephant dung is similarly attributed to the wide range of special plants elephants eat. It is highly probable that use of the kori bustard's stomach contents and use of the dung of both animals relates to what the birds are known to eat. Again, the important task here lies in not segregating this

empirical knowledge from the wider inchoate knowledge of these animals that contributes to popular ideas of their medical potency. Discussion of ostrich medicine highlights such complexity.

A key background to medicinal use of ostrich lies in its size and strength and in how these qualities, in line with wider ideas of potency movement, are believed to be transferred between the ostrich and people. The way KhoeSan typically talk about such human / animal transference of essence is through the wind, smell, or shadow of the animal entering the person. In practice, transference of potency entails taking parts of an animal and rubbing them into a 'medicinal cut', wearing animal parts, rubbing them on, eating and drinking them, burning them and sniffing the smoke produced, or allowing animal fluids into ears or eyes. Using parts of the ostrich bestows the recipient with attributes of the ostrich. Sometimes strength is conferred generically through, for example, rubbing on or drinking fat, while other times it is conferred specifically by such methods as wearing the leg tendon of an ostrich on one's leg to help with knee and leg problems. Reflecting on fat use in this context reminds us that reasoning can never be assumed to be homogeneous or singular. Fat is used widely as a potent rub, both for its particular strengths linked to derivative animal smell and identity and for its practical skin-protective qualities. At the same time it acts as a massage lubricant. In one action fat holds multiple meanings: drinking ostrich fat is a nutritious act and simultaneously a potent one.

The specific ostrich parts used, and the ailments KhoeSan treat with them, indicate particular variations of what is known about ostriches. The use of ostrich tendons on poor legs speaks to both the exceptional strength of ostrich legs and the similarity of ostrich legs to human legs. A !Kung man pointed to this in his comment that the ostrich is a medicine because it 'walks like a person'<sup>9</sup>. Bands of ostrich tendons or ostrich eggshell beads are worn by KhoeSan around the body to confer strength. Often this practice is meant to help with spinal problems. The bands are typically placed around the neck of infants to help lolling heads and weak necks. This use mobilizes the strength of the ostrich in a generic sense whilst also drawing on an awareness of the exceptionally strong and prominent ostrich neck. Across all the

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<sup>9</sup> '!Kung' refers to Namibian Bushmen living north east of Etosha National Park. They are distinctive from the Ju/'hoansi of the northern Kalahari, who were called !Kung in older literature.

KhoeSan, although less commonly amongst the Ju/'hoansi, a primary use of ostrich medicine is to treat colds, coughing, runny noses, and flu symptoms. Following associations made between eating eland chest meat and curing coughing problems, it is reasonable to suspect that this is linked to the highly prominent chest of the ostrich. As colds and coughs are a common problem of young and old alike, giving a medicine that generally bestows the longevity, health, and vigour of the ostrich is not surprisingly a common practice. Following eland medicine reasoning, using the chest of the ostrich would confer chest vigour and help treat chest problems.

If historian Felipe Fernández-Armesto is right that the antiquity of cultural practice is indicated by the extent of its occurrence (Fernández-Armesto 2004:38), then recent use of ostriches by KhoeSan ranging from southern Angola to the Cape suggests such use is old. The historical salience of ostrich is further supported by the widespread occurrence of the ostrich as a special animal in KhoeSan stories, new and old. Although there is virtually nothing in the way of historical records about ostrich medicine, there are accounts from later nineteenth-century philologists Wilhelm Bleek and Theophilus Hahn that provide the wider ideational context in which ostriches sat amongst KhoeSan—at least amongst the /Xam and Cape Khoekhoe. What is always surprising is how when one begins to explore these older stories and ideas amongst recent KhoeSan, continuities repeatedly emerge. This allows the setting up of a rewarding dialogue between the past and the present.

Across recent and historical KhoeSan narratives, the ostrich and kori bustard appear in contexts that connect them to fire and ideas surrounding creation or re-creation. Bieseles notes stories amongst the Ju/'hoansi that feature the kori bustard as a kind of 'captain' of the other animals. A similar notion crops up in an account by the missionary Samuel Shaw Dornan concerning the Hiecheware Bushmen. Dornan recounts a Bushman story in which the lion discovers that the ostrich, 'king of the animals', has no teeth (cited by Schmidt 1989:237). Bieseles further elaborates that amongst the Ju/'hoansi the powerful wings of the kori bustard were said to have fanned the fires at the mythological branding in which animals were given their specific characteristics and thereby separated from mankind (Bieseles 1993:23,98).

Amongst the Hai//om, I have encountered variations of stories linking ostriches to fire that echo those in the wider ethnography. In earlier research amongst Naro, for example, Guenther recorded stories about ostriches, usually though not exclusively female ones, as the custodian of the first fire. Typically the ostrich is said to have hidden or kept the embers of the first fire alight under her wings or apron (Guenther 1999:160). These sorts of stories locate ostriches and kori bustards at the transition between First Order Creation and Second Order Creation, or the ‘mythical’ junction between when animals and people were the same and then became separated. This status grants these birds, particularly the ostrich, a magical quality, which has been specifically acknowledged by at least one /Xam Bushman, who called the ostrich ‘Magic Bird’. Further evidence of this magic status lies in observations made by the Eastwoods, who recently encountered a Naro belief in a magical-looking Ostrich Woman, /Osê. /Osê is particularly dangerous to children and visible only to shamans (Eastwood 2006:108).

A further essential pole of this magical status is rooted in associations between ostriches and ideas of rebirth or resurrection. Bleek noted the recurrence of stories concerning the resurrection of a dead male ostrich ‘in and through one of its little feathers’. He observed that this resurrection was compared to the coming of the moon, the only other phenomenon, so the /Xam said, not to die outright (cited by Hewitt 2001:182). The wider archive of Bleek and his colleague, Lucy Lloyd, provides further information about the pertinence of the moon. In a number of tales recorded by Bleek and Lloyd, /Xam Bushmen related that /Kaggen, an archetypal trickster figure central to many /Xam tales, pierced an eland’s gall that was hanging on a bush. The gall burst and blocked out the sun. To see his way home, /Kaggen created the moon from a feather, which Lloyd identified as an ostrich feather. R.L. Hewitt suggests that the curling shape of a feather relates to the arc-shape of a new moon, and he emphasises the strength of /Xam beliefs about the regenerative power of the moon, noting that the /Xam even had a ceremony to ‘bestow its revived energies upon them’. Hewitt concludes that the feather, as a moon, ‘lights the darkness and mediates Life and Death’ (Hewitt 2001:174, 182).

It is not solely through the moon, however, that the ostrich links with ideas of celestial birth or rebirth. Hahn, another late-nineteenth-century philologist and ‘native’ Khoekhoe speaker, linked the ostrich egg to the sun.

Through etymological analysis, Hahn proposed that ‘it is not unlikely’ that the sun, which is round and white, was equated by at least Khoikhoi, if not Bushmen, to the ‘egg par excellence’, the ostrich egg (Hahn 1881:141). Giving further weight to connections between creation, people, and ostriches, elsewhere Hahn cites a Korana belief that Tsu//goab, the creator of the Khoikhoi, originally made a man, Kanima (or ‘ostrich feather’) and a woman, known as ‘yellow copper’ (Hahn 1881:105). In at least these historical contexts, Khoekhoe and San ideas of the ostrich feed into ideas surrounding the sun, moon regeneration, and creation that seem highly relevant to more recent beliefs linking medicine and life to idioms of waking up and standing up into life. As ever though, there is an ambivalence in potency, medicine, and life. A Ju’hoansi man told of the dangers of eating ostrich eggshell, which can make a person go mad. It is too much. In a similar sense the Ju’hoansi recognise that the life-giving sun is potent, it is *n/um*, but it can also be too much, a ‘death thing’ (Marshall 1969:352).

Some Nama women feed newborn babies, over a period of a few days, with a tiny amount of burnt ostrich eggshell. They say that the baby does not yet know anything. The medicine is to ‘teach’ the child, ‘it is the first thing that comes to his mouth’. The medicine is called *!huitsa*. The word is interesting for two reasons. Although establishing word derivation and linkages is a problematic process, it seems highly probable that *!huitsa* relates to *!hui*, meaning bursting open, exploding or opening of a spring and bursting into blossom (Haacke and Eiseb 2002:337). The name seems to juggle an idea of coming forth into creation. If so this would be consistent with the wider ontological context of ostrich eggs and ostriches. It is also interesting, although at this stage entirely conjectural, to note that the same root, *!hui.b*, means kori bustard in Khoekhoegowab.<sup>10</sup> It might well be, then, that this linguistic relationship is further evidence of semantic overlap regarding these birds.

The idea of the ostrich egg as a giver of life and an object of exceptional potency and significance further exists in beliefs of the Ju’hoansi, as recorded by Bradford Keeney. Keeney has worked with the Ju’hoansi since the early 1990s. He notes that the most powerful dream a

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<sup>10</sup> Khoekhoegowab is the language spoken predominantly by the Nama, Damara and Hai//om. The Naro speak a variation. Some ≠Khomani also speak Khoekhoegowab although most speak Afrikaans.

Ju/'hoansi shaman can have is of an ostrich eggshell cracking open. Having this dream provides a ready connection between the shaman and the supernal forces or beings that underlie Ju/'hoan cosmology. Additionally, some shaman believe that, when they are dancing, the coloured threads they see linking the 'heavens' to the earth are threads of ostrich eggshell beads. Climbing each bead takes the shaman one step nearer the ancestors and the Big God (Keeney 2003:42, 60).

Keeney records that Ju/'hoansi healers speak of *kabi*, or sacred visions, in which they are given gifts from the gods. Amongst the gifts are ostrich feathers, *kxao-kxao !kui*, that are used by healers as 'decoration' (Keeney 'declaration', pers.com.).<sup>11</sup> The gift may be a vision of what to make and use, a necklace or feather whisk, for example, or it might bring significance to a chance find or an opportunistic acquisition of ostrich feathers. The feathers are used by healers in healing dances across the KhoeSan, except, in my experience, amongst the Nama. They may be used to beat a person's body or sweep out sickness, to sweep a coal into a tortoise shell and singe the fragrant *sâi* plant powder within, to hold and sweep about when dancing, or to wear on the body, usually in a headdress type manner. In this latter use of feathers lies the undoubted harnessing of an effective stage prop and elaborate tool, but also the recruitment of a potent object capable of mediating potency within the healing context. In a related sense, using ostrich eggshell in the moth-cocoon rattles worn around the legs of dancing Bushmen shaman, is to use both an effective rattling 'stone' and a potent object.

## Conclusion

In my analysis, I have tried to capture what is at the heart of bird relationships in recent and historical times. I have highlighted ways in which birds feed into KhoeSan life at profound levels of knowledge and healing and, in turn, how this relates to broader environmental relationships and relationships with knowledge. At the heart of this alignment of environmental experience and ways of thinking lies a complex web of familiar and unfamiliar knowledge and intuition. Perhaps the most important

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<sup>11</sup> For a transcript of this 'declaration' by Ju/'hoansi healers about their healing see Keeney (2007).



means of understanding KhoeSan thought involves rejecting Western intellectual categories of enquiry. Knowledge of the environment can be empirical, but not in ways that equate absolutely with the empiricism of Western intellectual traditions. Even discussion of KhoeSan ‘myths’, ‘folklore’, ‘stories’, or narratives holds the danger of distancing the KhoeSan from the real meanings inherent in their oral accounts. In a world of possibilities, ‘stories’ are judged by experience, personal knowledge, and intuition. KhoeSan I have met have seen people change into animals and known giant snakes to fly around the mountains of northern Namibia.

In light of Bieseles ideas concerning persistent hunter-gatherer ways of thinking and arguments linking the spread of ideas with their longevity, I have suggested that the sorts of bird relationships I have described can be used to inform our thinking about the deeper archaeological past, although determining how far back one can go remains problematic. I have moved through examples of bird interaction to try and capture what I see as continuity in everyday and healing ways of thinking about birds that run across time and space, from historical Cape /Xam to recent northern Namibian Damara. It is a very similar sort of continuity to that identified by Bieseles in terms of folklore and by Barnard in terms of KhoeSan religion—not absolute but patterned. Although space has not permitted analysis of rock art, the webs of potency that weave through much of the art provide a good way of thinking about how featured birds are enmeshed in KhoeSan experience of life. Therianthropic half-human, half-animal bird-people become more understandable if we think about how KhoeSan might share qualities and potency with birds.

The paper’s medical focus has led to key ideas that must always be kept in mind when considering birds in any KhoeSan contexts. The multiple identity of ostrich eggshell bead necklaces, in particular, suggests how cautious we must be in dissecting recent and ancient KhoeSan culture through rigid categories of enquiry. Thomas Dowson has observed that KhoeSan dancing healers wear ostrich eggshell beads to impress bystanders and make themselves look strong and attractive to the spirits with whom they communicate (Dowson 1989:85). Whilst this seems a reasonable assessment, as we have seen, as we have seen, is more complex still. There is potency in ideas of attraction, and strength-bestowing properties are inherent in beads. Bieseles notes that early gemsbok people are said to have been the first to

make ostrich eggshell beads (cited by Dowson 1989:85). Ostrich beads have a long and rich history. I have no doubt that, in addition to these folklore and healing contexts, part of the potency of ostrich eggs also lies in their 'practical' value as water containers. One should not underestimate what securing or finding a stash of water represents in arid environments. Less clearly, although still relevantly, tools such as ostrich bone for making mats and baskets carry and perpetuate the wider potency of ostriches. So too does eating their meat, as /Xam prohibitions concerning ostrich gizzard remind us (Bank 2006:247).

The idea of birds as messengers appears amongst KhoeSan in a manner that strongly overlaps with birds in many cultures. Their song and their arrival and departure in the air, with no trace, give them a meaningful liminal quality. But the meaning of birds stretches further than that associated with songbirds or others that alight around camp. Birds of all sorts may have meaning depending on the context, but some are known for the special knowledge, like the vulture as an indicator of food. Amongst the KhoeSan, the liminal aspect of birds is developed further still in the ancestral *anib* messenger, or the kori bustard, at the first branding. It is, however, the magical ostrich that plays with the essence of what it means to be KhoeSan. In the ostrich as mediator of life and death, we glimpse a feel for the flexibility, imagination, openness, and responsiveness that characterises the mindset of these recent hunter-gatherers and pastoralists.

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# Levaillant's Bird Books and the Origins of a Genre

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## Abstract

François Levaillant (or Le Vaillant) has not had due recognition for his role in originating a new genre: the lavishly illustrated guide to the birds of a particular region. This article places Levaillant's role as formal innovator in historical context by showing how he drew on new technologies and influenced the form and content of ornithology. In particular, a comparison of Levaillant with Audubon suggests that Levaillant has been unjustly marginalised in the history of natural history and its forms.

**Keywords:** Levaillant; Audubon; Stresemann; Daudin; history of ornithology.

## Introduction

The latest huge Roberts VII includes 'A brief history of Southern African ornithology' that pays a typically back-handed tribute to François Levaillant: 'The first systematic collections of birds were made by François Levaillant in the early 1780s; some 20 years later he published his lavishly illustrated *Oiseaux d'Afrique*, but this work included several debatable renditions of local birds' (Hockey, Dean & Ryan 2005:10). A few sentences later, the authors add insult to injury by classifying Layard's 1867 *Birds of South Africa* as 'the first genuine African bird book' (10). This article will argue that this neglects how important a role Levaillant played, for South Africa

and internationally, as the creator of a new genre in naturalism—the bird book. What is undeniable is that Levaillant’s bird books look and feel much more like the current Roberts and other influential bird books since than Layard’s does, so that the editors are in the odd position of denying their own obvious generic genealogy. To prefer the Layard, an accurate and worthy compendium without any innovation or illustration, over Levaillant is to strip ornithology of its origin in excitement, adventure, wonder, and speculation.

This article adds to a critical re-evaluation of Levaillant’s legacy as the founder of South African ornithology (Rookmaaker, Mundy, Glenn & Spary 2004), a discovery given added importance by my tracing of the fate of his collection and its importance in the founding of the new bird collections in the Natural History Museum in Paris (Rookmaaker et al. 2004), and as a crucial figure in the history of bird preservation (Rookmaaker, Morris, Glenn, & Mundy 2006). Levaillant was far more than an ornithologist, as I have argued both in a critical edition and re-evaluation of his importance as early travel writer and social commentator (Le Vaillant, Glenn, Farlam, & Lauga Du Plessis 2007) and in articles on Levaillant’s important role as a creator of new narrative genres like the safari (Glenn 2005) and as originator of maps showing animal distribution (Glenn 2007). We could certainly argue that we do not yet have an adequate recent account of his aquarelles, which form a more substantial artistic record than most cultural historians have recorded (Quinton, Lewin Robinson & Sellicks 1973).

Media scholars have not yet produced an adequate history of the development of the media surrounding nature, from early nature writing to the Discovery Channel and Animal Planet (Glenn 2008). What this article argues is that Levaillant’s bird books, along with his other contributions, played a key role in these developments.

## **Levaillant as Ornithologist**

Levaillant’s formal developments rested on and preserved his genius as an ornithologist. In his magisterial account of the history of ornithology, Erwin Stresemann devotes his first chapter on a single ornithologist to Levaillant (Stresemann 1975). Stresemann (1975:97) writes that,



Levaillant was really an excellent observer of birds and an understanding interpreter of their behaviour, and in fact gifted as few others have been in communicating his ideas not only vividly but attractively.

Stresemann bases his tribute on a thorough knowledge of Levaillant's work, and he points out, for example, that Levaillant observed during his travels, 90 years before anybody else, that the Rosy-faced Lovebird (*Agapornis roseicollis*) nests in Sociable Weaver (*Philetairus socius*) nests (1975:97).

In the multi-author Brehm volume on Levaillant, Peter Mundy provides the fullest and most detailed account, since Sundevall, of Levaillant's achievements as an ornithologist. For Mundy, Levaillant's insights into the behaviour of shrikes ('the raptors of the undergrowth'), his achievements in being the first ornithologist to note reverse sexual dimorphism in raptors, and his deep knowledge of bird behaviour make him the undoubted original and founding figure of South African ornithology (Rookmaaker et al 2004:163-450). Mundy also notes the curiosity that marked the restless inquirer and the experimental innovation in, for example, Levaillant keeping vultures alive to see how long they can go without food. What this suggests is that Levaillant's errors or deliberate deception (and a consideration of this issue is beyond the scope of this article) have prevented him from getting his due as an ornithologist.

## **Developing the Bird Book**

When Levaillant produced his bird books, he used technologies enabling qualities of reproduction never possible before:

Levaillant was in the forefront of those who used the new printing techniques being developed in Paris. His connection with flower artist and professor of iconography at the Muséum, Gérard Vanspaendonck, possibly indicates an early source of information from one who was known to be experimenting in this field. It is generally thought that these techniques were first used in one of Audebert's works, either in 1801 or in 1802. This in turn has led to the belief that Audebert, known inventor of new colour-printing

techniques, was responsible for the artistic supervision of the first part of Levaillant's *Oiseaux d'Afrique*. These first parts, however, appeared as early as 1796, clearly predating Audebert's own publications. One thing is certain: among the enthusiasts for these new methods, Levaillant was the first fully to exploit their possibilities. His works should therefore, at the very least, rank alongside those of Audebert in the history of superb natural history publication in France (Rookmaaker et al. 2004:131).

Levaillant was thus in crucial ways the originator of this new form that would in turn lead to the work of Audubon and others. The ability to have highly accurate colouring in plates meant that artists could portray bird plumage far more vividly than ever before.

In other ways, too, Levaillant was at once typical of his time but also a restless formal innovator. In producing his works in different format with different pricings and in exploring various possibilities of subscription and sales of fairly short sections at a time, he at once showed himself constrained by the costs of the new genre and able to find ways of benefiting from it.

## Descriptions

In his volumes, Levaillant strives to find new ways of representing nature, always insisting on the importance of fieldwork and observation in nature. One way in which he shaped the genre was by copying onto his illustrations something he had been more or less the first to put into practice with his mounted specimens—namely, the striking of a lifelike pose with the bird in its natural setting. At the time, his displays were seen as revolutionary because formerly birds had, for the most part, simply been placed flat in a case.

Here we see how closely Levaillant's innovations were linked to one another. Because he felt confident in the power of arsenic-based soap to preserve specimens, he did not have to keep them in closed boxes but could make the effort of mounting them in display. As he was one of the best taxidermists of his age, he could put the birds into striking poses, dramatising their effect. And he could then reach a public outside the museums through the illustrations. For Levaillant, the illustrations were also ways to show

information about bird behaviour by indicating typical prey. He portrays the Common Fiscal (*Lanius collaris*), for example, with an insect impaled on a thorn next to it. This innovation has been widely imitated by Audubon and others and here, too, the Roberts volume does not admit how much more it owes to Levaillant than to Layard. Their plates of cuckoos with caterpillars in the beak or other birds eating berries or perching in their natural habitat stand in a direct line from Levaillant.

Levaillant was also an innovator in many other ways that do not seem to have had due recognition. He is certainly one of the first authors to use musical annotation for bird song. (On the history of attempts to annotate bird song, see Trevor 1970). But his books also appealed to a generation of European ornithologists because of their vivid descriptions of bird behaviour. Sundevall, in what remains the most critical assessment of Levaillant, pays tribute to Levaillant's descriptions of the Secretary Bird (Sundevall 1865). Peter Mundy calls Levaillant a wordsmith because of his ability to seize on a telling quality, and these words—for example, Bateleur (*Terathopius ecaudatus*) is French for tight-rope walker, which brings to mind someone balancing with a pole from side to side, a motion that echoes the bird's characteristic flight motion; and Vocifer, from the Latin for voice, alludes to the African Fish-Eagle's (*Haliaeetus vocifer*) tendency, unique among the species worldwide, to throw their head back and 'yelp'—have remained in common usage or in the scientific names.

## **Influence of Levaillant**

Levaillant has inspired not only a new idea of scientific vocation as ornithologist-explorer, but has also helped the (then-new) impetus to produce avian classifications and compendiums of birds. While most ornithological treatises refer to Daudin's descriptions as the original for many South African species, Daudin himself dedicates his work to Levaillant and other travellers:

C'est aux amateurs d'Histoire Naturelles et aux Voyageurs que j'offre cet ouvrage sur l'Ornithologie: il contient l'exposé fidèle des principales recherches faites jusqu'à présent sur l'Histoire Naturelle des Oiseaux (1800: v).

It is to lovers of natural history and the travellers that I offer this work on ornithology. It contains the faithful account of the major research done till now on the natural history of birds.

Daudin, who was confined for much of his life to a wheel chair or bed, admired and was almost in awe of Levaillant, as can be seen in the echoing, in his own work, of Levaillant's titles and in the frequent, laudatory, and knowledgeable references to him. He produced accurate summaries of Levaillant which are, in truth, the most interesting parts of the work. Daudin, though he benefited from the scientific rule that Linnaean binomial terminology won the battle and that Levaillant, in sticking to Buffon's side of a scientific quarrel, lost naming rights on dozens of species, clearly saw himself as an admiring propagator of Levaillant's work and someone benefiting from his expertise and generosity.

In South Africa too, Sir Andrew Smith, explorer and first Director of the South African Museum, saw himself not as supplanting but as supplementing Levaillant (Smith & Macleay 1838). By the time of Layard, however, the founding genius had been supplanted by an accurate compendium. Levaillant's fraudulent specimens (which he may have produced but may also have been duped into believing were genuine) have enabled many later ornithologists to ignore his founding role.

While the response of the authors of Roberts is justifiable, albeit (I believe) erroneous, other historians of ornithology are guilty, at best, of simply omitting somebody who clearly was a far more influential figure than any of the authors they consider (Tate 1986) or, at worst, of revealing a strong streak of Anglo-Saxon suspicion about the French. In Walters' recent history, for example, we get a short description (Walters 2003:83-86) that includes the following stereotypes: For Walters, the 'flamboyant, charismatic, ladykiller' Levaillant was 'drunk with success' but then, according to him, suffered the all-too-likely consequence of the French addiction to women and drink and, 'living in an attic. . . . died in poverty'. Though this rumour has a long genealogy, and though Levaillant may have been short of cash at times, he never lived in an attic and at his death he left a substantial country estate at Lanoue near Sezanne. Despite these *ad hominem* attacks, even Walters (2003:86) admits that, '[i]n many ways, Levaillant was a man before his time'.

## **Levaillant and Audubon**

There are strong parallels between the lives and achievements of Levaillant and Audubon. Both were born outside of France (Levaillant in Surinam, Audubon in Haiti), both returned to France and were educated there, and both then moved between France and another country whose birds they would chronicle as fully as possible. Each benefited from his persona as a Rousseauistic child of nature to impress Europe with his observations: Levaillant named one of his sons after Rousseau and while he may have railed against the authority of the theorist at points, was clearly under his influence (Boisacq 1993; Glenn 2006); while Audubon chose the buckskin and long hair of native Americans to suggest his distance from stuffy academic science.

When the young Audubon was first inspired to record birds in the early 1800s and visited Paris, the inspiration for creating a national guide to birds can only have been Levaillant. Though most American commentators on, and biographers of, Audubon have neglected Levaillant and his importance as a source (Ford 1988; Rhodes 2004), more detailed work on Audubon's antecedents and the influences on him suggest that this connection deserves further investigation. In her work on Audubon's debts to earlier traditions of ornithological illustration, for example, Linda Partridge points out that Audubon had a copy of Levaillant's *Birds* in his library (Partridge 1996:297) and shows ways in which Audubon may have drawn on the earlier author, such as in his decision to try to portray life-size images. Recently, too, evidence has emerged that Audubon took over, without acknowledgement, observations from Levaillant on egg translocation in nightjars (Jackson 2007). Jackson's article is intriguing precisely because the claim that nightjars move their eggs in their beaks to another location if they know they have been handled, though plausible, is almost certainly mistaken. Yet we do not know how much of the correct information or observation in Audubon relied, without acknowledgement, on Levaillant. Nor is Audubon the only author guilty of claiming this (erroneous) observation as his or her own. The article in *Roberts VII* on the Fiery-necked Nightjar (*Caprimulgus pectoralis*) by Vernon and Dean claims that the female 'moves eggs up to 5m if disturbed on nest, but this probably rare' (Vernon & Dean 2005:265); the note (53, suppressed) for this claim directs us to Vernon's unpublished data (2005:266)! Literary and cultural scholars have grown used to Harold

Bloom's notion of the *Anxiety of Influence* whereby those poets following a major figure have to deny his (almost always his rather than her) influence even while manifesting it (Bloom 1973). It seems as though ornithologists sometimes have this anxiety, too.

Jackson's careful tracing of this influential error raises the prospect that more of Audubon's personal myth-making may have depended on Levaillant than his American biographers have recognised. Anybody coming to Audubon's biography after reading Levaillant will be struck by a series of parallels: Levaillant's pet monkey demolishes his collection while Audubon's monkey kills the pet parrot; Levaillant's ship is attacked by British privateers and Audubon's boarded by British privateers; Levaillant has a striking moment of erotic temptation from a forward Gonaqua maiden, but remains chaste, while Audubon's veiled lady offers what Christoph Irmscher calls his 'testosterone-powered potboiler with generous references to female nudity' where he similarly is tempted but remains chaste (Irmscher 1999:68).

Audubon's personal myth-making, from his role in creating the myth that he was the Dauphin of France to embellishments about his family and upbringing, were certainly far more dishonest than anything in Levaillant. As Alice Ford notes, an early 'life sketch [of Audubon] is marred by distortions, if not by so many as the later more prideful, self-conscious versions' (1998:117), yet it is striking how forgiving, if not simply hagiographical, recent biographies such as Richard Rhodes' are. Rhodes' sub-title, *The Making of an American*, suggests a crucial difference in the critical view and reception given to Levaillant, still seen as a foreign outsider, and to Audubon, forgiven and embraced because he settled.

If we leave out national myth-making, we have to conclude that Levaillant was in many ways the greater and more original figure. There is not much point in belittling Audubon to try to change our estimation of Levaillant or his place in South African ornithology, but it is certain that Audubon's errors have been genially forgiven and Levaillant's contributions tragically forgotten. As Robert Mengel notes:

Although the present author [John Chancellor] edges in the right direction, no major biographer seems to have grasped how relatively slight, considering his fame, was Audubon's contribution to the

factual, let alone interpretive, aspect of ornithology. His nearest analog Francois LeVaillant (1753-1824), also a charismatic, shared Audubon's penchant for exceeding truth; yet his calculated fabrications, guided by ecological perceptions more penetrating than Audubon's, are often closer to fact than the latter's flights of romantic fancy. And who remembers LeVaillant? (Mengel 1980:353).

Levaillant's importance in South African culture, whether as social observer, explorer, sexual romancer, cartographer, anthropologist, or critic of colonialism, can hardly be exaggerated. He is, in many ways, the unacknowledged founding figure of South African colonial culture (Glenn, 2005, Glenn, 2007, Le Vaillant et al., 2007, Rookmaaker et al., 2004). This article has argued further that Levaillant has been a prophet without honour in the country where he did the fieldwork that in many ways founded modern ornithology. South Africans should remember Levaillant and should claim for him the pride of place that Stresemann gave him—not only as ornithologist, but also as inventor of a new form of natural history.

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# Reading *Space* and *Place* in Chris Mann's Bird Poems in *Lifelines*

Pat Louw

## Abstract

Michael Bennett makes an important point about the construction of space in a literary text, and reminds us that the literary analysis of space and place is something that has contributed to making ecocritical criticism different from what went before. 'If ecocriticism has taught us anything, it has taught us to view "settings" not just as metaphors but as physical spaces that inform, shape, and are shaped by cultural productions' (Bennett 2001:197). In this essay I use the concepts of space and place as a framework to analyse Chris Mann's bird poetry from *Lifelines*. I argue that the spaces created between human and nonhuman, contribute to an understanding of the type of relationship that exists between them. In a complex mixture of humility in the face of the unknowable dimension and a powerfully experienced encounter with the animal, Mann attempts to convey the essential qualities of that animal, free of stereotypical associations. He inverts the common usage of animals as metaphors for human society and instead uses human metaphors to describe the bird and the spaces which surround it.

**Keywords:** birds, Chris Mann, space, place, ecocriticism.

The human experience of the world is permeated through and through, on every possible level, by animality—by our relationships with other animal beings on the planet and by

our own animal ways of feeling and sensing (Slovic 2008:108).

Chris Mann's poetry deals with a wide range of topics, including social and political issues. His poetry has evolved over the years in response to new developments in the socio-political situation in South Africa and particularly in the area of science. In 2002 he published *Heartlands*, which he describes as 'a series of poems-of-place' in which 'people are shown to be present and a part of history and culture' (Levy and Mann 2007:222). A celebration of fruits and vegetables, entitled *The Horn of Plenty* (Mann and Skeen 1997), was published earlier. In 2006 he published *Lifelines*, where he focuses on a range of different animals, both prehistoric and contemporary. The poems are illustrated by fine line drawings by the artist Julia Skeen, and each poem has a corresponding biological sketch on the opposite page written by zoologist Adrian Craig.

Mann is acutely aware of the environmental crisis and the problem of biological sustainability. He sees *Lifelines* as providing 'a modest contribution [...] to the genre of eco-literature' (Levy and Mann 2007:221). Indeed, many would consider him an ecopoet. J. 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' (Bryson 2002:6). My understanding is that the prefix 'eco' is an indication of the central concern of the poetry. It does not attempt to replicate the discourse of science or ecology, but it indicates that the poet is concerned about the welfare of the natural environment in the face of the dangers that threaten it today.

One of the characteristics of this type of poetry is that it recognizes 'the interdependent nature of the world' (Bryson 2002:6). The title, *Lifelines*, is an expression of this type of interdependence. The metaphor conveys a sense of urgency as one would imagine throwing out a lifeline to someone who is in danger of drowning. It is not specified whether it is the human or the nonhuman who can save the other. Mann therefore stresses the interconnectivity between different life forms as being crucial for the survival of both the human and the nonhuman species on this planet. I have selected a few of the poems which feature birds in order to investigate how

these creatures are represented. I will be using a broadly ecocritical framework for my analysis, including theories of space and place.

The idea of creating *place* means ‘making a conscious and concerted effort to know the more-than-human world around us’ (Bryson 2002:101). Using the cultural geographer Yi-Fu Tuan’s notions of *space* and *place*, Bryson explains that *space* becomes differentiated into *place* when it becomes known and is given value. However, Tuan also describes *space-consciousness*. This is the recognition that the more-than-human world is ‘ultimately unknowable’ (Bryson 2002:101). Thus *space-consciousness* is not simply an absence of value, but a consciousness of value that lies beyond human comprehension. It is a recognition of human limitations, and it leads to ‘an imperative toward humility in relationships with both human and nonhuman nature’ (Bryson 2002:6). I hope to show that Mann demonstrates such humility through the construction of spaces not only between the human and nonhuman but also between humans and God. He reaches beyond the human and the animal towards an awareness of the creator of the universe or cosmogenesis.

*Lifelines* brings together science, art, and poetry in what David Levy describes as ‘a holistic work of environmental art’ (Levy and Mann 2007:218). The juxtaposition of the different forms of representation in this volume signals the importance of crossing boundaries of thought. Placing the scientific and the poetic texts opposite one another may seem to suggest that there is a strict division between the scientific and the poetic discourses. However this would not be completely accurate. In *Lifelines*, the scientific discourse, while providing additional facts about the animal under scrutiny, is not always strictly impersonal in tone. Craig sometimes inserts a personal note into his descriptions. Molly Brown remarks, ‘Interestingly, Craig himself often confounds the generic expectations set up by the Latinate certainties of the scientific names heading his commentaries by allowing himself to drift into the supposedly discrete “learning areas” of history, [...] mythology [...] and even literature’ (2007:135). Conversely, we will see that Mann’s poetry is deeply embedded in scientific and biological study. There are numerous scientific references in the poems, such as to the DNA gene-strands, phosphate, and photons. Take for example these stanzas from the poem, ‘Bees’(7):

**BEES**

Before we'd scratched  
geometry in the sand  
or baked the first mud brick  
of Jericho's walls  
you'd waxed a hexagon  
into honeying towns.

I lay like a Gulliver  
beneath your flight-path,  
bewildered by the traffic  
flickering in and out of your hive  
and the grubs of ideas  
you licked in my mind.

Did the dance-codes of bees,  
you made me ask,  
the algorithms of science,  
the spirals of the stars  
explode from a space-time nowhere,  
by chance?

In these stanzas we have the Tuanian creation of *place*, as the speaker carefully observes and reflects on the more-than-human world of bees. He also creates *space-consciousness*, as he marvels at the design of the honeycomb and the unknowability of the mysteries of bee communication. Larger questions about the origin of the universe arise from this consciousness. Using a narrative device in his poem to describe his encounter with nature enables Mann to capture the drama of the moment and also to allow thoughts to expand into questions that extend beyond the moment. In an interview with David Levy, Mann explains:

After considerable thought, experimentation and rejection, I postulated a form in keeping with my creative abilities and the highly differentiated and changing character of the science I was trying to absorb. The larger forces at work in the universe would be

depicted not in a grand design but in a series of individual dramatic monologues in which the narrator addressed an animal he had encountered. By choosing encounters from my own lived experience and working them into different lyrics I could more readily incarnate aspects of the standard model of cosmogenesis into poetry (Levy & Mann 2007:228).

By describing a moment of encounter in the poems, Mann allows the reader to enter fully into the present and from thence to a timeless zone. This can be related to Gaston Bachelard's notion of the reverberation which is set up by the poetic image. Jonathon Bate writes:

For Bachelard, the poetic image has its distinctive being in this quality of reverberation, which is an overcoming of time. But we can only understand the being of the image by ourselves experiencing the reverberation (2000:154).

The communication of the poetic image to the reader involves a subtle transference of time and space: 'The poet does not confer the past of his image upon me, and yet his image immediately takes root in me' (Bachelard 1958:xiii). This suggests that the power of the poetic image gives rise to a deeply felt experience in the reader, which is immediately internalized and takes new life in present time. I hope to show that Mann's poetic images have the power to evoke this type of experience in the reader through his appeal to the senses and his construction of space and place.

In a review, Nick Meihuizen describes the general pattern of the poems in *Lifelines* thus:

Typically, in the book the creature is addressed, an essence of it is expressed through the precise wielding of appropriate descriptive metaphor and a sacred barrier is traversed in a casual register, where an inner communion takes place, as if each creature were totemic in relation to human life, or somehow contributed towards making us whole (2007:137).

The idea of humans needing animals to complete them in a 'totemic' sense takes interdependency further than the anthropocentric view where animals

are valued only for their role in fulfilling human needs. It reinforces the interdependency suggested by the term 'lifelines' and refers to the much-debated question of the type of relationship that should exist between human and nonhuman life. Greg Garrard reminds us that ecocriticism has arisen partly in reaction to the Enlightenment view of nature and in particular to the views expressed by Descartes, who drew a very definite line of distinction between man and animals:

Descartes hyperseparated mind and body, and denied to animals not only the faculty of reason, but the whole range of feelings and sensations that he had associated with thought. As a result, he saw animals as radically different from, and inferior to, humans. They were bodies without minds, effectively machines (Garrard 2004:25).

Descartes' view is strongly countered by various ecocritics and philosophers, for example Derrida, who 'contradicts Cartesian philosophies of animals as creatures lacking sentience or feeling, and posits human ontologies or theories of being in response to the gaze of an animal' (Woodward 2008:2). Bate asks: 'is the distinction between man and animals so sharp?' (2000: 177) and goes on to describe behaviour in animals which is similar to human behaviour such as committing suicide or mourning the death of a mate. The notion of setting up humans as separate and superior to animals is satirized by Michael Pollan. He points out the folly of treating the human species as different from any other species but nevertheless acknowledges a 'gulf':

We've been telling ourselves such stories forever, as a way of making sense of what we call our 'relationship to nature'—to borrow that curiously revealing phrase. (What other species can even be said to have a 'relationship to nature'?) For a long time now, the Man in these stories has gazed at Nature across a gulf of awe or mystery or shame. Even when the tenor of these narratives changes, as it has over time, the gulf remains (2001:xxv).

Pollan's spatial metaphor of the 'gulf' between humans and the nonhuman world is useful for the purposes of analysing Mann's poetry. Other writers

have conceptualized the relationship semantically with spatial implications. Patrick Murphy, for instance, uses Bakhtinian dialogics to provide a model for the relationship between humans and nonhumans, which differs from the alienating notion of ‘otherness.’ He states: ‘Ecology and ecocriticism indicate that it is time to move towards a relational model of “anotherness” and the conceptualization of difference in terms of “I” and “another”’ (1998:40). Semantically, ‘other’ has the sense of difference and opposition whereas ‘another’ contains a suggestion of ‘sameness’, or of being on the same side. It denotes an addition to an already established group, not a different group. The notion of ‘anotherness’ is set up by Murphy in order to offer a more participatory model of relationship between human and nonhuman. It counters the construction of the alienated ‘other’ as a form of domination of the human over the nonhuman.

From the preceding discussion we see that representing the relationship between humans and nonhumans holds numerous possibilities. As with nature documentaries, there is the choice of whether to include a human figure in the frame: whether to convey an interaction between human and nonhuman or whether to let the animal appear alone. Mann defends his decision to address the animals directly in his poems by saying that he wants to ‘avoid the pathetic fallacy on one hand and the distancing stance of a Hughes on the other’ (Levy and Mann 2007:228). He explains:

This latter mode of address would, I would hope, encourage the reader to feel that animals were not so much objects to be observed, ignored or consumed [but rather] as chromosome cousins, fellow creatures in an interlinked web of necessary bio-diversity. To substantiate this relationship with an image, the artist has shown the animals in the book looking out and at the reader (Levy and Mann 2007:228).

The reciprocity implied in the above statement is an essential component of the concept of ‘anotherness’ and also of David Abram’s notion of the reciprocity of the senses. Writing about an encounter with a nonhuman other, Abram says: ‘Each of us, in relation to the other, is both subject and object, sensible and sentient’ (1997:67).



The ecocritical aim of representing the relationship between the human and the nonhuman has been criticized for taking a realist approach. For example, Dana Phillips writes: 'If ecocriticism limits itself to reading realistic texts realistically, its practitioners may be reduced to an umpire's role (Phillips 1999:586). He fails to consider the possibility that reading 'realistic' texts may involve an understanding of complicated phenomenological philosophy such as that advocated by Abram with regard to Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Secondly, he does not take into account recent developments in materialist-feminist theory, which promote a return to the material body and hence to a kind of realism which takes into account the insights gained from theories such as post-structuralism and postmodernism.

Although Mann's poems may give the impression of a simple realist approach, this belies the complexity of thought that lies behind his work. He takes on the challenge of attempting to replace an anthropocentric view of the world with an ecocentric one. In contrast to the 'realist' approach is the traditional literary convention of reading birds purely as symbols in literary texts. This focuses attention on what the bird can illustrate about human life and is therefore largely focused on human society. What is more difficult is trying to reveal the bird in a way that conveys an ontological approach and also a relationship of 'otherness' with the animal which involves the constitution of the subject through the construction of spatiality. In Mann's poems there is a careful weaving of spaces between the speaker and the natural world—the interstices between the beings. The physical spaces constructed in these poems are sometimes contested and at other times peacefully shared. The way in which the two protagonists in these dramas react to each other is largely determined by the kind of space that lies between them and conversely, the way in which the animals react to one another creates a particular kind of space.

In *Lifelines* there are poems on a variety of birds, such as Heron (37), Dove (21), Cape Robins (11), Eagle Owl (25), Finches (35), Hummingbird (39), Owl (57) and Peregrine Falcon (59), in addition to other winged creatures such as the Dragonfly (23), Bee (7), Moth (51), Mosquito (49) and Cicada (15). From this rich collection, I have chosen poems to illustrate some of the encounters which take place between the bird and the speaker in different kinds of spaces. Initially the speaker occupies domestic space and then moves further and further away from home into the wild environment.

Each successive poem will follow the movement of the speaker: ‘Cape Robins’, ‘Owl’, ‘Peregrine Falcon’, and ‘Eagle Owl’.

### **CAPE ROBINS**

Before the dawn’s faint grey had flushed the bush  
and gleamed its hooks and fruits,  
before the dusk had snuffed them out and brought its dangers near,  
the robins pegged their boundaries out in song.

We heard them call and sing from perch to perch  
and wondered why our house,  
so blunt and stiff, without a worm or midge to dart upon,  
should stand within the radius of their care.

That we should share the same small patch of earth,  
yet stay familiar strangers,  
that they should hear our coaxing human talk, yet fly from us,  
is as our different pasts and roles ordained.

This listening to another creature’s speech,  
our kind or theirs, this care for privacies  
that nest inside another’s weave of language  
ensures our beings blend, our distance keeps us near (2006:11).

Mann plays with the concept of space and time in this poem. The lyrical description of dawn and dusk demonstrates that man-made, clock-watching time is being replaced with the natural rhythms of sunrise and sunset. The keenly observant eye of the speaker notices the ‘gleam’ of light on both the ‘hooks and fruit’ of the bush: the potentially dangerous and the sustaining elements of nature. This kind of balance is reflected in the structure of the poem. The poem is woven in a regular pattern, with short lines alternating with long lines in four-line stanzas. This creates spaces on the page at regular intervals which could be likened to the rhythm and pattern of weaving.

The line ‘the robins pegged their boundaries out in song’ is an example of the metaphorical use of human activities being employed to enrich the description of the birds (as opposed to the converse, where birds

are used as symbols for human activities). Song exists in time and yet the speaker uses the image to construct space. It is as if the space that is created by the birds' song enfolds and protects the domestic space of the couple's house. The wild bush surrounding the house is to some extent domesticated, tamed and brought into focus through the robin's song.

The poem's central concern is the nature of the relationship between humans and nonhumans. The speaker imaginatively changes places with the birds and measures his house by the yardstick of what he presumes is attractive to them. The house is 'blunt and stiff' in comparison to a nest, which is rounded to match the shape of the bird, and is made from organic materials such as grass and leaves in comparison to a house made from sharp-cornered bricks and cement. There is a sense that the people feel both honoured and puzzled that their house 'should stand within the radius of their care'. The word 'radius' is mathematical and scientific, linking the image of the land surveyor 'pegging out his boundaries'. These images enhance the status of the birds activities, suggesting that with ease and grace they manifest the kind of knowledge that humans struggle to learn.

Returning to Tuan's notion of space-consciousness, we find in this poem a sense of acceptance and humility, for example in the third stanza: 'as our different pasts and roles ordained'. The religious connotation of 'ordained' suggests a sense of reverence for the 'natural order' of the world. It is not the anthropocentric hierarchy that is usually attributed to the Old Testament but rather an acceptance of the way in which different beings have evolved in relation to one another. The 'coaxing human talk' represents an attempt to make contact with the birds, but in spite of the invitation, the birds keep their distance. The space between them is maintained, and the speaker has the realization that this is how it should be, and is not cause for sadness.

Listening to birdsong can be compared to the process of place-making in the Tuanian sense. In the same way as a new neighbourhood is at first a confusing blur of images but later becomes differentiated into recognizable areas, so can listening to the sounds that birds make reveal 'landmarks' of recognizable sound in an undifferentiated blur of noise. This is part of the way in which space becomes place through time-based song. Recognizing a sound is not, however, the same as understanding it. One of the things that Mann does in his bird poems in general is to express what

meaning bird sounds have for him. At the same time he is aware that the real meaning is ultimately unknowable for humans, even though they have been able to identify warnings and mating calls. So while his poems create place for the reader, they simultaneously remind the reader of the unknowable dimension or space between human and nonhuman. The image of the nest inside ‘another’s weave of language’ expresses the inter-relatedness typical of the ecopoetic attitude towards nature while echoing ‘anotherness’ in the line.

The speaker makes the point that the lack of real communication is not in fact a lack, but rather an enabling factor which allows for ‘our beings [to] blend’. Without the protection of privacies that the non-communication allows, they would not be safe so close to one another and the paradox of the final line would not hold: ‘our distance keeps us near’. The concept of space thus takes on an ambiguity in this poem as it is measured both in terms of communication as well as physical space.

One of the important factors influencing the encounters described in these poems is the time of day (or night) during which the event takes place. In ‘Cape Robins’, it is the turning point between night and day, dawn and dusk. This is the time when the robin’s song is heard most eloquently. It is a transformative moment, when the natural surroundings change from benevolence to malevolence, or vice versa: ‘before the dusk has snuffed them out and brought its dangers near’. In the following poem, the encounter takes place at night.

### OWL

Tell me, night-hawk,  
*who-whooping*  
from that black untidy splotch of a pine,

do you also shiver  
with the beautiful  
and dangerous love of the stars?

Imagine the infernos,  
the heart-throttling cold,  
the bone-bursting vacuum above our heads,

Imagine the whirl-holes,  
the gusts of fire-dust,  
the light-years of loneliness in space.

*Who-who are we,  
I call back to you,  
that we can breathe in such a wilderness*

*and sing?*

(2006:57)

The poem opens in a casual register, with a conversational tone. The term 'night-hawk' places the owl in the group of predatory birds, thus stressing its biological links rather than its literary associations as 'birds of ill omen' (Craig 2006:56). The speaker's light, almost teasing tone is in keeping with the fact that this type of owl (Wood Owl) eats mainly insects and 'seldom tackle[s] birds or rodents' (Craig 2006:56) and is not as bloodthirsty as some of the other raptors.

The spatial aspect of the poem is conveyed in its structure. The lines placed on the page form a regular pattern with the repetition of two short lines followed by a long one. This pattern is broken by the final line, which stands on its own and seems to hang suspended in mid-air without the support of the extra lines that the pattern has led the reader to expect. This gives it a strong emphasis, and allows the question to draw our attention to space and to the unknown expanses of the universe.

Initially a sense of distance separates the speaker and the bird as he refers to its call issuing from 'that black untidy splotch of a pine'. Although the darkness disguises the identity of the tree as a formless 'untidy splotch' in the speaker's view, he recognizes it as a pine tree. This suggests that he is familiar with his surroundings and is probably speaking from his home. From the known environment, the speaker's gaze takes us upwards, to look at the stars. In this movement, the space that is created between himself and the bird is relativized. With the grammatical change from 'you' to 'our', the spatial positioning in the poem changes, and he and the bird are placed on the same side, as equals in the face of the expanse of the universe. This could

also be read as an example of Murphy's 'anotherness'. There is a recognition that the gulf that exists between all forms of life on our planet, and specifically between him and the owl, is negligible in comparison to the unimaginable gulf between ourselves and other stars or planets.

In the line 'the light-years of loneliness in space', the speaker deftly expresses timespace, a combination of the two dimensions. This has the effect of evoking immensities of time as well as space in the mind of the reader, which gives rise to Tuanian space-consciousness and humility in the face of human limitations.

As in the previous poem, we are given a sense of the beauty and also the terror of nature. While stars may remain gentle and beautiful as they remain twinkling at a distance, they turn into themes of horror when brought closer and examined in the light of scientific facts about the cosmos. The frightening extremes of heat and cold, 'infernos' and 'heart-throttling cold' give a different perspective on the stars. It is as if he is giving us a telescopic view of the stars, sun and planets, constructing dimensions of space and time which reach far beyond the dimensions of human life.

It is with relief then that the speaker returns to the earthly dimension, calling across to the owl from a distance that now seems negligible: 'Who-who are we', retaining the encompassing first-person plural, and combining humour with a sense of wonder at both humans' and birds' ability to face this wilderness 'and sing'. Having imagined the awesome power and terrifying extremities of the universe creates a new awareness of the mystery surrounding human and animal life, and the 'who-who' of the owl seems to encapsulate this question.

Another interpretation of the owl's call is that it is expressing its identity in this way but is simultaneously questioning the identity of the speaker: 'Who-who are we?'

The speaker and the owl seem indeed to be 'fellow travelers' (Matteson 1994:247) or 'chromosome cousins' (Mann 2007:228). By placing himself next to the owl in relation to the possibly alien species beyond, Mann momentarily erases the barrier between the human and the nonhuman.

In the previous two poems, the relationship between human and bird is depicted as being harmonious. However, this is not always so. As the speaker moves away from his domestic space and explores territory which is

usually unoccupied by humans, he comes into conflict with the bird. This poem captures the drama of contesting spaces:

**PEREGRINE FALCON**

Climbing a crag, I heard a *kwaak-kwaak*,  
and looked down and saw you scudding  
across a river's crinkle on a bushveld plain.

You looked as small and remote as I felt.  
You were a dark speeding speck of a bird,  
a faint fury hollering, *Get out of my niche!*

Pulling slowly, up and over warm basalt,  
I saw a carcass on a balcony in the sky.  
I read you then, raptor. Your meat-hunger,

bunching its wings, had hurtled down, down  
from out the glaring white zenith of the sun  
at the grey fleck of a rock-pigeon far below.

*Thump!* A blue-black explosion of wings,  
a scrunch of talons. A flapping, a jerking  
lugged heavily to this abattoir of a ledge.

I stared and stared, at the parable of a kill,  
at the stark, almost cryptic life-in-death art  
of a headless squab on the table of a feast.

A spillage of granules, loosed from its crop  
was already drying its seeds for a new terrain.  
A dust-coloured foraging ant, a mite's red dot

enacting some earthed, intrinsic narrative  
hurried to the manna of a glisten of blood  
as a maggot-fly entered the crib of the wound.

I turned and gazed, out over miles of bush,  
awed that the plants, the hunger of animals  
made such a simmering green Canaan of death.

I began to love you then. You sky-wrote to me  
what you signal my species, when you migrate  
and float round the earth: *Leave me to my life!* (Mann 2006:59).

In this poem, the speaker and the bird are in an unusual spatial relationship to one another: the man is *above* the flying bird. The vantage point which the speaker assumes when ‘climbing a crag’ is similar to that of a bird flying high in the sky. He sees the ‘crinkle’ of the river and the black speck of the bird below him. The words ‘crinkle’ and ‘speck’ create a sense of depth and scale and construct space between the speaker and the bird. The speaker finds that he has trespassed on a falcon’s territory and he interprets the bird’s ‘*Kwaak-kwaak*’ as a vehement protest at the human’s invasion: ‘*Get out of my niche!*’ His interpretation of the bird’s angry warning call could be seen as ‘project[ing] a human presence on the otherness of nature’ (Elder 2001: 322). However, this charge is offset by including the human figure as a participant in the poem. The human is not a ghostly observer with, in Donna Haraway’s words, ‘the gaze that mythically inscribes all the marked bodies, that makes the unmarked category claim the power to see and not be seen’ (1991:188). This man is certainly seen by the bird and is the object of the bird’s subjectivity at this moment. In spite of the speaker’s momentary height advantage over the bird he says, ‘You looked as small and remote as I felt’, thereby shrinking his own importance in relation to the bird.

In spite of the inherent antagonism of the encounter, one could say that the speaker sees the bird in terms of ‘anotherness’. The term ‘another’ need not imply that there is a friendly relationship between the human and the nonhuman. It indicates rather that the relationship is not one of domination by the human. In this poem there is the reverse: the speaker’s clumsy human movements as he clammers slowly and laboriously over the rock contrast strongly with the power and intensity of the ‘dark speeding speck of a bird’, thus making himself not equal but in some ways inferior to the bird. The spatial arrangement in this instance is instrumental in constructing such a relationship.



In order to draw us into the space of the encounter with the bird, Mann conveys the scene of the kill in graphic detail, using images which appeal to the visual, auditory, tactile, and kinaesthetic senses. It enables the reader to participate imaginatively and to almost hear the 'scrunch' or feel the weight of the struggling bird flopping onto the rock with a '*Thump!*' Mann brings us 'to our animal senses', to use David Abram's phrase (1997:211). Abrams stresses the importance of keeping in touch with our senses and representing nature as a subject, capable of agency, rather than objectifying it. The 'agency' of the bird is amply demonstrated as it 'hurtle[s] down, down / from out the glaring white zenith of the sun', swiftly conquering space. The attack comes out of the sky like a bolt of lightning, blinding and paralyzing the falcon's prey with its astonishing speed and accuracy. In these lines, Mann takes our vision upwards to the sun and then swiftly downwards to the earth, emphasizing the spaces which this bird is able to traverse with ease and deadly efficiency.

The vividness of these images transports us to the space of killing: of the 'life-in-death art' / of a headless squab on the table of a feast'. The reader is forced to confront death physically and graphically through the speaker as he comes across the falcon's kill which was so recently alive and pecking granules that they are not even digested, but spill out onto the ledge, 'drying its seeds for a new terrain'. The cycle of nature, from life to death and back again is conveyed by this sight.

The poet uses spatial metaphors taken from man-made structures such as 'balcony' and 'abattoir' to describe natural spaces. This invites comparisons between the human and animal activities. 'Abattoir', for instance, is a place where animals are routinely killed for human consumption. It suggests systematic and mechanical killing compared to the dramatic speed, accuracy, and skill of the falcon. It also serves as a reminder that the falcon is doing what human beings do on a much larger scale.

Apart from using our senses to draw us into the space of encounter with the bird, Mann also creates a complex multilayered effect by superimposing different spaces onto the scene through the use of both literary and Biblical allusions. Mann fuses both the Old and the New Testament by using terms such as 'parable', which is used mainly in the New Testament, and 'manna', referring to the book of Exodus. The reference to 'manna' links up with a later mention of 'Canaan' in evoking Moses and the

Israelites wandering in the desert and being provided with food from heaven. There was a time when the Israelites were grumbling about not having meat to eat and the Lord provided them with quail in the evening: ‘That evening quail came and covered the camp’ (Exodus 16:13). In the poem, the story is given a grotesque twist as the small creatures at the bottom of the food chain, an ant and a mite, are given a quail-like meal to eat. It is as if the Biblical narrative has taken its form from this ‘earthed, intrinsic narrative’ which goes back long before the time of Moses.

The ‘blood’, ‘wound’, and ‘crib’ suggest both the birth and death of Christ. Following from that is the Resurrection, and the cycle of new life following death. Again it seems that the narrative of nature precedes that of the New Testament, and it re-enacts itself in the present before the eyes of the speaker. The space of death is transformed into a space of life with the lush green growth of the bush:

I turned and gazed, out over miles of bush,  
awed that plants, the hunger of animals  
made such a simmering green Canaan of death (Mann 2006:57).

The word ‘simmering’ has an auditory echo of ‘shimmering’ which suggests the play of light on the trees or grass. Combined with the allusion to Canaan, it could also suggest the shimmering of a mirage in the desert: a promise of rich, sweet food such as the land of milk and honey, which turns out to be an illusion. However, ‘simmering’ is a more powerful word in that it suggests a strong force building up from the inside. In cooking, to simmer something is to cook it in liquid slightly below boiling point. When applied metaphorically to emotions, there is the sense of destructive emotions being held in check, which could break out at any moment. Therefore this word constructs an ambivalent space because it could be a creative or a destructive force which is moving under the surface. It is a hidden force which is perhaps made up of myriads of little creatures like the ant, the maggot, and the mite, all doing their work in order to turn blood into greenness and life. The transformative action of these animals makes a ‘Canaan [out] of death’. The line is ambivalent as it can also be read as making Canaan a place of death. I think this line demonstrates the density of the poet’s meaning because it contains both the sense of violence under the surface and also the

richness of growth and food. Killing and growing, death and life, are inextricably bound together in nature. This is a well-known fact, but Mann conveys it in a fresh way by combining a dramatic narrative situation with an age-old allusion.

The simple fact that animals kill each other because they are hungry is brought home to him sharply in this poem. It is knowledge which he experiences graphically and immediately as he climbs up that ledge and sees the evidence of the kill. The type of experience of death is brought home to him almost physically. It is reminiscent of the short story by Doris Lessing, 'A Sunrise on the Veld', in which a young boy stumbles upon a scene of horror while wandering in the bush far from home, and he sees a wounded buck being eaten alive by ants:

The knowledge of fatality, of what has to be, had gripped him and for the first time in his life; and he was left unable to make any movement of brain or body, except to say: 'Yes, yes. That is what living is.' It had entered his flesh and his bones and grown into the farthest corners of his brain and would never leave him (1994:32).

Here, Mann conveys the physicality of the knowledge of death, growing into both his flesh and his brain and even his bones. It is experiential knowledge as opposed to mental, theoretical knowledge. The paradox in Lessing's quotation is that the knowledge of death is expressed as 'that is what living is'. Mann constructs a similar paradox in the reference to Canaan.

The final message from the bird is conveyed in space: 'you sky-wrote'. The final emphatic message, '*Leave me to my life*', seems to indicate that the bird is drawing a clear barrier between himself and the human. He does not want to be judged by the criteria of human behaviour and the speaker allows him this space to be separate and to be somewhat unknown. It seems to me that in this poem as well as many others in this volume, we experience the animal as 'an enigmatic presence with whom we have been drawn into a living relationship' (Abram 2002:214). This is done through the device of the human figure in the poem which provides us with an entry into the experience of the encounter with the bird or animal involved and helps us to question the boundaries that define the space between the self and other, or another.

The final poem in my selection deals with an encounter with an Eagle Owl. In this poem the speaker is at his most vulnerable as he is not only far from home, having chosen to wander in a wilderness area, but it takes place at night while he is asleep.

### EAGLE OWL

You terrified me from sleep.

I'd gone off into the night  
a ruminant of Africa's stars,  
and lain down in the grass

that wet the Hashaza hills,  
my hitchhiker's rucksack  
pillowed under my head.

*Whish!* I woke with you  
hovering your dark angel  
between me and the moon.

Your pinions smashed air  
across my face. I leapt up,  
yelling, flailing my arms.

You sped off, and left me  
quivering with a revelation.  
My genes like Jacob's ladder

were grounded in the earth.  
Their spiral twists of rungs  
reached up into the stars,

Into the genesis of space (Mann 2006:25).

The specificity of the name 'Hashaza' indicates the speaker's familiarity with the local, indigenous knowledge of place. Barry Lopez maintains that in order to really know a place intimately, you need to make yourself vulnerable to it, and this is certainly what the human figure does by exposing himself to the African night without protection of a roof or covering: 'You must open yourself to its textures, its colors in varying day and night lights, its sonic dimensions' (Lopez 1998:300). This vulnerability leads to a very close encounter with the bird.

The drama of this encounter is captured by the violence of 'smashed' and the auditory effect of '*Whish*', drawing the reader into the experience as in the previous poem. The word has both a tactile and an auditory effect as the feeling of the air rushing past as the wings sweep close to the speaker is evoked. Here, as in the previous poem, the human figure is being threatened by the bird. The Cartesian hierarchy is upset and man is denied his position of superiority over the animal world and instead presents a comical figure 'yelling' and 'flailing' in shock and impotence. It is as if this exposure to nature has put the human 'in his place' in terms of the ecosystem. His spurious position of superiority is dependent on his hiding inside man-made structures and the slightest deviation from that habitat shows him how vulnerable he is.

Mann develops a complex allusion to the Biblical Jacob and his dream while sleeping in similar fashion with his head on a rock. Jacob dreams of angels going up and down the ladder, connecting him to heaven. When Jacob wakes up he says: 'How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God' (Genesis 28:17). In the poem the angel comes between the speaker and the moon, blocking out its light and suggesting that this is an angel of death, not life. Yet the consequence of this encounter for the man is that he is left 'quivering with a revelation':

My genes like Jacob's ladder

were grounded in the earth.  
Their spiral twists of rungs  
reached up into the stars,

Into the genesis of space (2006:25).

The significance of this revelation lies not so much in what he learns but in the way he learns it. The DNA spiral, genetics, and cosmogenesis are all part of the wonder of creation and this is something we can read about and understand intellectually. But it becomes a revelation when this knowledge enters into his very being through the awe and terror of his experience. The epiphany is brought on by adventuring into the spaces and times that are usually reserved for animals and kept hidden from humans. The encounter with the Eagle Owl is thus instrumental in giving the man an experience of the sublime and bringing him to a new understanding of the wonder of creation, breaking through the shell of dullness which ordinary, routine life can result in and shaking him bodily and spiritually into a new space.

In the poems discussed, space is created both by the visual imagery and by the bird's song or call. The falcon's call is a harsh warning, an alarm call, and it creates the space between the speaker, high up on the cliff, and the bird, flying below. Without that sound he would not have been aware of the 'dark speck' far below him. In the Owl poem, his hooting creates the space between the speaker and the tree although this space is immediately diminished in relation to the 'whirl-holes' of the universe. Earthly space changes to 'outer space' and returns with renewed awareness to the earthly existence of all species.

The question of whether this poet is successful in moving beyond an anthropocentric view of the universe remains. It should be pointed out that an anthropocentric view does not necessarily involve the erasure of the human in the representation of the nonhuman. A definition of anthropocentric is: 'considering human beings and their existence as the most important and central fact in the universe' (*Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* 2003). I would argue that by including the human in the picture, he does not make it anthropocentric, but rather, he creates an opportunity to demonstrate the relationship between the human and the nonhuman in a way that undermines the importance of the human. The speaker in these poems is shown, often humorously, to be inferior in some way to the bird. It puts mankind in different 'places' in relation to the animal and thus disrupts the Cartesian hierarchy with mankind as the dominating figure at the pinnacle of the universe.

The inclusion of the human figure in the poems is instrumental in constructing 'situated knowledge' (Haraway 1991:188) in which the human

takes responsibility for his presence and is not simply a godlike observer. 'Situated knowledge' is also mentioned by Murphy who refers to 'a foundation based on situated knowledges and the determination of understanding through experience' (Murphy 1998: 48). Experiential knowledge in addition to intellectual understanding is what that Mann attempts to project through relating an event 'situated' in a specific place.

What we have in these poems is a space-consciousness. Through the interactions between human and bird, and the accurate and detailed observations that are given, Mann turns space into place in the Tuanian sense. In addition, he holds the deeply felt knowledge of place in tension with the unknowability of the universe. As with Merwin's poetry we can say that in Mann's poems,

Space-consciousness emerges from a mindful relationship with place because a deep knowledge of place produces a humble awareness of our own limitations (Bryson 2002:105).

Chris Mann illuminates the notion of space through his interaction with the nonhuman. Space comes alive, changes from space to place—and possibly back again to space in the sense of the immeasurability. His handling of the spaces between the human and the nonhuman takes us into the realm of the nonhuman and makes us more deeply aware of the mysterious boundaries we share with them.

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# **‘Lines of flight’: Sydney Clouts’s Birds**

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## **Abstract**

Sydney Clouts’s poetic treatment of the natural world can conveniently, if slightly artificially, be approached through clusters of images: particles, rock, animals, and so on. This paper explores Clouts’s treatment of bird images, partly through the metalanguage of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. Their phrase ‘lines of flight’—the ways in which imagination and creativity ‘deterritorialise’, escape from, modify or critique normative frameworks—has the potential to act as a touchstone for a study of Clouts’s birds. I suggest that birds are a particularly iconic image in Clouts’s work in respect of ‘movements through space’ which are simultaneously and inescapably movements through and of the perceiving consciousness. The poems embody heterogeneous perceptions of the world which effect momentary unities, wholly new yet wholly immanent, an ever-renewing sense of belonging-in-the-world. The paper centres on those poems most obviously about birds—‘The Feeding of the Doves’, ‘The Avocado and the Sparrow’, ‘The Sea and the Eagle’, ‘The Hawk’ and ‘Wintertime, great wintertime’—although birds turn up frequently throughout his oeuvre.

**Keywords:** Sydney Clouts, South African poetry, birds, ecocriticism

Starlings in vast flights drove along like smoke, mist, or any  
thing misty without volition—now a circular area inclined in

an Arc—now a Globe—now from complete Orb into an Eclipse & Oblong—now a balloon with the car suspended, now a concaved Semicircle—& still it expands & condenses, some moments glimmering & shivering, dim & shadowy, now thickening, deepening, blackening! (Holmes 2005:253f).

Richard Holmes, Samuel Taylor Coleridge's biographer, notes that this description in one of Coleridge's notebooks of 'a protean form or a force-field, lacking fixed structure or outline, a powerful personality without a solid identity', was clearly 'some sort of self-image for Coleridge, both stimulating in its sense of freedom, of 'vast flights'; and menacing in its sense of threatening chaos or implosion' (2005:254). Menacing, perhaps, but also an image for the conflation or interfusion of self and object through which Coleridge envisioned a selflessly unified 'One Life'. The incorporative resonance of words, too, he envisioned as potentially unitary. He wrote to William Godwin on 22 September 1800:

I wish you to [...] solve the great questions, whether there be reason to hold that an action bearing all the semblance of predesigning consciousness may yet be simply organic, and whether a series of such actions are possible? [...] Is Thinking impossible without arbitrary signs? And how far is the word 'arbitrary' a misnomer? Are not words, etc., parts and germinations of the plant? And what is the law of their growth? In something of this sort I would endeavour to destroy the old antithesis of Words and Things; elevating, as it were, Words into Things and living things too (in Richards 1978:264).

It is arguable whether Coleridge, after this characteristically brilliant outpouring—foreshadowing all at once Darwin, de Saussure, and Merleau-Ponty—ever satisfactorily answered these questions for himself. Suffice it to say that the congruence of his concerns with those of Sydney Clouts is at many points striking. Clouts wrote:

Poetry always produces that integrity of spirit and matter, joining

word and theme and feeling and thought, so that the poet [becomes]  
an elemental force (in Butler & Harnett 1984:9).

It is virtually certain that Clouts derived the title of his single published collection, *One Life*, from Coleridge's poem 'The Eolian Harp'. In the latter poem, the music of the wind, 'like birds of Paradise [...] hovering on untam'd wing', exemplifies

the one Life within us and abroad  
Which meets all motion and becomes its soul,  
A light in sound, a sound-like power in light,  
Rhythm in all thought, and joyance every where [...]  
(in Richards 1978:66).

What is the quality of this synaesthetic meeting and becoming and interfusion? How is it that poetry seems the most powerful medium for expressing such intuitive senses of immanent belonging? How does Clouts's poetry in particular wield language and the suggestiveness of metaphor—especially for the present purpose, the presence of birds—in this cause? And what metalanguage might the critic employ in explicating such an immanence, one which by definition seems intrinsically beyond linguistic capture?

We might begin, by way of introduction, with an illustrative Clouts bird poem, 'The Feeding of Doves' (1984:3). It is a rare instance of a flock of birds in Clouts's work, and an early work which has not yet achieved the aphoristic clarity of later poems. It is, however, as concerned with the nature of the 'self', and with the relationship between thought and the natural world, as Coleridge's description of starlings. These doves are similarly protean, swooping down and away; they 'ripple' and 'shower' from above, 'beleaguer' the poet with his handful of crumbs and thoughts. Thoughts, crumbs, and doves entail and structure one another—'mind and nature as one,' as Clouts puts it (in Butler & Harnett 1984:9). The doves' movements entail and structure the world around them, including the poet's presence, in multiply interlocking and seamless ways. In the opening stanza of the poem, it is 'a thought taking wings' as much as the doves taking wing; not only is a thought taking off as doves do, it 'takes wings' (e.a.), as if acquiring them,

momentarily excising physical wings as items of attention from the flux of the world. It is the 'diet' that is 'pensive', not only the poet; it is the 'windowsills' which are 'glancing seaward', not only the doves and/or the poet; it is the 'grasses' which are also 'swooping'; it is 'stone' that is 'fluttering'. These persistently 'transferred epithets' are doing a strange thing: they are evoking the central subject, the doves, even as they describe something else in their world; doves and world are both distinctive and indistinguishable. It is not that doves *are* becoming stone, or that wings are being merely *compared to* grass: the first is impossible, the second only a partial explication of what is happening poetically. Something much more organic is being postulated: correlations and interdependencies, fused within a single motion of thought and writing, which *enact* rather than merely *describe* a self intricately imbued with, and imbuing, the world within which it subsists and finds its meaning. The self of the poem seems unconfined by that meagre pronoun 'me': it not only observes, but rather *is* the spaces and motions it describes. Clouts has said: 'The relationship of the poet with things is always being another' (in Butler & Harnett 1984:9). The self is as wide, as intimate, and as protean as its perceptions, and these perceptions—those transferred epithets imply—themselves actively constitute the unfolding self. Moreover, like Coleridge's flock of starlings, this is at every moment a new self, an unpredicted but unquestionably authentic aggregation of qualities, both riven by and infused with the continuities and dislocations of the situation. Evidently, the conventional depiction of the 'self' as a discrete and bounded consciousness is not being abandoned, but is expanded in multiple directions, like lines of flight out of itself, in ways for which it is hard to find a meta-language of adequate precision.

## II

Before embarking on a search for such a meta-language, it will be useful to briefly survey Clouts's poetical birds. Birds, as the example above shows, are scarcely divisible in his poetic treatment from the air they traverse, the rocks on which they perch, the trees in which they shelter. Yet they do preserve their distinctiveness, too. They are less common, as images, than water, stone, trees, sea, and other natural elements, but their presence is frequent enough to warrant special scrutiny, and—I hope to show—do

indicate or embody some quite specific processes in Clouts's trademark quest for immanent belonging. That said, their imagistic connotations in the poems are, at least on the surface, highly variable, and hardly susceptible to any analogical or allegorical generalisations. They are in each appearance, so to speak, site-specific.

A handful of poems from the *Collected Poems* are centred on birds: 'The Feeding of Doves' (1984:3); 'The Sea and the Eagle' (9); 'The Avocado Tree and the Sparrow' (21); 'Driving from the Sea' (41); 'Wintertime, great wintertime' (57); and 'The Hawk' (72). Some of these I will examine in detail later. Most often, birds are mentioned in passing, as it were, sometimes, especially in the earlier work, in obviously symbolic terms. In the subtler later work, overt symbolism is supplanted by a more organic sense of their integration into a greater whole, or what Ken Wilber terms a 'holon' (a kind of temporary or perceived aggregation or ecosystem enclosed within, and enclosing, other holons; the poem itself is such a holon)<sup>1</sup>.

Clearly, the birds often symbolise, at a conventional level, escape, or a reaching-beyond. In 'The Soul in its Sleep' (1984:34), the eagle is depicted 'soaring upward clear of its mythologies', as awakening to something untrammelled by convention. In 'Wat die hart van vol is' (119), the 'sparrows tingle', energising the senses. The sensory appreciation is beyond intellectual articulation: the poet reveres 'many wings without a thought' in 'As it Was' (32), and in 'The Strong Southeaster' (16), the hawkbirds are 'mindless' and 'monumental'. In 'Such Silence' (48), the 'dawn bird' sings the senses awake. 'Everywhere', as Clouts states in 'The Beginning' (2), 'the sense must be quick to follow' the 'falling' flickers of intuition and enlightenment, and birds, along with other airborne creatures like moths and flying fish, are exemplary of the quick and fleeting.

Some instances recognise that these lines of flight out of a complacent self-hood can be a solitary business. In 'The Load' (1984:49),

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<sup>1</sup> Wilber defines the holon as 'an entity that is itself a *whole* and simultaneously a *part* of some other whole [...] holons within holons, in an *infinity* of probability waves' (1996:20). These are not dissimilar to Deleuzean 'planes of consistency' or 'fields of immanence' in that they possess at least four capacities: 'agency and communion, self-transcendence and self-dissolution' (244).

the 'call of the starling' is 'cold and lonely'. 'Can a bird be so lonely?' the poet asks in 'The Sleeper' (83), as he ruminates on the disconcerting independence and self-containment of the woman sleeping beside him. In 'Something Precious' (39), this paradox is imaged as a 'bird that hovers and falls'; in perceiving the object as distinct, the poem suggests, 'Something precious will escape you [...] will separate', so that 'You will be only yourself'. Even as the poet wishes to identify with the eagle or the hawk, the notionally separate 'self' will reassert itself: 'I am not the turtledove', he realises in 'Frog' (115). Separateness constantly baulks the effort to integrate and unify: 'The eye will not go in', as Clouts puts it in 'Within' (88). Yet at another, more profound level the apprehension of beings as separate seems artificial, or superficial: in 'The Autumn Garden' (11) a moth is seen 'flapping about with a quick, falling / lifelikeness', as if it is only mimicking true life.

Despite the impediments our very consciousness seems to impose on us, the effort at unification must be made, and it can reward. The flying fish in 'Juan' (56) seem to return to their watery element recharged by their flight. As in 'The Feeding of Doves', the lines of flight of birds can also circulate and return. Settling doves and pigeons, in particular, rather conventionally embody peace for Clouts. In 'The Gathering' (20), a poem which celebrates unifying the disparate, 'three pigeons' dig their beaks into the 'folded skyblue greys' of their own feathers with 'deft violence'. In 'What Remains' (23), 'Arctic snows [...] settle like a dove'. The 'first pigeon / cooing in the dusk' in 'A Part of Misery' (24), is metonymic of settlement and contentment. In 'Cape of Good Hope' (44), the 'white birth of a dove' is indicative of a quiet gentleness, even if it is sufficient to break the 'silence' of Diaz's contemplative sea. It is 'pure delight' when 'birds stay / and nothing scatters' ('Knotted globes of tawny resin', 25): there is always a part of the poet's consciousness which wants only to be nested within some 'broad wingfolded / wingbeating place' ('The Grave's Cherub' 86).

As that last formulation implies, however, there is ever a tension between the passivity of contented contemplation and the activity of creation. Illusions of separateness conflict with intuitions of organic or ecological unity; the insistent reassertions of separateness occasion oscillations between alienation and security, between feeling isolated and feeling energised by the very search for an absorption into the other (though as I will argue,

‘absorption’ is not quite right, either). If certain birds seem to insist on their otherness, are even threatening—like the ‘clacking of the Butcher bird’ in ‘Is’ (68)—there remains the possible apprehension of greater ‘holons’ in which ‘grasswings and boulderwings’ (‘The cold wreathes rising after rain’ 47) can take up ‘natural’ residence, their formerly distinct characteristics re-envisioned as

mingled as greenness is in green;  
landless essences that have been

deeper than touch in touch with things  
of the surface and what the surface brings

out of the solid fall  
outranging any human call (1984:47).

The very use of rhyming couplets here (unusual in Clouts’s oeuvre) captures 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. Yet the surfaces and the distinct qualities are themselves inescapable and essential. There are suggestions here of the Blakean ‘fall’, a collapse *out of* the unitary but also *into* a distinctively human mode of creativity.

That distinctive mode of course involves art and language. In the poem ‘Lines’ (1984:15), the ‘lines of flight’ are not of birds but of Rembrandt’s etching stylus; they are, however, analogous. The act of ‘etching’ one’s perceptions ‘can teach these curls / how most accurately to be / bright hair’; art and material reality inform one another. It is not quite as strong as the Berkeleyan *esse est percipi*, but it’s close. On more intimate inspection, which is to say by a change in perspective, ‘the whole head / becomes massed with innumerable directions / leading up to the wind and the sky’, and ‘The head is then not only the head’: it is itself and simultaneously more than itself, a holon within holons, ‘lines in a scheme of lines’. In short, as Clouts himself expresses it, his poetic aim is ‘to reconstitute, to rearrange if it can, all meanings around fresh ignition points’ (141).



### III

I have hinted at various points above that the manner in which I have tried to express this reconstitution of meanings is inadequate. This is because, I think, Clouts or the speaker is not merely drawing comparisons or analogies (*I am like a dove*); nor indulging in sentimental wishful thinking (*Oh, if only I were a dove*); nor trying impossibly to be wholly absorbed into a different discrete entity (*I am/could actually be a dove*); nor being merely symbolic (*The dove means/stands for X*). There may be elements of all these in the various deployments of his bird-presences, but more is going on: a sensate perception of being-in-the-world which is all but inarticulable outside the world of the poem itself. It lies just beyond that 'vanishing point' of a blade of grass where 'the air is pricked' ('Pathways' 1984:33), where there is no longer only mind and grass in separation, but simultaneously 'Mind *with* grass'. Mind and grass 'become' one another, yet in a paradoxical sense which does not entail destruction of their individual characteristics, whilst also 'going beyond' them.

But how do we *explain* this 'going beyond', this 'moving towards' without a 'definite object', as Clouts himself has said (in Butler & Harnett 1984:13)? What is 'becoming' or coming into being in the poem? How are we to explain both the difficulty and the freshness in Clouts's treatment of the natural world in his poems? Why, with what import, does he depart so frequently from studied form, from narrative progression, even from obvious metaphor? What, in the final analysis, does his technique hold or imply for an ecologically-orientated literary criticism?

It has to do, in some ways, with what Whorfian semanticists term *cryptotypes*, which Whorf defined as 'a submerged, subtle, and elusive meaning, corresponding to no actual word, yet shown by linguistic analysis to be functionally important in the grammar' (cited in Steiner 1975:91)—a kind of linguistic 'dark matter' which George Steiner describes as involving, say, 'dispersion without boundaries, oscillation without agitation, impact without duration, [or] directed motion' which 'translate as the underlying metaphysics of a language into its overt or surface grammar' (1975:91). Some of this sounds rather like the paradoxical formulations of the meta-language of French theorists Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, which I have also found helpful here. The theorisations of Deleuze and Guattari (hereafter DG) present their own prickly abstrusities and frustrations; in a sense, their

central text, *A Thousand Plateaus*, seems to be offering up a richly metaphoric discussion of, or a kind of swarming infolding prose-poem to, the world and consciousness, a rumination ‘dispersed without boundaries’ rather than a reasoned argument. The book, moreover, denies its own book-ness, inviting the reader to absorb it in individualistic and non-linear ways, and in that spirit I will plunder it patchily for a terminology I find provocative and peculiarly apposite to Clouts, if not at every point rationalistically intelligible. It is an added attraction that DG tend to express themselves in terms overtly biological and ecological in tenor; indeed, their work is attracting increasing enthusiasm amongst ecologically-minded literary critics (see Chisholm 2008).

One way in is to note that both Coleridge’s flock of starlings and Clouts’s feeding doves, cited earlier, might be taken as beautiful examples of a ‘pack’, which DG distinguish from a mere ‘crowd’ thus:

Among the characteristics of a pack are small or restricted numbers, dispersion, nondecomposable variable distances, qualitative metamorphoses, inequalities as remainders or crossings, impossibility of a fixed totalization or hierarchization, a Brownian variability in directions, lines of deterritorialization, and a projection of particles (Deleuze & Guattari 1987:33).

In several of these characterisations Clouts’s treatment of the doves might be reflected, especially the small numbers, the motions of dispersion or deterritorialisation, and the lack of hierarchy, not merely between doves but between dove, mind, and stone. The directions the doves take are variable and Brownian<sup>2</sup>; the birds themselves are like particles—a crucial term in Clouts’s *oeuvre*—between which meanings are generated. There is, too, the pull-and-push of inequalities, of differences, of advancement into new correlations as well as remainderings of other dynamics. The ‘crumbs’ are as important as apparently more coherent entities: Clouts ever operated in the subtle marginalia of the ‘residuum’, the title of a key poem (1984: 78).

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<sup>2</sup> Brownian movement may be described as the ‘random movement of microscopic particles suspended in a fluid, caused by bombardment of the particles by molecules of the fluid’ (*Collins English Dictionary*).

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I want to go further, however, to suggest that the notion of the 'pack' helps describe Clouts's poetic technique itself. His startling metaphors and correlations perform 'qualitative metamorphoses' of the given, and are themselves enacting 'crossings' and dispersions of particles (words and images) in non-hierarchical ways. The unfoldings and infoldings of Clouts's best 'pack'-like poems encourage a non-linear, aggregative manner of reading and therefore of relating to the world. This is counter-intuitive, what we might call *unnatural*. 'These combinations are neither genetic nor structural; they are interkingdoms, unnatural participations. That is the only way Nature operates—against itself' (Deleuze & Guattari 1987:242). As I understand this, DG mean that the mechanisms of Nature cannot be explained merely by a narrowly Darwinian genetic genealogy or 'filiation', nor in terms of any pre-designed or imposed structure or blueprint; there are events continuously arising out of the 'Chaosmos' which combine formerly utterly incongruent entities in aleatory ways, with all but entirely unpredictable new aggregates forming and temporarily stabilising on what DG call a 'plane of consistency' or 'field of immanence' (154). Each poem might be regarded as such a field, with an analogous detachment from genealogy. Clouts has said, perhaps slightly overstating it: 'To know that it can happen here—behind the poem is a person, behind the poem is a life, and a beating heart, eyes, senses, etc., not a tradition. There is no tradition behind poetry' (in Butler & Harnett 1984:12). Crucially, at any rate, these new instantaneous aggregations are occurring in, or with the participation of, mind and language. Clouts's poem 'The Feeding of Doves', then, acts as the trace of multiple such aleatory encounters between mind, language, doves, rocks, etc., compressed into a startling, grammatically fresh, aggregate of words—the poem.

It is not that filiation and structure are false or unimportant or non-existent, only that they are not the whole story. Stabilities do settle, like doves; these DG call 'striations' or 'strata' or 'stratifications' or 'territories'. Always, however, there are forces and energies escaping or breaching or returning to those strata, in multiple processes of 'deterritorialisation' and 'reterritorialisation'. Or as Clouts puts it: 'The imagination disestablishes its own constructions continually' (in Butler & Harnett 1984:37). These motions DG call 'lines of flight' or, in a kind of aggregative shorthand, the 'rhizome'. In anyone's language, I take it, such stratifications also exist: the stability of

grammar itself, conventions of association and symbolism, the sense that usage and thought have been in a crucial sense inherited. But also constantly operating is the rhizome of challenge, escape, advancement, assertion of difference merely in personalisation of style, neologisms or inflections drawn from newly encountered languages or philosophies (something like what Harold Bloom calls the ‘anxiety of influence’).

That Clouts was thinking along similar lines (literally) might be evidenced by the second stanza of his poem ‘Pathways’ (1984:140), whose title itself evokes ‘lines of flight’. In this stanza, the philosophic traditions on which the poet inevitably draws are transformed into, literally consumed by, a rhizomic multiplicity of plants, light, and bees, interfused in ways Aristotle could never have predicted:

All that the philosophic men  
have said of the mind  
in its contemplation,  
bends like a field of lupins whose  
slant sunlight is profuse and burrows  
sharply into famished bees (1984:140).

These lines alone exemplify almost all the qualities of the ‘pack’ outlined above, ending with the implications of the ‘Brownian movement’ of the ‘profuse’, particle-like *and* pack-like, mutually fructifying lupins *and* bees<sup>3</sup>. In both its expansion into the vasts of history and fields, and in its return to the miniscule, there works in the poem what DG call

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<sup>3</sup> DG appropriately exemplify this in the symbiotic relationship between the unlikely allies of a wasp and orchid: ‘The wasp becomes a piece in the orchid’s reproductive apparatus. But it reterritorializes the orchid by transporting its pollen. Wasp and orchid, as heterogeneous elements, form a rhizome. It could be said that the orchid imitates the wasp, reproducing its image in a signifying fashion [but a]t the same time, something else entirely is going on: not imitation but a capture of code, surplus value of code, an increase in valence, a veritable becoming, a becoming-wasp of the orchid and a becoming-orchid of the wasp [...] in a circulation of intensities’ (Deleuze & Guattari 1987:10).

a circulation of intensities pushing the deterritorialization ever further. There is neither imitation nor resemblance, only an exploding of two heterogeneous series [light and bees, say] on the line of flight composed by a common rhizome that can no longer be attributed to or subjugated by anything signifying (Deleuze & Guattari 1987:10).

There is no name or structural shorthand to be given to this new aggregate; there is no longer a merely mimetic correlation between a signified and signifier. The poem is what DG call a 'body without organs', which is 'permeated by unformed, unstable matters, by flows in all directions, by free intensities or nomadic singularities' (Deleuze & Guattari 1987:40). Birds, for Clouts, are just such 'nomadic singularities', sometimes settling and congregating, sometimes embodying a line of flight, of thought, and of verbal expression, out of and beyond the ordinary. In a very particular sense, the poet (perhaps the reader, too) *becomes* the dove, or the 'hawkbird', or the 'boulderwings'. It is an almost instinctive identification even stronger than what Coleridge famously termed the 'willed suspension of disbelief'. It is a sense of becoming which DG, in the chapter '1730: Becoming-Intense, Becoming-Animal, Becoming-Imperceptible...', explicate thus:

To become is not to progress or regress along a series. Above all, becoming does not occur in the imagination [...]. Becomings-animal [or becomings-bird] are neither dreams nor phantasies. They are perfectly real. But which reality is at issue here? For if becoming animal does not consist in playing animal or imitating an animal, it is clear that the human being does not 'really' become an animal any more than the animal 'really' becomes something else. Becoming produces nothing other than itself. We fall into a false alternative if we say that you either imitate or you are. What is real is the becoming itself, the block of becoming, not the supposedly fixed terms through which the becoming passes. [... A] becoming lacks a subject distinct from itself [...] it has no term, since its term in turn exists only as taken up in another becoming of which it is the subject. [...]

Finally, becoming is not an evolution, at least not an evolution by descent and filiation. Becoming produces nothing by filiation; all filiation is imaginary. Becoming is always of a different order than filiation. It concerns alliance. If evolution includes any veritable becomings, it is in the domain of *symbioses* that bring into play beings of totally different scales and kingdoms, with no possible affiliation (Deleuze & Guattari 1987:238).

It sometimes seems as if Clouts had read Deleuze and Guattari, whose use of the word ‘kingdom’ here coincidentally but highly appropriately evokes Clouts’s poem ‘Animal Kingdom’ (1984:76). In that poem, the deceptively simple line ‘the river that I heard / included birdsong’ projects consciousness onto a hitherto all-but-inconceivable plane of interrelationship, ambiguous agency, and ‘alliance’. It somehow transcends even metaphor; it is not the case that birdsong is being compared to a river, but that a complete new assemblage of river, song, hearing, and expression is being actually created. The poet’s own vision is not just *like* the sun that shines or enlivens; in a sense it *is* ‘fly and frog / pond hand stalk and loquat / river and beak’. Humanness and birdness belong equally within the ‘field of immanence’ that is here metonymically the interfusion of sun’s warmth. All, it might be said, is/are synecdoche; hence the poet can, even as a momentarily separable entity, partake in, and be redefined by, the ‘lines of flight’ inscribed on the world by other entities or nomadic singularities: ‘Locust locust leap with me / water flow and mirror me’ (1984:76). Particles and flows, like the characterisations of energy-matter in quantum physics, express the same ‘thing’, the same ‘plane of consistency’. (Lines of flight are by no means confined to birds: in ‘Dew on a Shrub’ [1984:88] even a ‘crocodile flies to me’!) Put another way, Clouts attempts—to echo Adrienne Rich—to write not poems *of* experience, but poems *as* experience.

#### IV

I think it is a mistake to label, let alone decry, Clouts’s propensity to search for organic unities in natural environs as uncritically and narrowly ‘Romantic’, as certain critics have done. Prominent amongst these is Stephen Watson in his essay ‘Sydney Clouts & the Limits of Romanticism’ (Watson

1990). Writing in the turbulent 1980s, when the anti-apartheid struggle and what Louise Bethlehem has termed the 'rhetoric of urgency' (Bethlehem 2006:1-3) dominated literary critical discourse, Watson disparaged Clouts for his lack of attention to immediate political events, for apparently being able to locate transcendence only 'in relation to the natural world—not in society, and certainly not in anything like a recognisably South African version of it' (Watson 1990:72). The results, according to Watson, are pseudo-spiritual poems that are 'evasive, even escapist' (74), a Utopian fantasy and 'smokescreen' that was 'facilitated' by the 'romantic tradition' (78). This is not the place to offer a studied response to Watson's robust and provocative treatment of Clouts: suffice it to say that I think Watson's characterisation of Clouts's motivations as 'mystical' or 'spiritual' is imperfect; and that while many writers legitimately respond to the 'short-wave' oscillations of immediate socio-political events, others may equally legitimately respond to 'long-wave', more subtle and incremental changes in global mentality, amongst which are subtle shifts in human relations with the natural world. Today, some 23 years after Watson first published his article and in the midst of our clear and overwhelming environmental climacteric, it seems obvious that Clouts's perspectives (like those of, say, John Clare or Henry Thoreau) are re-gaining a relevance which appeared scarcely creditable at the time.

Clouts certainly was influenced by Wordsworth, Coleridge and Blake—not to mention his favourite, Wallace Stevens—and self-consciously so. (It is intriguing how, in a critique like Watson's, such evidence of 'intertextuality' is seen as a weakness, where in T.S. Eliot it is regarded as a strength.) But as even a passing acquaintance with those poets reveals, their so-called Romanticism encompasses as many differences and arguments as it does similarities. Clouts professed himself suspicious of the 'daring, dangerous Romantic note', especially that of the suffering poet (in Butler & Harnett 1984:12). At no point does Clouts pretend that the attainment of a unitary vision of any kind—an experience of the 'One Life'—is easy, stable, or irreversible, or even that it should be. He is not a romantic 'nature poet' in that sense. Nor is he vapidly 'mystical'. The studious materiality, the muscular effort at compression and surprise evident in almost every line of his oeuvre, should be testament enough to that. He writes: 'I think of transcendence as inhabiting [a] raptness, that possession of the poem *by the*

*world*' (in Butler & Harnett 1984:13; e.a.). Throughout, the energy is manifest in a grammar of physical 'movement', of boundary-crossings, of momentary poise before the swift ephemerality of being reasserts. 'I have moments either of transcendence or of movement toward that transcendence, of passage into it, of definition of it [...] whatever any *line* which one tries to think of might be doing *at that time*' (13; e.a.). Birds are exemplary exponents of such a line or lines.

Nor does Clouts pretend that Nature is unrelievedly beneficent, as a superficial reading might imply (the same incidentally goes for Wordsworth and Coleridge). Some early bird-related poems demonstrate that Clouts saw the natural world as in certain manifestations dangerous and predatory, but he characteristically used this perception to examine the nature of the field of immanence within which the poetic mind manifests.

An early bird poem is 'The Avocado Tree and the Sparrow' (Clouts 1984:21). The tree is characterised as a battlefield: the 'sheens' of its leaves are 'sharp, corrosive', like plates of armour which an incursive sparrow is either confronted by or dons—or both. It is unclear at times just what is fighting what in the poem, and I'm not convinced that the ambiguity is deliberate; but if it is an unintended confusion in the poem, it is also a revealing one. At one stage it seems there is a massing against the sparrow, as if by the Zulu troops of 'Cetawayo'; but it is finally the sparrow's 'gaze / of quick command' that 'sway[s] the battlefield' (1984:21). On the one hand, the sparrow seems to insert himself within the plates of the leaves—like 'listen[ing] amongst the particles'?—and this partnership gains him a 'subtle' ascendancy; on the other hand, he seems to enclose within himself the power of 'small fibres densely steeled'; it is hence a combination of self-confidence and partnership which prevails against the anonymous attackers. This is, I take it, the early expression of a poet struggling to define the self and its poetic metier—a self, torn between confrontation and belonging, which has not yet defined securely the parameters of an emerging theme of displacement and belonging in a world of formless threats, or a Chaosmos of potential dissolutions.

Aggressiveness in the natural world is background to a second bird poem. In 'The Strong Southeaster' (1984:16) the rather unspecific 'hawkbirds', which 'sink on the light / and fold their imperative wings', have a 'mindless, monumental' hieratic air rather too reminiscent of Yeats and his



Byzantium; they are an expression perhaps of a desire to leave behind the 'turbulent cloud / of brooding victors' and the 'mustering gloom / of power', perhaps even of thought itself. The desire here seems to be to enter the almost death-like (yet intimately alive) state outlined in 'As It Was' (1984:32). In that poem about the persistence of the natural world after human death, 'the entire restless mind / stumbles to the cold', after which there will still be 'many beetles marching forth / and many wings without a thought', and water 'tasting so sweet and deep and cold / of unhuman numerous things'. Clouts in both these poems seems still in search of an 'absolute' line of flight which will be genuinely transformative, but can only imagine it as an after-death/afterlife state of 'cleansing' (16). (This does inadvertently echo the rather misanthropic strain in some contemporary ecological thinking, even amongst scientists envisaging a 'world without humans', but lacks its edge of weird triumphalism. Most often Clouts, it seems to me, expresses his 'becoming-nature' ideals not as escapist from the human, but as an expansion of what it means to be human.)

The yearning for some Yeatsian state of pure art is expressed more imploringly in 'The Hawk' (1984:72). Slightly reminiscent of Tennyson's imperious eagle, the hawk on its 'glimmering scythes' of wings 'darkens the mountain / darkens the field', but also seems to offer some hope of a vehicle, a vector of directives to the poet, who cries out 'for a word of judgement / lean as a blade' from a condition of threatened chaos in which 'Flowers are toppling' and 'the earth burbles blood'. The vision of a 'white cloud' urges the speaker to cry out to the 'scholars of Mercy' for the solace of an interpretation of 'the flood'. The threat represented by the hawk can only be answered by a specified meaning, apparently; in this sense, Clouts had not yet reached the point of self-confidence at which he could postulate the *loss* of his self, and the relinquishing of specifiable meaning in the universe, as creative and agentive positives.

In its detached, 'darken[ing]', even death-dealing line of flight, the hawk in this poem echoes the eagle in others. In 'The Soul in its Sleep' (1984:34), 'the eagle soar[s] upwards clear of the mythologies'—as clear an expression of Deleuzian 'deterritorialisation' as one might wish for. Clearly for Clouts there is a solitariness, a sense of self-alienation incumbent on this soaring, especially in the earlier work. 'The Sea and the Eagle' (1984:9) is a good instance here. This poem is shot through with questioning, but ends

with a strong foreshadowing of the confident authority of the later poems. Precisely because it is a bit gauche, it lays out the dynamics especially clearly. The poet is evidently looking for a ‘destiny’, a solidified sense of placement within the world (something analogous to DG’s ‘arborescence’, or attachment to pre-determined models or genealogies); he envisages that the ‘sea’ or the ‘eagle’ might embody or direct him to this destiny. He queries the bird’s ‘line of flight’, its destination and its motivation, as if he might follow it somehow. The eagle is envisaged as being privy to something ‘conceal[ed] in thunder’, as being of a primordial authority, pre-human in the depth of its history. This is not, however, a process of romanticised regression to some antecedent mode of being (‘though fragments of regression, sequences of regression may enter it’ [Deleuze and Guattari 1987:240]). Rather, the thrust is focussed on the present and the reformatory: the eagle is envisaged as *knowing* how the seasons have ‘mingl[ed] us in the flowing metre’. This is an especially important image, since it implies that poetry itself, the ‘rising and falling’ cadences of speech, are embedded in, co-existent with, inseparable from both our own existence and that of the greater ecology. To recognise that inseparability is to *know* in the manner the poet imagines the eagle does. Sea and eagle are thus, in a sense, our unconscious—and in line with Deleuze and Guattari, Clouts eventually wants not to *interpret* the surface signs of that unconscious (as he does in ‘The Hawk’), so much as fully to *experience* its multiform, rhizomatic haecceity, its ‘thisness’.

For both statements and desires, the issue is never to reduce the unconscious or to interpret it or to make it signify according to the [hieratic or genealogical] tree model. The issue is to *produce the unconscious*, and with it new statements, different desires (Deleuze & Guattari 1987:19; e.i.o.).

Mind and language must have their place in the process of unifying the disunited—reterritorialising the deterritorialised—as Clouts’s next line also acknowledges: ‘We have given you both [sea and eagle] a mystery’. He is asking the old question: Is meaning inherent in the world, to be discovered, as if in a mirror (if only we could be sea-like, or eagle-like); or do we impose it upon the world? Both and neither: we are already inside the meaning of the

world, wilfully though we conceal it from ourselves, or merely fail to achieve awareness of it. Unquestionably there are internal contradictions here, but they are the contradictions of life itself, the contradictions of verbal expression of and within life<sup>4</sup>. Clouts ends the poem: 'Reveal it and we shall see ourselves / suddenly like a rising wing, / terribly like a swoop of water (1984:9). Only when we recognise how we shape and are shaped by our willed and/or unwilled integrity with our surroundings do we know who we are. Such knowledge is inevitably transitory and even frightening. This is not about 'transcendence', as Stephen Watson seems to think it is, but about a reterritorialisation of our putative self within a perpetually mutating, 'airborne' cosmos. This is to exemplify Clouts's own manifesto: the sense 'that one is not only in one's body but outside it. [...] The relationship of the poet with things is this always being another' (in Butler & Harnett 1984:9).

## V

'Producing the unconscious' may be said to be the central concern of perhaps the most successful of Clouts's bird-centred poems, though it was not published in his lifetime: 'Wintertime, great wintertime' (1984:57-8). In this

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<sup>4</sup> Deleuze and Guattari express this as the contradictory-but-simultaneous existence of the *tonal* and the *nagual*, which they derive from Castaneda: 'The *tonal* seems to cover many disparate things: It is the organism, and also all that is organized and organizing; but it is also signifiante [sic], and all that is signifying or signified, all that is susceptible to interpretation, explanation, all that is memorable in the form of something recalling something else; finally, it is the Self (*Moi*), the subject, the historical, social, or individual person, and the corresponding feelings. In short, the tonal is everything, including God, the judgment of God, since it 'makes up the rules by which it apprehends the world. So, in a manner of speaking, it creates the world'. Yet the tonal is only an island. For the *nagual* is also everything. And it is the same everything, but under such conditions that the body without organs has replaced the organism and experimentation has replaced all interpretation, for which it no longer has any use. Flows of intensity, their fluids, their fibers, their continuums and conjunctions of affects, the wind, fine segmentation, microperceptions, have replaced the world of the subject' (Deleuze & Guattari 1987:162).

poem, the speaker conducts a somewhat wry ‘conversation’ with a ‘glossy bird’, probably a wagtail. At first the relationship is dualistic, almost confrontational: the bird’s ‘tapping tail upbraid[s]’ the poet, perhaps for his very sense of separateness. He in turn ‘mutter[s] like a witch upon it’, as if evoking a magical incantation. Obviously Clouts is not advocating necromancy: rather he pursues a method of associationism akin to magical symbolism. ‘If the writer is a sorceror,’ Deleuze and Guattari appropriately argue, ‘it is because writing is a becoming, writing is traversed by strange becomings that are not becomings-writer, but becomings-rat, becomings-insect, becomings-wolf, etc.’ (1987:240). Again, this is not a simplistic or fantastical transposition or merely imagined metamorphosis: it is a ‘fearsome involution calling us toward unheard-of becomings’ (240). Such becomings eventuate in *affect*, which is ‘not a personal feeling, nor is it a characteristic; it is the effectuation of a power of the pack that throws the self into upheaval and makes it reel. Who has not known the violence of these animal sequences, which uproot one from one’s humanity, if only for an instant [...]?’ (240). From this upheaval emerge lines which, like examples we have already seen, themselves form the sense of a multitudinous, newly aggregated world, one without name, a ‘body without organs’:

Drum drum the sodden world  
till all the drops go flying.  
Little tail, good  
Governor Conclusion, drum  
the acid core of worms,  
the plateau of desertions,  
absence, lies, confusion (Clouts 1984:58).

A new world seems to be drummed into being here: what was once ‘sodden’ is made dry, cleansed of its inner corruptions; the droplets fly outwards into new territories. Ironically, of course, the ‘acid core’ of the world’s corruptions are themselves the stimulus behind the drumming; only the recognition of abuses can evoke a counter-movement, a destratification, a movement towards a new ‘Conclusion’. That this is seen as fundamentally political—delivered by a ‘Governor’—gives a partial quietus to Watson’s accusations of political disengagement, though it does remain unspecific.

The presence of 'desertions' and 'lies' thus sounds negative, but they might also be seen as Deleuzian rhizomes—vectors or expressions of rebellious renewal, challenge, and escape. The 'core' and 'plateau' are themselves territories from which new movements inevitably take off. So the bird's feathers 'troop' or parade 'the spectrum / moist presumptive stream'—a neat encapsulation of deterritorialisation<sup>5</sup>. (Recall Clouts's phrase 'the spectrum soul' from 'The Soul in its Sleep' [1984:34].) More importantly, there is 'not a flounce / of supernatural phrase / abolishing as bird its actual nature'. There results neither a glib religious appropriation of the bird into an allegoric realm of merely human significance, nor a denial of the haecceity of the bird-as-bird. Clouts observes the bird itself closely *as bird*: 'its belly showed what gluttons birds are made'. Despite that, it also contains features of all other haecceities: 'the body alteration takes / can be reptile, man, or bird'. Its signification is not confined to its genealogies or evolutionary descent: 'Its plumage seemed to show / its parentage—to hell with that!' This robust dismissal of pastness gives way to a concentration on the 'freak[ish]' nature of an unpredictable present, whose aesthetics make for an ethical humbling:

Freak fire and snow  
some birds are very beautiful  
and this bird doubly so,  
to miserable mind repentance brought.  
O muddy mind of sorrow, brace your soil (1984:58).

The recognition of beauty in the instance, abrupt as a freak snowfall, engenders 'repentance'. Repentance from what? The next lines imply that it is the separation of 'mind' from 'soil' that has been the problem: the bird has pointed the way towards some sense of reunification, a renewed recognition that the mind at bottom *is* soil—and 'muddy' with its own delusions. Moreover, 'sorrow', like the lies, greed, and confusions noted earlier in the

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<sup>5</sup> Another echo, too, I suspect, of Blake's famous couplet from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: 'How do you know but ev'ry Bird that cuts the airy way, / Is an immense world of delight, clos'd by your senses five?' (cited in Keynes 1972:150).

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poem, proves to be the grounds of renewal, the stimulus to ‘brace your soil’, to actually recharge itself with energy as well as support the very earth from which it came, in renewed symbiosis. ‘Brace’ here carries the echo of ‘embrace’.

In the vast scope of the Chaosmos, the poet realises, the change may be miniscule, yet the bird even in its diminutiveness encompasses all ‘beams and darkness’, is integral to the greater ‘rhythms’ of life: ‘It was the bird whose scope / of beams and darkness pressed / the axial rhythm’s millionth part of change (1984:58). There is no way of predicting this change and what might stimulate it: no preconceived plan or blueprint, no genealogical filiation, no simple correlation between a signified and a signifier, between a word and its predesignated object. This is to return us to Coleridge, whose desire to eliminate the boundary between Word and Thing is echoed by Deleuze and Guattari. They write: ‘Signifier enthusiasts take an oversimplified situation as their implicit model: word and thing. From the word they extract the signifier, and from the thing a signified in conformity to the word, and therefore subjugate it to the signifier’ (Deleuze & Guattari 1987:66). Rhizomic writing like *Clouts*’s breaks this bond; it moves even beyond our capacity to theorise it: ‘Theories of arbitrariness, necessity, term-by-term or global correspondence [...] serve the same cause: the reduction of expression to the signifier’ (66). But ‘content and expression are never reducible to signified-signifier’ (67), even though there often seems a close correspondence. In fact, according to DG, a signifier is merely a frozen extraction from an implicit multiplicity, a door or threshold like the notion of a Self, a momentary imaginary within a multiplicity which is ‘already composed of heterogenous terms in symbiosis, and [which is] continually transforming itself into a string of other multiplicities, according to its thresholds and doors’ (1987:249). *Clouts* himself echoes this remarkably closely: The poet adopts ‘complexity for his own and knows himself as more complex than anything he will ever see. He can give the name complex and multiple [...] and incomprehensible to the things that are’ (in Butler & Harnett 1984:37).

The closing section of ‘Wintertime, great wintertime’ enacts just such heterogeneity, such mobile crossing of thresholds, such deliberate escaping of self and of theory, such irreducible marriages of points into fresh symbioses. The bird is only momentarily, or in one limited mode, a signifier;

it is also at once a heterogeneity of 'spinning drops'; a spectrum of qualities of wider 'scope'; a body which is both itself with its greedy 'belly' *and* 'unaxiomed', not wholly subject to predetermining laws; and an 'entrance' to profounder perceptions. Upon this recognition, paradoxically, a profoundly true and engaged ethics can be effected.

I felt the spinning drops that stage the world's  
unaxiomed body's hungry entrances.  
What I am not I am. The core expounds  
the beating of a heart. Unmagical,  
into this mud I carry the morning star  
thrown with time's tragedy  
to glitter like an angry stone.  
The beating of a heart! It binds that stone.  
I wept for all betrayals, greed and loss (1984:58).

'What I am not I am.' This sounds evasively paradoxical, even mystical, but I think can be explained in materialist terms of mud and feathers, too. There are two kinds of 'I' here: the limited self of the bounded body, the ego-centric sense of selfhood which is both real and illusory—illusory because it pretends to exclude all of the Chaosmos which effectively *does* constitute its being (that which it is not). Embrace that embracing 'soil' or cosmos, and a different, wider, integrative 'I' may be postulated, if no longer directly expressed, an 'I' somewhat like Freya Mathews's 'ecological self' which is like a temporarily stabilised ripple (a holon) in the onrushing, endlessly interlocking waves of energy that constitute the universe, and is therefore a 'function' of those waves, only in a severely limited sense a discrete entity (Mathews 1994:108). There is, as Clouts's phrasing indicates, nothing 'magical' about this: it is simply a recognition that 'time's tragedy'—the Blakean fall, if you like—is for us, our peculiar consciousness, to have dragged the cosmic and illuminative (the 'morning star') down into the mud of illusion and disillusion (betrayal, greed, and loss), the rationalistic and unimaginative, where it smoulders like an 'angry stone'. Yet it also 'glitter[s]'; it is a 'heart', is *our* heart; again, this fall is grounds for 'hungry' regeneration, for the fresh recognition of beauty, and hence for the ethical act of weeping. How one perceives such discreteness or unity, as Clouts's words

‘expounds’ and ‘stage’ indicate, is inevitably to some degree a matter of expression, of the theatricality of language. As Clouts himself puts it in his MA thesis, ‘The Violent Arcadia’: ‘The tone of the poem is a function of [the poet’s] presence-in-his-language; and the appearance of the ‘I’, full or slight or implied, is this presence raised into the personal mode under the aspect of dramatic intensity’ (in Butler & Harnett 1984:35). Both poet and bird, in becoming-another, are Deleuzian ‘nomadic intensities’, creating their own symbiotic unconscious through their interdependent ‘lines of flight’ into the world of the poem.

## VI

Birds in Clouts’s poems are depicted as ineffably themselves, but are not reducible to themselves alone. They partake of their environs, just as the self is a function of its environments; in reading the poem, the appearances of the bird or the speaker’s self manifests as neither the bird-self ‘itself’ nor purely a word. In this, Clouts’s poetic method enacts the dilemma of human-natural relations everywhere. As verbalising humans we are perpetually, simultaneously in flight from the natural world, and flying into it, and flighted within it. Further analysis of this poetry for its compactness and philosophical implications might have a good deal to say to the practice of an ecologically-orientated literary criticism.

In a useful article, appropriately entitled ‘The Sound of a Robin after a Rain Shower’, Sabine Wilke outlines an eco-critical field characterised by ‘two camps and a variety of approaches that try to mediate between them’ (Wilke 2009:91). The ‘nature camp’ explores ‘the linkages between natural and cultural processes’, arguing that ‘both realms need to be acknowledged in their own right’ (91). On the other hand, the ‘constructionist camp’ insists on ‘the historical and cultural construction of nature’ (91). Wilke outlines a number of thinkers who have endeavoured to mediate between or meld these positions, including Glen Love, Dana Philips and Max Oelschlager, ending with discussion of the dialectical arguments of Immanuel Kant and Theodor Adorno. She cites Philips, who suggests that on the one hand ‘we need to cure ecocriticism of its fundamental fixation on literal representation’ while on the other hand needing ‘to have a perspicuous sense of the differences between words and things’ (in Wilke 2009:99). This is precisely the area in



which Clouts's poetry to my mind works, endeavouring to set up not so much a dialectical relationship, let alone an allegorical one, as Wilke draws from Kant and Adorno, so much as an even subtler one of Deleuzian 'becoming'. Indeed, what Wilke characterises as 'allegorical' in Adorno seems to me, from the very quotation she includes in evidence, more than that, something rather closer to Deleuze and Clouts. Adorno writes of a strand of German romanticism, a persistent brand of perception by which 'a rock appears for an instant as a primordial animal, while in the next the similarity slips away' (quoted in Wilke 2009:110).

In natural beauty, natural and historical elements interact in a musical and kaleidoscopically changing fashion. Each can step in for the other, and it is in this constant fluctuation, not in any unequivocal order of relationships, that natural beauty lives (Wilke 2009:110).

While dialectical relationships inevitably persist between 'territories' or 'strata', the apprehension of beauty goes further. An ecologically-attuned literary criticism which fails to acknowledge this, which becomes beholden either to empirical science (Glen Love's tendency) or an ecological theologism (Oelschlager's tendency) is likely to miss dynamics essential to the human phenomenology of perceiving the self-in-nature. I keep coming back to Clouts's sparrow's 'gaze / of quick command' (1984:21) among the surfaces of the avocado leaves, an example of what Edward Casey has deemed the phenomenological power of the 'glance':

The place-world shows itself in its surfaces, as existing within its own normative parameters, geomorphic or evolutionary, agricultural or wild—or else as exceeding or undermining these parameters, as ill at ease with itself. The glance takes all this in without needing to pass judgment or to engage in reflection. A bare apperception, a mere moment of attention is enough: *a glance suffices* (Casey 2003:198; e.i.o.).

This is analogous, I think, to Clouts's 'method of the speck and the fleck' (1984:79). In being so poetically absorbed in the phenomenology of the glance, all momentarily becomes everything; human face and landscape

become one another even as they assert their individuality. Casey cites Deleuze and Guattari:

What face has not called upon the landscapes it amalgamated, sea and hill; what landscape has not evoked the face that would have completed it, providing an unexpected complement for its lines and traits? (Casey 2003:202; Deleuze & Guattari 1987:173).

Birds, in Clouts's poetry, embody and enact just those complementary lines, the 'lines of flight' of the mind, winged with thought.

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# **Toward an (Avian) Aesthetic of (Avian) Absence**

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## **Abstract**

Science, broadly defined, seeks to bring humans epistemologically closer to the physical world by empirical means; philosophy and history of science remind that the apparatuses deployed by scientists (scientific method; mathematical formulae; language) always already maintain a distance. Certain literary/artistic endeavours do not fundamentally differ in their attempts to bring humans closer to the world via language/symbolism. After laying a framework for negotiating the shifting tensions between distance and proximity when contemplating literature's place in ecological thinking, I offer in this essay a series of comparative readings of bird poems complemented by an analysis of a book for young readers. Informing my readings of texts by British, Canadian, and South African writers is a thought experiment: what happens when we consider birds as works of art? For the first half of my argument, I offer readings of poems that sound an alarm regarding humans' carelessness and that posit faulty birdwatchers as exemplars of respectful poetic attention. For the remainder of the essay, I focus on texts about penguins as a critical case study for the first half's thought experiment. The texts that privilege distance and absence as preferable modes of engaging with birds also enable an understanding of birds as works of art independent of human designs.

**Keywords:** ecocriticism, birding/ birdwatching, science and literature, poetry, aesthetics, extinction.

## **Disappearing Distance**

You call into the dark and dart  
to where no nest of yours has ever been  
and the most precious, secret-nurtured things  
remain unseen (Dixon 2006:19).

Absence makes what  
presence, presence (Thompson 1995:135).

The movement between distance and proximity, in scientific and experiential terms, offers a strategy with which to consider practical responses to such environmental problems as habitat loss and degradation, pollution, and extinction. Science, broadly defined, seeks to bring humans epistemologically closer to the physical world by empirical means; philosophy and history of science remind that the apparatuses deployed by scientists (scientific method; mathematical formulae; language) always already maintain a distance. In ‘The Question Concerning Technology’, Martin Heidegger claims that ‘Modern science’s way of representing pursues and entraps nature as a calculable coherence of forces’ (1993:326). While pursuit implies a distance to be overcome and entrapment suggests a mode of overcoming that presumes to measure and comprehend (explain) ‘nature’, the possibility of a ‘calculable coherence of forces’ threatens, in Heidegger’s formulation, to collapse distances in dangerous ways. From an ecological perspective, Heidegger’s critique of technology, which he links through the Greek *technē* to the craft of poetry, points out the danger of humans relying too heavily on a set of practices—technological, poetical—that removes the world of its mystery. What Heidegger calls ‘enframing’, which he identifies as the essence of technology, ‘starts man [sic] upon the way of that revealing through which the actual everywhere, more or less distinctly, becomes standing-reserve’ (1993:329). In other words, the danger of technology lies in its tendency, as Catherine Frances Botha notes, to usurp ‘all other modes of revealing. With everything standing in reserve for our use, ‘distance’ disappears’ (2003:162). The disappearance of distance is simultaneously a dangerous proximity and an absence, both of which find their ultimate home in extinction.

Consider the following analogy: distance is to proximity as absence is to presence. The analogy is not particularly challenging. But what if I substitute another pair? Distance is to proximity as extinction is to conservation. In other words, a distance/absence paradigm, which includes absence/presence and extinction/conservation, informs my argument in significant ways. In this essay I examine an aesthetic of absence by looking at writing about birds and the practice of birding. For the purposes of this essay, birders and poets both strive, like scientists, to achieve a proximal relation to the physical world. Elsewhere I have argued that the act of birding functions as a postcolonial strategy, that is, as a strategy for interrogating the limits of knowing the (nonhuman, avian) other while participating in efforts to learn the names and stories of the (nonhuman, avian) other<sup>1</sup>. Although my attention here to works by Canadian and South African writers represents an implicit extension of my earlier argument, I stop short of claiming what follows as postcolonial in theory or in practice. There is simply not space enough to consider the relevant geographical, political, or ecological similarities and differences between Canada and South Africa.

After laying a framework for negotiating the shifting tensions between distance and proximity when contemplating literature's place in ecological thinking, I offer a series of comparative readings of bird poems complemented by an analysis of a book for young readers. For the first half of my argument, I have chosen poems that sound an alarm regarding humans' carelessness (Thomas Hardy's 'Wagtail and Baby' and Don McKay's 'In Aornis') and that posit faulty birdwatchers as exemplars of respectful poetic attention (Ingrid de Kok's 'Wattle-Eyes' and McKay's 'Pine Siskins'). If my readings of McKay's and De Kok's poems suggest a strategy for comparing avian poetics from Commonwealth nations—Canada and South Africa, respectively—my inclusion of British writer Hardy's poem is less political and more topical. Though Hardy's best-known bird poem is 'The Darkling Thrush', which has turned the eponymous bird into an icon of steadfast hope in the face of gloom, he has written other bird poems that demonstrate a poet attentive to actual birds and their

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<sup>1</sup> See 'West-Coast Birding as Postcolonial Strategy: Literary Criticism in the Field' (Mason 2007a).

conservation<sup>2</sup>. Analyses of, for example, ‘Shelley’s Skylark’ (1993:18)—in which the speaker reminds us that Shelley’s most famous bird poem, ‘Ode to a Skylark’, was inspired by an actual bird—and ‘In a Museum’ (1984:238)—about seeing a stuffed bird and imagining its return—fall beyond the scope of this paper. I wanted nevertheless to locate an antecedent to the philosophical (and perhaps ideological) aspect of the contemporary poems under discussion in this essay’s first half, to hint at a tradition of birdwatching poems, even at the risk of destabilising my comparison of postcolonial/Commonwealth literatures.

For the remainder of the essay, I focus on texts about penguins as a critical case study for the first half’s thought experiment. The penguin texts are less about watching, or attempting to watch an absent bird, and more about the constant threat of endangerment and human interventions to address such endangerment, though they also explore the shifting boundaries between absence and presence, distance and proximity. Phil Whittington’s *The Adventures of Peter the Penguin* (2001) is a well-intentioned attempt to educate young readers about oil spills, but I argue that the narrative—in both its style and its trajectory—renders benign the human rage for proximity by failing to acknowledge adequately the ways scientific research (on penguins) functions within a paradigm of human behaviour that, in addition to benefiting knowledge, is responsible for oil spills. Turning back to poetry, I argue that Jeremy Cronin’s ‘Penguins’ displays a similarly careless anthropocentrism, which essentialises penguins vis-à-vis humans in ways that are not so helpful to penguins or to humans. Ruth Miller’s ‘Penguin on the Beach’, by contrast, comprises a sad portrait of an individual penguin that has been oiled; it also serves as a critique of human behaviour in much the same way McKay’s ‘In Aornis’ does—subtly and self-consciously. The texts that privilege distance and absence as preferable modes of engaging with birds also enable an understanding of birds as works of art independent of human designs.

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<sup>2</sup> Coincidentally, De Kok has taken the title of and epigraph to her 2002 collection, *Terrestrial Things*, from Hardy’s ‘The Darkling Thrush’.

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## Utility Versus Art

The work of art shows us that ‘truth happens in the guise of the primordial struggle between “clearance” and concealment’ (Steiner 1987:135).

Distance between humans and birds is necessary for bird conservation because it enables birds to live away from human disturbance. Proximity is also necessary for their conservation because humans have much to learn from avian biology and culture that might prevent us from intervening too destructively. If we—Western middle-class environmentally conscious citizens—loosen our epistemological grip on birds, even as we learn their names, their habits, their songs, their habitats, then we might reduce the manic drive toward ownership that dominates our relations with them and much of the world. Canadian poet and nature writer Don McKay—well-known for his writing about birds—observes that ‘pieces of equipment [...] are used up in their equipmentality, unlike works of art’ (2001:57). In McKay’s poetics, the tendency to define things under the heading of utility gets disrupted during moments of breakdown: an untied shoelace, a failed yardsale, a flat tire. McKay identifies such moments as ‘wilderness’—‘not just a set of endangered spaces, but the capacity of all things to elude the mind’s appropriations’ (2001:21). Such moments are necessary ‘for us to see that tools exceed the fact of their construction and exemplify an otherness beyond human design’ (McKay 2001:57). Recognising this otherness means recognising our (mostly human) dependency on tools alongside the dangers of using tools to reveal too much of the world.

What happens if, modifying McKay’s discussion of tools in the usual sense, we think of *birds* as tools, as equipment to be used in gauging, and often celebrating, our own place in the world? How might we imagine such a formulation? Consider the way birds, both generally and specifically, get appropriated as symbols representative of the natural world, of hope, of freedom. As Alberto Manguel notes in *The Bedside Book of Birds* (Gibson 2005), birds historically serve as signs for other ideas: ‘Noah’s dove, Macbeth’s rooks, Horace’s swans, Omar Khayam’s pigeon, Theocritus’s nightingale, Count Fosco’s canaries—they are no longer birds but usages of birds, feathered with words and meaning’ (Gibson 2005:17). Consider how



some birds get used as resources, as quarry for hunters, as food for consumption, or as the basis of scientific research. Consider how birds generate revenue for tourist and birding industries, both as objects of desire and as extensions of the equipment—binoculars, scopes, camouflage, field guides—produced to make seeing and identifying them possible. ‘Even among birdwatchers’, writes Graham Gibson, ‘there are those who feel the need to possess the birds, if only symbolically’ (2005:227). But Jacklyn Cock argues that even symbolic possession can have real-world consequences when she claims that, ‘ironically, bird-watchers may be contributing to the decline of birds’ (2007:60). If we consider birds as tools, then they, too, will inevitably be used up. With 1.3 percent of birds globally having become extinct and another 12 percent threatened with extinction, such a claim exceeds merely philosophical claims (Stutchbury 2007:5). If we stop thinking of birds as tools, like an old typewriter or toaster we relegate to the attic or garage, birds might respond to our defamiliarising gesture by shifting, as McKay suggests other tools do, ‘a few degrees in the direction of art, that class of objects which are eloquent and useless’ (2001:56). What happens if we consider birds as works of art?

Works of art, particularly those that challenge conventional wisdom and perception, satisfy McKay’s criteria for wilderness, which is one reason they do not get used up like pieces of equipment. Works of art tend to get preserved in galleries and museums, in private and public collections. What would happen if we were to consider birds as works of art? Not merely to collect and display, as we do in natural history museums, but to admire and protect. We already maintain a distance between them and us through a process of othering that has become, with some exceptions (see Preece 2005), essential to our ontological status as human. So birds might resist utility, as art does, by presenting a version of the world that is *other*.

Not just bird song inheres as poetry, though; I want to push at the limits of recognising birds as poets and singers. To acknowledge birds, as French composer and ornithologist Olivier Messiaen does, as ‘not only virtuosos but artists, above all in their territorial songs’, no longer seems to test the imagination much (Deleuze & Guattari 1987:316). Messiaen might have helped normalise the characterisation of birds as musicians, and many ornithologists and ecocritics might take it for granted—but French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari push it, in their inimitable

way, beyond the mere sonic. Deleuze and Guattari discuss territorialisation's presence 'in the becoming-expressive of rhythm or melody, in other words, in the emergence of [a bird's] proper qualities (color, odor, sound, silhouette ...)' (1987:316). In other words, those qualities that enable quick identification in the field. The rhythm of shape and movement expresses a territory by delineating shifting boundaries. 'Can this becoming', Deleuze and Guattari ask, 'this emergence, be called Art? That would make the territory a result of art' (1987:316)<sup>3</sup>. Not a result of an artist, but of art. Or, a result of artist and art. A bird that uses song and colour and silhouette to mark territory makes art, and that art is himself. The body, the hollow bones, the feathers, the ecological niche—all cohere as artistic gesture, as gesture with myriad possible meanings, including those that remain inaccessible to human cognition. When birders accept their inability to access a bird in the field, then the bird's absence—from view, from understanding—manifests as a hidden but real presence.

In *The Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature*, however, Malcolm Budd writes that 'the appreciation of birdsong is free from [...] the understanding of its meaning as art' (2002:11). I appreciate Budd's focus on birdsong in his philosophical ruminations, but something in his confident declamatory tone makes me suspicious. His rhetorical use of the pronoun 'you' in passages like the one below, rankles the ecocritic and the birder in me. Not to mention the English teacher. Budd dismisses the possibility that

your delight is aesthetic only if you hear the sounds merely as patterns of sounds. On the contrary, you hear the sounds as products of [unaided] bodily actions, of 'voices', or 'whistles', or 'warbles'. But you do not hear them as intentionally determined by artistic considerations. You delight in the seemingly endless and effortless variety of a thrush's song—variations in pitch, timbre, dynamics, rhythm, and vocal attack, for example—but not as the product of artistry and not as a construction aided by consideration of its effectiveness as art (2002:11).

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<sup>3</sup> Translator Brain Massumi indicates no difference between Art and art in Deleuze and Guattari's writing. I take the difference to be that between product (Art) and process (art).

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I don't know who Malcolm Budd imagines his audience to be, but *I* certainly don't identify with his imagined *you*<sup>4</sup>. Actually, I don't think Budd's *you* exists; the language he uses is meant to articulate abstract philosophical ideas about concrete human experiences. That he avoids positing himself as subject in his scenario about listening to birdsong speaks volumes about how certain methodologies presume standard aesthetic experiences. Even if I were to accept Budd's argument—assuming art by definition requires reflexive intentionality—I fail to be convinced by his presumption that birds themselves cannot be considered works of art.

Canadian poet and translator Robert Bringhurst writes against such presumptions, arguing that 'Poetry is not manmade; it is not pretty words; it is not something hybridised by humans on the farm of human language. Poetry is a quality or aspect of existence. It is the thinking of things' (2002:155). This description supports the idea that birds are poets when they sing their songs; it also supports my reading of birds *as* poetry, as art. But what does such a reading imply in regard to the conservation of birds and their habitats? I'm not suggesting arts grants to help hadda ibises through lean times; but a paradigm shift might change the relation between humans and birds for the better. More distance, less proximity. More dialogue, less deforestation. Maybe I'm looking idealistically for a poetic genre such as natural history to act as a salve against prosaic science and policy narratives, which seem to have brought us too close to the physical world too quickly. Maybe I'm looking for a form of writing about the physical world that aims for proximity while maintaining a respectful, even healthful, distance, and thus encourages a reading of the world as complex artistry we can interpret

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<sup>4</sup> Budd's position might be considered akin to the concept of the Aeolian harp, which suggests the sounds of Nature (birdsong included) pass through a human voice to proclaim the eminence of human experience. McKay addresses this Romantic concept, arguing that 'Aeolian harpism relieves us of our loneliness as a species, reconnects to the natural world, restores a coherent reality' (2001:27-28). As a response to the way that Romanticism thus 'ends in the celebration of the creative [human] imagination in and for itself' (McKay 2001:28), McKay suggests as an alternative 'poetic attention [which] is based on a recognition and a valuing of the other's wilderness' (2001:28).

and discuss and protect. ‘The library was here before we were’, writes Bringhurst: ‘We live in it. We can add to it, or we can try; we can also subtract from it. We can chop it down, incinerate it, strip mine it, poison it, bury it under our trash. But we didn’t create it, and if we destroy it, we cannot replace it’ (2002:160). Bringhurst’s metaphor of the world as prehistoric library draws a clear distinction between art created by humans (in the conventional sense) and art created by other-than-humans. Unlike Budd, who does not allow for this distinction in his aesthetic philosophy, Bringhurst argues for ecological conservation on grounds of artistic, as distinct from aesthetic, merit. Negotiating the tension between distance and proximity, between absence and presence while birding represents one way to pay homage to the library<sup>5</sup>. Birding and writing—whether field notes or poetry—invite closer attention without the need to see fully and to determine whether a species or a biome holds value for humans.

## **Absence as Extinction: Hardy & McKay**

Three lovely notes he whistled, too soft to be heard  
If others sang; but others never sang  
In the great beech-wood all that May and June.  
No one saw him: I alone could hear him  
Though many listened. Was it but four years  
Ago? or five? He never came again (Thomas 2004:145).

Thomas Hardy’s short lyric ‘Wagtail and Baby’ (2004:76) achieves much with its formally conventional and conceptually quotidian tale. Hardy presents a series of encounters between a diminutive wagtail drinking in a ford and four different mammals: a bull, a horse, a dog, and a man. The baby watches through innocent eyes as the wagtail negotiates each of his significantly larger counterparts in turn. Not one of these formidable animals poses a threat to the wagtail as he drinks and preens in a ford. Hardy employs language that describes each animal’s essential qualities without naming

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<sup>5</sup> For more on McKay’s project of paying homage to bird song, see Mason (2008).

them explicitly, foregrounding the disparity between bird and mammal by noting the respect each shows the other: 'A blaring bull' wades through while 'The wagtail show[s] no shrinking'; 'A stallion splash[es]' frenetically, yet the bird responds to 'nearly sinking' with a matter-of-fact 'twitch and toss'; and a dog 'slowly slink[s]' around the ford but fails to cause the bird's languid, canny gaze to falter. In short, Hardy composes an ecology of discretely consilient forces. He simultaneously notes the differences between wagtail and others and demonstrates how proximity can enhance their similarities.

But when a 'perfect gentlemen' approaches, the distance between bird and man reaches a crescendo. The slightest hint of proximity causes the wagtail to rise 'in a winking / With terror' and to disappear from view. The man is clearly a different animal here. He is not likely to use the ford for anything other than crossing to the other side, though a perfect gentleman might rather find a bridge or transportation to avoid getting wet. Nevertheless the wagtail's experience tells him that terror and flight represent his best chance of survival. Many a gentleman, after all, has been known to shoot birds from afar with as little compunction as if it were merely distance he were shooting down in his quest for proximity. Gentlemen like John James Audubon. But the wagtail doesn't simply take flight at the man's approach. He *disappears*. Disappearance portends an ultimate unbridgeable distance. The wagtail's disappearance augurs not so well for the fate of birds more generally. The wagtail's *rising* action coupled with the baby's *falling* action at the end of the poem reinforces a distance that is more likely to endanger the planet than help it. That the baby only falls 'a-thinking' rescues the poem from complete despair.

I'm not sure I can say the same about Don McKay's poem 'In Aornis' (2006:66), published approximately a century after 'Wagtail and Baby.' I am tempted to call McKay's poem 'speculative lyric' for the way it imagines a post-avian world in verse. The distance between bird and human far exceeds that depicted in Hardy's poem. Hardy's repetitive *-ing* sounds imbue 'Wagtail and Baby' with a hopeful sense of forward momentum despite the sombre note on which it ends. That final 'thinking' gestures toward the possibility of reducing the portentous dangers implied by massive distance. By contrast, McKay's use of negative words and suffixes reinforces unrecoverable distance as extinction. So much in Aornis is *not*, is *un*. The

prospect of utter loss resonates in frightening ways throughout the poem. Aornis translates, as the poem's speaker tells us, as 'birdless land'. This is a land whose 'uninflected sky extends / like rhetoric to the horizon', as if the landscape itself were defined by the presence of birds. Bushes and trees still contain tangles, but they are not nests; the wind still carries flying objects, but they are not birds. They are machines presumably controlled by humans, but not necessarily. It seems Aornis is birdless *and* humanless land. It seems McKay is suggesting that the absence of birds indicates bad times ahead for people, as well. Humans exist in the poem as spectres: if not flying those machines, we are presumably responsible for their construction; if not present in the landscape proper, we are at least remembered by one of the branches that 'now and then' shrugs to 'shed its load' of snow. Likewise, and more to the point, the single mention of a specific bird resonates like an echo in an empty room. The branches—and note the double negative sound—'know / no junco will descend to instigate / the tiny blizzard like a sneeze / which frees them.' This is a nightmare version of what Hardy's baby falls a-thinking. A world in which birds are present only as fading boreal memories and where absence manifests in calm, matter-of-fact tones. The 'unsung sun, / it turns out, comes up anyway' while flying machines ride like cyborg Icaruses on the empty wind.

That image of the wind being ridden by machines instead of birds hints suggestively at a Heideggerian critique of technology. As the only human product in the poem—unless we consider the absence of birds as something we will have produced—these flying machines represent the most direct way humans have used birds. The science that informs aerodynamics and the engineering technology that enables powered flight both rely upon knowledge of bird physiology and biology. This is one way we have posited birds as tools in the Enlightenment narrative called progress.

## Attending (to) Absence: De Kok and McKay

Bird, thy form I never looked on,  
And to see it do not care (Howitt 2004:141).

Ingrid de Kok and Don McKay have each written a poem about a different sort of birdless land. In both De Kok's 'Wattle-eyes' (2006:28) and McKay's

'Pine Siskins' (2006:64), the eponymous birds appear only in name; the birds themselves remain physically absent from view. De Kok's speaker finds this absence disheartening at first, evidence both of her lack of birding skill and of her companions' colonial affinities with Victorian explorers. While her companions 'stalk[...] the drizzle' with poised binoculars, the speaker trails 'myopically behind / displaying a slouching, unfit jizz'. The language in these opening lines emphasises sight as the primary grammar of this expedition: these explorers are bird-*watching*. Or trying to. They are almost *willing* the bird to appear, an arrogant gesture which causes the speaker to distrust their sighting of 'the wattle-eyed flycatcher in the tangled bush / that after two hours showed its apparently / luminous, tiny, shy eye'. Though obviously frustrated that she does not see the bird, the speaker makes seeing and appearances the focus of her poem; she is clearly inspired by the flycatcher's evocative designation as wattle-*eyed* and by her companions' desire *to see*. She also describes herself in visual terms as myopic and displaying an unfit jizz. To display is a peculiarly avian act, as well; and jizz refers to the gestalt of a species, the characteristic shape, colour, and behaviours that enable quick identification in the field. That De Kok's speaker describes herself in avian terms complicates her identification as a bad bird-watcher while implicating birds in artistic creation. The final strophe verifies the speaker's distrust of her companions and completes her identification with the eponymous bird. She refers to the sighting as a gift they gave themselves and reiterates the link to Victorian-era discipline; she reads this gift, in turn, as 'a rebuke' to her 'wattle-eyed and hooded sight', a signal that she has not been admitted to the club, as it were. But the object of her frustration seems to have shifted in the end. Somehow in *not* having seen, the poet achieves an ontological status that resists connotations of colonial exploration and 'disciplined delight'. De Kok does not clarify why this should be the case. By identifying with the bird, is she suggesting that he, too, has suffered a rebuke by these bird-watchers? Does the rage for proximity and presence somehow endanger or insult the absent and distant wattle-eye? De Kok's speaker does not say. But her emphasis on vision in a poem that doubts the veracity of a bird sighting implies that absence can perhaps be a valid, albeit distant presence.

McKay's speaker, by contrast, accepts the visual absence of the pine siskins as a comfortable distance between himself and the birds. He knows

birders cannot will birds to appear in the bush any more than poets can will words to appear on the page. Each requires patience and an attentive readiness. The speaker of “Pine Siskins” writes self-consciously as what I call a birder-poet, an observer who cultivates a mode of attention that is helpful in the field and at the desk<sup>6</sup>. This mode of attention typically impels the birder-poet into closer proximity by encouraging familiarity with bird names and ecologies; it also stresses the importance of recognising and maintaining distance between observers and observed.

The poem begins with a version of visual absence. But McKay’s attention does not rely upon sight alone: ‘Unseen in the pines the pine siskins / are unlocking the seeds from the pine cones, click / click click’. These negative prefixes do not have the same effect as they do in ‘In Aornis’. Here they indicate avian agency and intelligence—the birds exist beyond the birder’s field of view and eat their meal as if unlocking the secrets of life. In their absence they provide the birder-poet with material to write about, namely the husks from the pine cones they are consuming and the patterns they create as they fall. The chaff that ‘freckles the air, / the lawns, the parked cars, / and the notebook’ in the poet’s lap enters the notebook as ‘fallout’ and ‘dross’ and ‘dun-coloured memos from entropy’ (McKay 2006:64). Each description invokes the energy exchange taking place in the pines, the clicks that release the protein to keep the siskins warm and that deliver the unwanted waste, no longer filled with potential heat, to gravity and the earth below. Midway through the poem, the speaker abruptly halts his metaphorical musings, as if to prevent himself from overwriting and writing over the pine siskins. He reminds in the poem’s second half that birds are cultural beings who play and make music. Unseen in the pines,

the siskins party on, now and then  
erupting into siskin song — upswept  
ardent buzzes, part  
wolf whistle, part raspberry, part Charles Ives’  
“Unanswered Question”:  
tragic-comic operas crammed  
into their opening arpeggia (sic) (McKay 2006:64).

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<sup>6</sup> This figure is central to my doctoral work on McKay’s avian poetics (Mason 2007b). See also Cook (2006) and Elmslie (2006).



The speaker explains siskin song with a complexity typically reserved for describing Mozart concertos or Thelonious Monk performances. But it seems to be a complexity humans are not entirely capable of comprehending. The tragic-comic aspect is easy enough to understand—we are in many ways an ironical species willing to appreciate the come-hither qualities of wolf-whistle that get undermined by the pejorative, childish raspberry. But we might have difficulty comprehending how these competing sounds come together as a full opera ‘crammed into’ an opening arpeggio. It’s a little like trying to imagine an entire novel stuffed into its first sentence. Of course, humans are physiologically incapable of hearing birdsong as birds hear it. For that we need advanced recording and playback equipment. How’s that for irony? Just as the poet’s attention does not rely on sight alone, however, so his rendering of the siskin song does not rely on sound alone. The siskins’ operatic performance comprises their song and their opening act—eating seeds—so that they become not just singers but song. The way they *erupt* into song, which the speaker describes as *ardent* buzzes, completes the energy transfer begun in the first lines. They eat in order to sing; they sing in order to live. At least that’s what evolutionary theory implies—some questions remain unanswered.

Based on my readings of these four poems, relations between humans and birds have been one-sided affairs. Because despite our supposed aesthetic appreciation of nature, we tend to ignore the artistic qualities of non-humans. Instead we exploit what we can for our own gain. We might acknowledge birdsong as pretty or as nostalgic. But we seldom admit avian musical achievement that compares to our own. Bringham articulates one difference between human and bird song, which goes some way to revealing the consequences of such arrogance: ‘If the proportion of individual creation in human song is greater than in birdsong, that’s no cause for pride, though it may be very good cause for excitement. What it means is that nature and culture both are at greater risk from us than they are from birds’ (163). The siskins in McKay’s poem are complex collective works of art. And as such they should compel us to fall, like Hardy’s pensive baby, a-thinking. I think McKay’s birder-poet gestures toward a viable response to our complicity in extinction—namely, embracing an absence that resembles the distance between a work of art and our capacity to let it elude our minds’ appropriations.

## Penguins in Oil: Whittington and ‘Peter’

This may not be art’s last word, but art went that route, as did the bird: motifs and counterpoints that form an autodevelopment, in other words, a style (Deleuze & Guattari 1987:319).

What does all this mean with respect to actual birds living in actual territories? How might an understanding of birds as works of art alter an understanding of specific birds in a specific place? I want to shift my focus to the ongoing plight of African penguins (*Spheniscus demersus*) endemic to Southern Africa’s coast by way of offering a case study in support of my thought experiment. According to reports, ‘Low-level oiling events occur nearly continuously’ (Wolfaardt 2001:45). The most recent major oil spill to affect South Africa occurred on 23 June 2000. The *Treasure* spill affected nearly 40 000 African penguins: over 19 000 were oiled on Robben and Dassen Islands, and ‘a further 19 500 unoiled penguins were collected’ and ‘evacuated to Cape Recife in the Eastern Cape, to prevent them from being oiled’ (Wolfaardt 2001:45). The *Treasure* spill also sets the stage for Part Two of *The Adventures of Peter the Penguin*—Peter is one of the penguins evacuated<sup>7</sup>. Phil Whittington, who wrote the book while completing his PhD in statistical sciences from the University of Cape Town’s Avian Demography Unit (ADU), provides a narrative following the ‘adventures’ of a penguin many South Africans came to know as Peter. Peter and two other penguins, named Percy and Pamela, featured in media reports following clean-up efforts. Each of the alliteratively named penguins was fitted with a satellite tracking device designed to transmit data to a website associated with the ADU. Unlike Percy and Pamela, though, Peter was never found, his transmitter—which communicated his return to Robben Island—never recovered.

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<sup>7</sup> In Part One, Peter actually gets oiled, only to be rescued by a passing ornithologist who takes him to the SANCCOB rescue centre in Cape Town. While determining the book’s temporal logic is a bit difficult, this early oil spill is likely from the *Apollo Sea*, a bulk iron-ore carrier that sank off Dassen Island on 20 June 1994 (Wolfaardt 2001:45).

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This strange phenomenon offers an interesting example of absence as presence: despite efforts to bring Peter into greater proximity, he remains ineluctably distant, inexorably penguin. I am not interested in analysing *The Adventures of Peter the Penguin* as a work of fiction; nor do I want to question the scientific and conservationist value of the ADU and the Southern African Foundation for the Conservation of Coastal Birds (SANCCOB). Rather, I want to examine the distal and proximal qualities that biologists sometimes demonstrate, which Whittington expresses when he writes that ‘Peter helps us to discover what it feels like to be an African penguin’ (2001:82). At least two Peters appear in Whittington’s book, and I’m not entirely certain which one he claims helps us (nor to whom ‘us’ refers). The passage I’ve just quoted introduces Part Three, ‘The Serious Bit’ that follows the story proper. Peter, then, is a metonym for all the African penguins SANCCOB members have rescued and/or studied. This is an example of proximity in the service of conservation. Except that in this case, the proximal bird has been made present in a fictional sense to make up for his physical absence.

So, why make Peter, the one that effectively got away, the star of his own book? What is it about Peter’s absence that makes his story the preferred one to inform readers about the wonders of penguin biology/ecology and the dangers of oil spills? Perhaps, like De Kok and McKay, Whittington is interrogating the rage for proximity by highlighting human failure. He portrays biologists in the book—metonyms for humans, surely—as imperfect clowns who keep getting bitten by frightened and sanctimonious penguins. ‘In torn tee-shirts, jeans, leather gloves and gumboots’, the narrator observes as some biologists approach, ‘they looked a mean gang of desperadoes’ (Whittington 2001:26). Such a characterisation does little more than offer readers a chance to laugh at figures who might otherwise be considered quite scary and violent. Children love a buffoon, don’t they, especially when adults fill the role. My main point of contention with the book—which is otherwise a well-intentioned effort to engage young minds in environmental issues—is that Whittington stops short of examining the complexity of human-penguin (biologist-Peter) relations. Peter is portrayed as a naïve youngster who alternately suffers in one oil spill and benefits from preventive measures put in place by SANCCOB in the wake of the *Treasure* spill. *The Adventures of Peter the Penguin*, for all its biological

accuracy and ‘serious’ agenda, ultimately acts as a justification for the activities of SANCCOB and similar organisations. By casting Peter in this story about the importance of maintaining conservation efforts, Whittington finally succeeds where his colleagues failed—namely, in capturing Peter and putting him to use. Knowingly or not, Whittington ensures that Peter fulfils his usefulness to SANCCOB. Unable to glean data from his tracking device, Whittington instead deploys language and illustrations (by Fred Mouton) to wrest as much use as possible out of the Penguin name Peter.

However, by turning Peter the Penguin into a fictional character—effectively a work of art—Whittington poses some challenges to my argument thus far. What happens if we consider birds as works of art unselfconsciously? Let me answer with a question from Heidegger: ‘What is a plant and animal to us anymore, when we take away use, embellishment, and entertainment?’ (1999:194). In the case of *Peter the Penguin*, his construction as entertainment reclaims his usefulness, which he took away himself by eluding capture and remaining visually absent yet physically present. But entertainment is not necessarily art, and I think Whittington’s Peter avoids the latter even as he inhabits the South African imagination as the former. Consider, for example, that by avoiding capture, Peter is also avoiding getting ‘pink stuff on [his] feathers’ as Percy does (Whittington 2001:77). ‘Once Percy’s satellite tracker had been removed,’ Whittington recounts in ‘The Serious Bit’, ‘some bright-pink dye was *painted on him* so that scientists [...] could find him easily’ (2001:91 e.a.). If painting a penguin in this manner does not quite mark an attempt to turn him into a work of art, the practice might usefully be viewed in terms of Deleuze and Guattari’s territorialisation and deterritorialisation. By avoiding being painted by the scientists, Peter is in fact expressing his characteristics as a work of art rather than as a signboard meant to appropriate his body. He maintains ‘rhythm’, the colours that are ‘associated with interior hormonal states’ (Deleuze & Guattari 1987:315), which represents the territorializing factor.

Avian artistry resides in each bird’s ‘jizz’, what Deleuze and Guattari call rhythm or melody (though it need not be musical in the conventional sense). Moreover, ‘The discovery of [...] the properly rhythmic character marks the moment of art when it ceases to be a silent painting on a signboard’ (Deleuze & Guattari 1987:319). In spite of SANCCOB’s efforts

to find Peter and retrieve ‘their’ data, and in spite of Whittington’s imagined capture of the elusive bird, Peter refuses to be ‘a silent painting on a signboard’. His encounter with pink Percy at the end of the book only reinforces his refusal. The real Peter—that is, the individual penguin fitted with a tracking device and released from captivity following the *Treasure* oil spill—remains distant amid all efforts at rendering him proximal, and thus useful. He remains, thus, a work of art: distant, ‘eloquent and useless’ (McKay 2001:56).

## **Penguins in Verse: Cronin and Miller**

[N]ature poetry should not be taken to be *avoiding* anthropocentrism, but to be enacting it, thoughtfully (McKay 2001:29).

Most of what Deleuze and Guattari have to say about distance in their work on the refrain pertains to beings of the same species, beings that are likely to jockey for territorial positioning. ‘The territory’, which they describe as a melodic refrain such as the singing of male wrens or the spraying of felines, ‘is first of all the critical distance between two beings of the same species’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1987:319). Distance in this case is a necessary component of subjectivity: ‘What is mine is first of all my distance; I possess only distances’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1987:319). Between beings of different species, the distance resounds in obvious ways as physiological rather than rhythmic or melodic difference. In ‘Penguins’ (2006:52-54), Jeremy Cronin attempts to bridge this distance, offering a strained set of relations between humanity and penguins.

Cronin’s poem poses questions about possible homologies between penguins and humans in a confessional, free-verse style that attends to his role as poet and as politician. For ecocritic Julia Martin, this duality is central to Cronin’s poetry: ‘Multiple visions, or seeing from different places, is after all, one of the things that some of us sentient beings do rather well. Herons, for example, and flamingoes’ (2007:74). And penguins. Indeed, the poem’s ultimate question, which Cronin poses parenthetically, can easily extend to both poets and politicians: ‘People are starving, why give a damn

about birds?’ (2006:54)<sup>8</sup>. The question implies a common resistance to environmental concern by those—politicians, poets, academics, and laypeople alike—who isolate social ills. By posing the question, Cronin implies, quite rightly I think, that concern for social health and concern for environmental health are not mutually exclusive. Unfortunately, his version of an answer relies, much as Whittington’s narrative does, on essentialist notions of penguin-human relations, effectively rendering ‘penguins’ as proxy humans.

I admit to placing a perhaps unfair burden on Cronin’s poem. My critique, though, should not be taken as an attempt to dismiss works of art that fail to meet the criteria that I have set out as important for considering birds *qua* birds. My concern is with how the poem’s aesthetic qualities—word choice, cadence, tone—communicate intentionally or not a position vis-à-vis an (avian) aesthetic of (avian) absence, such as I discuss in the essay’s opening pages. Poets cannot, of course, avoid anthropocentrism, as Don McKay notes in the epigraph to this section, but they should attempt to enact it thoughtfully (2001:29) if they are willing to address environmental concerns and humans’ complicity in ecological crises. As a result of what I see as not-so-thoughtful anthropocentrism in ‘Penguins’, the poem never really rises above the author’s anthropomorphic designs, which see in

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<sup>8</sup> I borrow the idea of homology in this context from Susan Fisher as a way to identify a relation between penguins and people that exists beyond the symbolic and implies a biological (evolutionary) link. Fisher develops this notion in an essay about McKay’s bird poetry. Homology, in Fisher’s reading, represents ‘a subtler form of comparison’ that relies upon similarities evident among species with common ancestors, for example bone structure among mammals (Fisher 2007:57). ‘Whereas metaphor presents a similarity that is an artefact of poetry’, Fisher writes, ‘homology presents similarities that are the product of evolution, the result of shared genetic history’ (2007:57). So, homology enables McKay and by extension Cronin to write about birds ‘without the distancing tropes of analogy, metaphor, or simile’ (2007:57). The proximity afforded by homology in a poetic context recognises birds as works of art fashioned by genetic mutation and time, but it is a proximity that threatens to collapse distance altogether if not handled with sufficient knowledge of homology’s scientific basis.

penguins an opportunity—again, like Whittington—to reify the apparently contradictory, and exemplary, meeting of nature and culture in humans. A concern for birds that manifests in recognition of what Martin identifies as their multiplicity, that is, seems to justify attempts to have herons and penguins stand in for people.

‘Penguins’ comprises three brief sections. The first addresses penguins—as ‘you’—in earnest homage to their amphibious life on land and in water. In the first half of part one, Cronin describes penguins in stereotypical fashion:

Waddle, bray away  
Shuffle down your dune  
Grunt, grunt again  
Head looming over tummy  
Short-sightedly to check  
On your own clown-footed step (2006:52).

On land these creatures elicit descriptions that focus on their awkward locomotion and harsh voice<sup>9</sup>—in short, their clownish appearance and movement. Cronin’s depiction implies a silliness that reflects in these opening lines’ bathetic rhyming, alliteration, and cadences, and continues in the glib, punning description of the birds’ inexplicably ‘bandaged wings’ unwinding their ‘sheer // Flippery’ (2006:52). This flippery—at once frippery and flippancy—signals a shift from clownish waddle to ‘porpoise-like’ swimming that brings

the ocean’s immense, in short  
Orchestra  
Speechless  
... to hush (2006:52).

—a marked difference from the barely pedestrian penguin on land. The transition is meant to be as sudden as a penguin slipping—‘flopping’ in

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<sup>9</sup> Until recently, African penguins were called Jackass penguins because of the braying sound to which Cronin refers.

Cronin's terms—from rocky shore into wavy sea. Were the poem to end there, I might have been convinced by the awkward language and phrasing as playful homage to a creature well-known to many South Africans. But the following two sections render the opening as mere metaphorical set-up for a contemplation of a potential homology between penguins and humans. The poem ends up being more about the speaker, and humans in general, than about the eponymous birds.

Only in the final section do I recognise an idea augmented by the language of and politics behind the poem. After a middle section in which the speaker wonders if the penguins retain a 'weak vestige of [the] in-built capacity' to hear an alarm clock 'a shade / Of a second before it actually goes off' (2006:53), the speaker asks his listener to 'Imagine these words dropped off in remote bays / Swimming with uncanny instinct / Towards the end of a poem' (2006:54). This shift in focus to the poet's words—language itself, not the humans who speak it—is in keeping with Cronin's interest in poetry and politics. By imagining words in place of penguins, though, Cronin effectively makes the birds described in the poem's first section—albeit in clichéd terms—disappear. Abandoning the penguins in the final section belies what the speaker identifies in this section as his 'fascination for penguins', a fascination he admits can be 'Easily dismissed' by, presumably, those non-environmentalists to whom he silently attributes the rhetorical question 'People are starving, why give a damn about birds?' (2006:54). The presence of the question, if not its parenthetical placement, lays bare what Cronin hopes to accomplish with the poem. A poet's interest in, or fascination with birds needn't detract from his humanitarian efforts. Poetry, after all, traffics in symbolism and metaphor, in saying what is not strictly true in order to get at a truth or set of truths worth pondering in the eyes of the poet. But even this claim, at least as it pertains to an appreciation of birds, raises questions about how interest in (and fascination with) birds translates into their conservation.

In *The War Against Ourselves: Nature, Power and Justice*, sociologist Jacklyn Cock wonders about the extent to which a fascination for birds is capable of helping birds, let alone people by metaphorical and ecological extension: 'Is the growing appreciation of birds enough when birds all over the world are facing unprecedented threats to their survival from factors such as climate change, population pressures, habitat



destruction, the loss of traditional feeding and nesting grounds, persecution through hunting and the massive use of pesticides' (2005:57)? Despite some successful breeding years following the *Treasure* spill—thanks in large part to the efforts of SANCCOB—after a 90% decrease in their population during the twentieth century, the African penguin is still listed as vulnerable by the World Conservation Union (Crawford and Dyer 2000:7). Cronin's poem does not offer a response to such a quandary, despite indicating a fascination for penguins. In the end, his 'words want / To splash, home' like penguins while wondering, like a poet, whether it is wrong 'To feel wonder // For penguins' (2001:54). The question, as Cock implies, has little to do with right or wrong and much to do with adequate or inadequate responses to the crisis.

Unlike 'Heron's Place' (2006:47-48), a poem that appears in the same collection and which Martin suggests 'ends with the affirmation of a kind of [...] practice of vigilance, locatedness, specificity' (2008:73), 'Penguins' ends with a claim about the poet's fascination 'seeking / some hint of compassion in chaos / In this too often cynical place with its oil spills / And nature's alarm clocks going off' (2006:54). The vagueness of the language echoes the poem's lack of direction, its inability to swim home successfully from the realm of dreams. Whereas 'Heron's Place' 'is about the intimate, wakeful, situated knowledge of place' (Martin 2005:73), 'Penguins' eschews such specificity: 'this place' could be anywhere in the Southern hemisphere where penguins live; penguins themselves might as well be people; and the recurring image of nature's alarm clock fails to signify anything beyond a vague set of crises that, I suppose, Cronin feels people should wake up to and initiate action against. The poem leaves me feeling quite literally bereft of engagement with penguins as birds or as art—in short, as living beings worthy of my attention, conservationist and otherwise.

Ruth Miller demonstrates nearly half a century earlier than Cronin how to 'feel wonder for penguins' without marginalizing them and reifying the written word. With 'Penguin on the Beach' (1990:35-36), Miller has written a poem that encourages a respectful distance between penguins and people even as she acknowledges the necessity of conservation efforts. From the title, the difference between Miller's and Cronin's poems appears clear: whereas Cronin conflates all penguins in his poem with humans, Miller focuses her attention on a specific penguin in a specific place (even if she

does not name the place<sup>10</sup>). This penguin on the beach, however, has been made a 'Stranger in his own element', a 'Sea-casualty' and 'castaway manikin' because of the oil that 'Has spread a deep commercial stain / Over his downy shirt front' (1990:35). Note that Miller does not refrain from evoking stereotypical images of penguins. Her penguin 'Waddles in his tailored coat-tails' and his shirt gets stained (1990:35). The difference between Miller's anthropomorphism and Whittington's and Cronin's is critical and ironical. Whereas the two contemporary writers seek to bring penguins closer to human experience, Miller uses anthropomorphic language to chastise readers, to distance us from the bird we so easily and carelessly read as a clown in a tuxedo. This seemingly innocuous reading, Miller argues, has played a hand in the suffering the penguin in her poem experiences. In the first five lines, Miller dispenses with the notion of clichéd penguins occupying the realm of art while critiquing their position as tools for human use.

The oil on this penguin 'clogs the sleekness' that to Cronin only manifests while the birds are under water (Miller 1990:35). For Miller, words, particularly clichés, function much as oil does to endanger the penguin, a starkly different role from the words Cronin wants to become penguins. This distinction imbues Miller's poem with pathos and paradox: it is a poem about the dangers of human behaviour, including language, rich with linguistic adroitness and beauty. Miller's words, ironically, and not Cronin's resemble the penguins about whom both write. Through Miller's words, the eponymous penguin 'recall[s] the past, to be so cautious' of the '[s]leazy, grey' slick infecting his water and beach (1990:35). Here, the poet's description is in keeping with ornithologist Bob Rand's observations of penguins following an oil spill in 1952. Les Underhill quotes Rand, who claimed that 'Soiled penguins died on the beaches or lingered on the islands to perish of hunger. Where nesting birds were affected, chicks also died. No matter how small the contamination, the birds refused to take to the water' (Underhill 2001). This refusal to enter the water, this caution, robs the penguins of their characteristic ambivalence, prevents them from expressing

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<sup>10</sup> While it is tempting to imagine that 'Penguin on the Beach' was inspired by the major oil spill that occurred near Cape Town in May, 1968 (a few months prior to publication of *Selected Poems*), the poem first appeared in *Floating Island* (1965).

their melody or rhythm, in Deleuze and Guattari's terms. This loss leads to their death, individually, and ultimately might lead to their extinction. Miller's depiction points an accusing finger after inviting readers to take a closer look:

Watch him step into the waves. He shudders  
Under the froth; slides, slips, on the wet sand,

Escaping to dryness, dearth, in a white cascade,  
An involuntary shouldering off of gleam.  
Hands push him back into the sea. He stands

In pained and silent expostulation (1990:36).

Shuddering in the water and shivering to remove the frothy gleam back on dry land betray a coldness that penguins do not naturally experience when their plumage is in good shape<sup>11</sup>. Oiling prevents penguins from insulating themselves against the frigid temperatures of the two oceans they inhabit. Knowing this, biologists are often able to clean oiled birds successfully—though the long-term success is still not known for certain—and, as in the case of SANCCOB's response to the *Treasure* spill, evacuate birds before they have a chance to be oiled.

The human presence in this poem, which makes its first appearance as 'Hands push[ing]' the penguin 'back into the sea' in the lines above, represents a shocking indictment. To whom do these hands belong, and why are they attempting to force the oiled penguin into the sea? One answer lies in the caution with which the penguin, we are told, perceives the waves, a caution learned from past experience. The shudder and shiver, then, is not the physiological response of an oiled bird, but a psychological response of a previously oiled bird. Miller's penguin is back on the beach, it seems, after having been rescued and cleaned by caring hands. His 'pained and silent expostulation' (Miller 1990:36) indicates just how deep the stain on his coat has been, regardless of the successful de-oiling. It also reminds of Peter the

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<sup>11</sup> Unlike most birds, penguins cease foraging for food while moulting, so important is a healthy coat of feathers. See 'News from the ADU' (2007/2008:52).

Penguin eluding capture, both literally (by evading biologists tracking his position on Robben Island) and figuratively (by resisting Whittington's attempts to turn him into a caricature). The moment when the penguin on the beach turns to stand in silent expostulation echoes 'the moment of art when it ceases to be a silent painting on a signboard' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987:319). His characteristic jizz now comprises shuddering 'from the clean flinching wave' (Miller 1990:36). Moreover, in a move that indicates his resistance to being made into either a tool or a work of art—in a move that marks Miller's discomfort with her role as artist/poet—the penguin:

Turns and plods back up the yellow sand,  
Ineffably wary, triumphantly sad.

He is immensely wise: he trusts nobody. His senses  
Are clogged with experience. He eats  
Fish from his Saviour's hands, and it tastes black (1990:36).

Words, Miller seems to suggest, lack the capacity to express the penguin's state between wariness and triumph. The wisdom he has gleaned from unfortunate experience, immense as the ocean he used to call home, subsumes his ability to trust as the image of 'Oil on sea, / Green slicks, back lassos of sludge' consume the thoughts in his 'head's small knoll' (Miller 1990:36). The penguin's 'Saviour', likely an early incarnation of a SANCCOB volunteer and thus full of good intentions, can do nothing but recapitulate the trauma suffered by this penguin. After rescuing, cleaning, returning, and feeding the oiled penguin, the volunteer's hands can offer nothing more than black-tasting fish.

Miller deploys the synecdoche in scrupulous fashion: she is not aiming to criticise the individual humans whose knowledge and efforts save penguin lives—nor, for that matter, am I—but rather a particular set of human behaviours. The decision to portray the human in the poem as 'hands' is enough to make her indictment clear. No matter the clean-up and rescue efforts of well-intentioned scientists and volunteers, humans are collectively responsible for the oiling of penguins (and other marine life). The association is one that the penguin on the beach has difficulty getting past; it is one that Miller makes difficult for readers to ignore. If Hardy's observant baby were

around to witness the scene Miller describes, he would be in his late sixties and, assuming his thoughtfulness continued into later life, would fall a-thinking yet again. No doubt he would be reminded of that diminutive wagtail making a statement about humanity by disappearing from view. Unlike that wagtail, though, the penguin—though de-oiled and potentially able to continue life as before—is unable to disappear. He remains caught between the sea that used to define half his life and humanity, which is responsible for both his suffering and his (precarious) survival. The longer he remains visible on the beach, unable or unwilling to trust the sea again, the more difficult it is to imagine him as a work of art such as the pine siskins in McKay's poem or the elusive African penguin named Peter. If he could disappear often enough, he might just be able to thrive as a work of art whose use-value to humans is negligible: a bird whose absence enables him to remain eloquently present.

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# ‘The long wait for the angel’: Sylvia Plath’s ‘Black Rook in Rainy Weather’

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## Abstract

Sylvia Plath’s poetry is at times tortuous: she practiced her craft with deliberacy and seriousness, and the complexity and difficulty of her life is often painfully registered in her writing. Yet her poetry at times also reflects a *joie de vivre* that enlivens and responds with whimsy and humour to these travails. In ‘Black Rook in Rainy Weather’ we see something of this: her experimenting with form in order to render a response to a particular instance of the natural world; the rook that is *arrivant*, that is harbinger of fleeting meeting. What is most arresting in this, my favourite of her poems, is her tone: the tongue-in-cheek sass of her relation with the bird and the context which casts it up in a sublime light.

Keywords: Sylvia Plath, Rooks, representation, *arrivant*, suspension of disbelief.

Sylvia Plath, who must stand as one of the more important women writers of the last century, is also a poet of rather unfortunate renown. Her marriage to the British poet Ted Hughes ended in heartbreak, and she committed suicide in 1963 at the age of 31, leaving behind two small children and an *oeuvre* of intense and powerful poetry. Following the birth of her second child, especially, her writing entered a phase of profuse output and arresting quality, and in the last weeks of her life she was writing three or four accomplished poems a day. Intense and tortured as these later works may be, her entire *oeuvre* is remarkable for its craftsmanship. It is also often characterised by a self-awareness, a sense of wry humour that is very engaging. Of them all, it is one of her earlier poems that is my favourite, perhaps because it accommodates the free play of such wit; perhaps because



it demonstrates a sense of the natural, and of its speaker's relation to the natural, that is in line with the emerging green consciousness of the last few decades. In the brief study that follows, I wish to offer a close reading of this poem, prefaced by a brief consideration of two others she wrote on the same subject to supply a comparative context.

A rook, according to the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, is a 'gregarious crow with black plumage and a bare face, nesting in colonies in treetops'. The origin of its name is 'Old English hroc, probably imitative and of Germanic origin'. Widespread throughout Britain, Asia, and Europe, this common bird has a few outstanding characteristics. One is gregariousness: it nests communally in rookeries that can accommodate up to 65 000 birds. It is omnivorous, and has the habit of digging into the ground in search of insects; it also has the adaptive intelligence to bury food for consumption later. During courtship, the male engages in ritual display and may feed his female before mating with her. A member of the crow family, the rook also figures in folklore: the sudden desertion of a rookery is said to be a bad omen for the landowner; and rooks are believed to be able to predict rain, and to smell approaching death<sup>1</sup>.

Since much of Plath's poetry is inspired by or responsive to the natural world around her, it is intriguing to see which qualities of rooks she emphasises in the three poems she writes about them—and which she doesn't. It is also intriguing to see how her representation of rooks works to shape and position the consciousness of her speaker in each case.

### **'Winter Landscape, with Rooks'**

'Winter Landscape, with Rooks' appears as the second poem in the 1956 section of the *Collected Poems*.

Water in the millrace, through a sluice of stone,  
    plunges headlong into that black pond  
where, absurd and out-of-season, a single swan  
    floats chaste as snow, taunting the clouded mind  
which hungers to haul the white reflection down.

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<sup>1</sup> Information from [www.arkive.com](http://www.arkive.com), authenticated by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds.

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The austere sun descends above the fen,  
    an orange cyclops-eye, scorning to look  
longer on this landscape of chagrin;  
    feathered dark in thought, I stalk like a rook,  
brooding as the winter night comes on.

Last summer's reeds are all engraved in ice  
    as is your image in my eye; dry frost  
glazes the window of my hurt; what solace  
    can be struck from rock to make heart's waste  
grow green again? Who'd walk in this bleak place? (1981:21-22).

Besides its title the poem deals with rooks only by analogy and by contrast. Opening with 'water', which it traces through 'millrace', through 'sluice of stone' and into 'black pond', it comes to rest on the 'absurd', the 'out-of-season' swan whose 'chastity', it seems, is what haunts 'the clouded mind / which hungers to haul the white reflection down'. Unlike the speaker, the swan is 'single', and hence impervious to the 'chagrin', the 'hurt', the 'waste' of the broken coupling of 'I' and 'you'. Here rook serves as emanation of the 'I' who 'stalks', 'feathered dark in thought', 'brooding as the winter night comes on'. The bird is used emblematically, instrumentally, to represent a response to the pain of damaged or disrupted relationship. The 'ice' and 'frost' create a 'bleak place', a blanched snow-scape in which the bird's haunting presence is an iconic 'dark' 'black' blot. It is the aspects of colour and mood that are emphasised, with perhaps a play on pregnancy in the bird's 'brooding'. The effect is imagistic: the bird stalks on the ground, its blackness a contrast both to the snow and to the swan's snowlike chastity; its blackness a figure on the ground of white, with the orange 'scorn' of the sun and the imagined, sought-after green 'solace' completing the palette. Stanza three shows the speaker back inside, the 'window of [her] hurt' 'glazed' with 'dry frost'. Her final question, 'Who'd walk in this bleak place?', conceives of human presence that might replace the 'stalking' black rook. Its finality lends it rhetorical force, however, marking both human presence and 'solace' as elusive, unlikely.

### **'Prospect'**

We find a similarly imagist effect in 'Prospect' (8<sup>th</sup> poem in 1956 section).

Among orange-tile rooftops  
and chimney pots  
the fen fog slips,  
    gray as rats,

while on spotted branch  
of the sycamore  
two black rooks hunch  
and darkly glare,  
watching for night  
with absinthe eye  
cocked on the lone, late,  
passer-by (1981:28).

The white of swan and snow and ice of the earlier poem are replaced, here with the gray of the 'fen fog' which slips, rat-like, among 'rooftops' and 'chimney pots'; it is the tiles of the roofs, not the sun, that is orange; and green is registered by implication only, in the 'absinthe eye' of the birds. Where before the speaker is like a lone bird that 'stalks', here 'two black rooks hunch' on a 'spotted branch / of the sycamore'. They are elevated above the ground to look down on the 'lone, late passer-by'. Their colour lends mood, as they 'darkly glare / watching for night'. At the same time, the birds are part of a scene that is at a remove from the speaker. The reference of the title might seem to attach to the birds' 'absinthe eye', yet the vantage point we are offered takes in rooftops and chimney pots, and so could as easily be the 'prospect' of an observer looking out of an upper-storey window. The looseness of the visual perspective contributes to a sense of emotional detachment, of impersonality. Although the rooks are malevolent, they are not looking at the person looking at them. Unlike the earlier poem, then, they are not figured as emanating from the consciousness of the speaker, nor do they reflect it back upon her. Rather the poem serves to render, with irony and detached humour, the intensity of the birds' 'eye cocked' upon the person who passes by, quite unaware.

### **'Black Rook in Rainy Weather'**

'Black Rook in Rainy Weather' is the last poem, number 44, in the 1956 section of *Collected Poems*. The figuration of the rook it offers is rather

different from the earlier two poems: one, because of the intellectual and emotional engagement of its speaker; and two, because of its rendition of the otherness, the singularity of the bird, and of its implications for the speaker's state of mind, her state of being.

On the stiff twig up there  
Hunches a wet black rook  
Arranging and rearranging its feathers in the rain.  
I do not expect a miracle  
Or an accident

To set the sight on fire  
In my eye, nor seek  
Any more in the desultory weather some design,  
But let spotted leaves fall as they fall,  
Without ceremony, or portent.

Although, I admit, I desire,  
Occasionally, some backtalk  
From the mute sky, I can't honestly complain:  
A certain minor light may still  
Lean incandescent

Out of the kitchen table or chair  
As if a celestial burning took  
Possession of the most obtuse objects now and then—  
Thus hallowing an interval  
Otherwise inconsequent

By bestowing largesse, honor,  
One might say love. At any rate, I now walk  
Wary (for it could happen  
Even in this dull, ruinous landscape); skeptical,  
Yet politic; ignorant

Of whatever angel may choose to flare  
Suddenly at my elbow. I only know that a rook  
Ordering its black feathers can so shine

As to seize my senses, haul  
My eyelids up, and grant

A brief respite from fear  
Of total neutrality. With luck,  
Trekking stubborn through this season  
Of fatigue, I shall  
Patch together a content

Of sorts. Miracles occur,  
If you care to call those spasmodic  
Tricks of radiance miracles. The wait's begun again,  
The long wait for the angel,  
For that rare, random descent (1981:56-57).

The rook features twice in this poem: first in the opening stanza, where it is described statively, 'hunching' and 'arranging and rearranging its feathers in the rain'; and then in stanza six, where these actions are reprised as 'ordering its black feathers'. For much of the poem the rook seems to be absent from the surface awareness of the speaker, who ponders her own expectations, her admissions, her desires, her wariness, her scepticism, her knowledge. Some nine, that is roughly half, of the clauses in the poem have 'I' as their subject:

I do not expect  
nor seek  
but let ... fall  
I admit  
I desire  
I can't honestly complain  
I now walk  
I only know  
I shall patch together...

The effect is to foreground the meditative consciousness of the speaker, to make the poem very subject-centred. Also noteworthy is the mood of the verbs she uses, which are predominantly assertive. By contrast, five of the remaining ten clauses are modal:

a certain minor light *may* still lean / incandescent  
one *might* say  
it *could* happen  
whatever angel *may* choose to flare  
a rook ... *can* so shine

and two more are rendered tentative, conditional, by the use of ‘if’:

as *if* a celestial burning took possession  
*if* you care to call.

It is, of course, these clauses, the ones that are not subject-centred, that lend the poem its overall air of speculation and consideration.

The verb forms given to the rook, by contrast, are positive, definite: it ‘hunches’, it ‘arranges and rearranges’, and then ‘orders’ its feathers; releasing, as it does so, the ‘shine’ whose impact renders the speaker object to its actions: they ‘seize’ her senses, ‘haul’ her eyelids up, and ‘grant’ her brief respite from fear. It is this impact that leads her to her correspondingly positive concluding statement. ‘Miracles occur’, she says, and reflects, ‘The wait’s begun again’.

Thus the poem is not, specifically, ‘about’ the rook. As might be evident from my earlier brief overview, there is much more that Plath could have chosen to say about the bird but didn’t; and the two glimpses we are given of it are fleeting and transient. The effect of her rendition, rather, is to engender an image caught in the corner of the eye, in the peripheral vision; evanescent, scarcely there; something that will disappear if it is looked at too hard, if it is focused on directly. We might recall, perhaps, the ‘other echoes’ that inhabit T.S. Eliot’s garden in ‘Burnt Norton’: the ‘unheard music’, the ‘unseen eyebeam’, the empty pool (1963:190).

And yet the bird’s presence is powerful because it is subliminally registered and sustained, bringing about a moment of the sublime that is transformative, although it is transient and can only be grasped tentatively, self-effacingly. I am reminded of Keats’s ‘negative capability’—‘that is, when man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason’ (1962:257)—or, though couched in negative terms, of Derek Attridge’s concept of the *arrivant*, which he draws

from Derrida in his reading of Coetzee's *Master of Petersburg*. Attridge translates the concept as both 'arrival' and 'the one who arrives' (1996:27). Most of Coetzee's novel, he says, 'occurs in the time before the *arrivant*' (1996:30); it is a novel of waiting, 'and waiting without any clear sense of what would constitute the longed-for arrival' (1996:25). The spectre in the room, the *arrivant*, takes shape gradually as a 'phantasm' the main character is responsible for bringing into being: 'It is himself, it is Nechaev, it is Pavel, but it is also none of these; we know that it will eventually reach written form as Stavrogin' (the figure, edited out of Dostoevsky's *The Devils*, who violates his landlady's eleven-year old daughter, and does nothing to prevent her suicide by hanging) (Attridge 1996:34). Thus, concludes Attridge (1996:35), the path to the *arrivant* in Coetzee's novel, 'lies through the younger generation, and ... what is required for writing, for literature, to begin is the sacrifice of their innocence'.

Setting aside the grimness of this variant of it, the concept captures, for me, something of the quality of waiting, of receptiveness, that Plath brings to her rendition of the brief, flickering, evanescent appearance of the rook-as-angel. It requires from its speaker a kind of willed suspension of disbelief. Hence the negative assertions in the poem: the measured concession in the first stanza—'I do not expect'—the reluctant relinquishment in the second—'nor seek / Any more'—the colloquial quip in the third—'I can't honestly complain'.

What makes the poem hard to gauge, hard to pin down, is both its structure, with the rook featuring in stanzas one and six as if placeholding, and the form and the tense of the verbs that make tracing sequence difficult. Some readings treat the poem as containing contradictions that undermine the express stance the speaker takes at the outset: she may say she's not looking for miracles, but in fact she is. I don't read the poem this way. Contrary to the predominance of the subject-directed sentences noted above, I believe Plath does indeed achieve a setting aside of the self that enables her to register desire and yet to achieve patience at the same time. Hence the sequence,

'I do not expect [...] but let';  
'nor seek / Anymore [...] some design';  
'Although [...] I desire [...] I can't honestly complain';

‘At any rate, I now walk / Wary (for it could happen)’;  
‘I only know that a rook [...] can so shine’;  
‘With luck [...] I shall / Patch together a content / Of sorts’;  
‘Miracles occur’; and, ultimately, ‘The wait’s begun again’.

And hence the tone of the poem that is deprecating, self-effacing, gracious. Infused with the spiritual language of radiance and inspiration, the process of the sublime must still work through and against the resistance of the ordinary: the ‘incandescent’ light leans out of the ‘kitchen table or chair’; the ‘celestial burning’ takes possession of the ‘most obtuse objects’; the interval it ‘hallows’ is ‘otherwise inconsequent’; the ‘landscape’ in which it happens is ‘dull, ruinous’. The speaker, too, is at once receptive and resistant: her fear is of ‘total neutrality’; she walks ‘wary’, treks ‘stubborn’; she is ‘skeptical, / Yet politic; ignorant’. Her scepticism, nevertheless, is expressed through whimsy: having renounced expectations, she ‘lets’ processes happen around her; although she desires acknowledgement or response, she belittles it by calling it ‘backtalk’ and by labelling the sky from which she seeks it ‘mute’; the ‘incandescent’ light is a ‘minor’ one; it is ‘with luck’, she says, that she shall ‘patch together a content / Of sorts’. Dismissive as this account might seem, she ‘can’t honestly complain’, because, for the ‘largesse, honor’ this light bestows, ‘one might say love’; and ‘those spasmodic tricks of radiance’ are ‘miracles’—‘if you care to call’ them that. The knowledge she has is sparse, but it is incontrovertible: ‘I only know that a rook [...] can so shine’; and the knowledge is hers by dint of its impact on her senses and by the definite though ‘brief respite’ it brings from fear.

This tone, I think, is key to the nature of the experience she recounts—it is also key to her choice of rook around which to cohere the experience. I outlined to start the range of things she might have said about the rook if she had chosen, and didn’t. Nothing about its young; nothing about its call; nothing about its flight; nothing about its feeding habits; nothing, really, about its habitat. Only that it ‘hunches’, on a ‘stiff twig’, ‘up there’; that it is ‘wet’ and ‘black’; that it ‘arranges’ and ‘rearranges’ its feathers ‘in the rain’. It does not look at her, nor does it cock the ‘absinthe eye’ of her previous rooks. In fact colour is suppressed in this poem, refined to the monochrome of the rook’s black and the light that seeing it shine



momentarily ignites. The shine emerges as the rook arranges, rearranges, orders its feathers in the rain. Is this an image of endurance against the elements? An example for the speaker to follow? An image of beauty? An association of order with the 'design' she eschews? Certainly the rook is separate from her, since she offers no comment or interpretation that might fix its meaning. Its shine links it with the light, the incandescence, the flare, the burning, the radiance that illuminates the moment for her and that she calls, casually, coolly 'miracle', that she christens 'angel'.

Part of my interest in the poem is in this sense that the bird is not defined, not fixed, not aesthetically used. Its presence is registered, and its action triggers an epiphany, but it is itself untouched by this. Its autonomy is respected; it does what it does; it keeps its self to itself. The speaker's response is revelatory because momentary and involuntary: because it cannot be called up, nor can it be hastened. It can only be awaited, and the wait is long.

I have endeavoured, in this brief study, to offer a reading of poems by Plath in which she depicts, or renders, or responds to rooks. My attempt has been indicative rather than exhaustive; a reflection on one particular poem that has lived with me for a long time. Far more than being just words on the page, Plath's rook has a life of its own. Her rook measures, for me, the power that poetry has to mean, to be.

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# **‘Darkling I Listen’: The Nightingale’s Song In and Out of Poetry**

**Catherine Addison**

## **Abstract**

The nightingale is a common non-endangered species of songbird found almost throughout Europe and Asia, where it has from time immemorial been regarded as the maestro of bird composition and performance. It has come to signify not music so much as poetry, especially love poetry and, of course, love itself. Although in fact only the male of the species sings, the mythology surrounding nightingales styles the singer as female; and, although most people listening to the actual sound of nightingale song would describe it as joyful, its cultural meaning is usually tragic. Both the Greek myth of Philomela and the Persian legend of the nightingale in love with the rose underpin the image of a sad female nightingale. This essay examines the nightingale’s appearances in English poetry, both in the traditional sad female role and its occasional joyful male representation, and it tries to account for the anomaly of these two contradictory images while at the same time taking into consideration the actual sounds of the wild bird and their meanings within the larger context of the ecosystem.

**Key Words:** Nightingale, birdsong, bird poetry, Philomela, zoomusicology.

## **Introduction**

The nightingale, a bird that we do not hear singing in southern Africa, is nevertheless a heavily encoded sign for all of us who speak and read English—as it is for people who participate in almost every other European

and Asian culture. Its song is associated with poetry, love, beauty, melancholy, spring ebullience and the suffering artist or lover, together with other, often contradictory meanings. It is the national bird of both Iran and Bangladesh and appears in the literature of almost every country 'from Japan to the Iberian Peninsula' (Hatto 1965:792-793). In Greek the word '*aedon*' denotes not only 'nightingale' but 'poet' and 'poem' as well (Williams 1997:20). The old Persian legend of the nightingale in love with the rose and the ancient Greek myth of Philomela recur endlessly in the literature of other and later cultures. So overlaid with cultural meanings is this nondescript little passerine bird that many writers seem unable to hear its actual song at all. This essay represents an attempt to disentangle the mythology from the reality of nightingale song, paying attention to the phenomenon of its sound, to relevant discussions in ornithology, ethology and aesthetics, and to literature, mainly English-language poetry.

As a South African who has never seen or heard a nightingale in the 'real' world, I have been able to encounter several in the 'virtual' world of the internet, where good photographs, recordings and videos of the bird are freely available. I am particularly grateful to the anonymous person who posted three long and very clear recordings of nightingale song made in a forest near Cologne, Germany, in 2002, 2003 and 2004, at <http://www.freesound.org/packsViewSingle.php?id=455>. These recordings have allowed me to some extent, by means of a series of phenomenological *epochés*, to hear nightingale's song as a pure sound, as an animal's mating call, as a musical composition, and as the essence of poetry and love according to literary tradition.

## **Birdsong**

In the preface to a discussion of nightingale song, an outline of the nature and functions of birdsong in general is relevant. Ornithologists distinguish between bird song and bird calls, the latter being shorter, invariable to particular species, used equally by both sexes, and characterised by very specific meanings, such as 'danger!' Bird song is usually performed only by the male of a species and its main purpose is to attract a mate or defend a territory (or both of these functions). Unlike calls, songs are often extremely complex in structure, being in many species of considerable duration and in sound

pattern often using ‘variations on a theme’ rather than simple repetition. Many species are programmed only with the rudiments of the song that they will later sing and must learn nearly all of the rules and possible variations—much, say ornithologists, as human children learn language (Stap 2006:10; Jarvis 2004:266). Individuals of most species develop their own personal variants and local groups follow recognizable dialects.

In humans, the relationship between language and music is very close, according to recent discoveries in neuroscience (Patel 2003:678). And, if the resemblance between birdsong and human language is striking, its parallel with human music is even more so. Songbirds use tempo, melodic phrasing, and varied rhythmic effects including *accelerando*, *ritardando*, *rubato*, syncopation, *crescendo* and *diminuendo*, ‘just as human composers do’ (Boswall 1983:286; Taylor 2008). They practise as youngsters and gradually elaborate their repertoire, in many species even after the song has achieved its practical end: the attraction of a mate and establishment of a territory. Some contemporary ornithologists, diverging from the strict anti-anthropomorphism of earlier ethology towards what is now, ironically, seen as a less ‘homocentric’ approach, believe that birds actually possess an aesthetic appreciation and take pleasure in their compositions and performances (Weinberger 1996; Taylor 2008; Boswall 1983:287). Songbirds were probably the most sophisticated musicians in the world before mankind acquired the knack—which we may have copied from birds anyway. As early as the first century BC, Lucretius wrote:

*At liquidas avium voces imitauer ore  
ante fuit multo quam levia carmina cantu  
concelebrare homines possent aurisque iuvare.*

(But imitating with the mouth the liquid notes of birds came long before men were able to repeat smooth songs in melody and please the ear) (Lucretius 1:504, 505).

Sir John Hawkins in 1776, specifically agreeing with Lucretius, also claimed that ‘the melody of birds’ gave humankind the raw material of music,

furnish[ing] the minds of intelligent creatures with such ideas of

sound, as time, and the accumulated observation of succeeding ages, could not fail to improve into a system (Hawkins 1963:1.2).

Even today musicologists are discovering the traces of birdsong in human composers' works. According to Sylvia Bowden, in an article published as recently as 2008, Beethoven not only consciously imitated the sounds of cuckoo, quail and nightingale in his 'Pastoral' Symphony, but he probably 'borrowed' the themes of several other works, including the Fifth Symphony, two piano sonatas and some of the late quartets, from the yellowhammer and the blackbird (2008:25-26). Bowden also speculates that Beethoven tended to use the keys of A and F major in his joyful and 'smiling' works because these keys 'encompass the natural range of the blackbird', a species 'whose song is usually interpreted by the human ear as joyful' (2008:28).

The relevant question to ask here is whether birdsong through the ages has influenced human musicians as a 'found object' might touch an artist's sensibilities, or as the masterpiece of a precursor might shape or influence his taste and treatment. Jeffery Boswall, a well-known BBC Natural History personality and ornithologist, phrases the question thus: 'There is a simple choice: either aesthetics is confined to one species, *Homo sapiens*, or it isn't' (1983:256). Some contemporary, environmentally-aware musicologists make the anti-homocentric choice with overwhelming confidence, carving out a new field of study, called by Dario Martinelli (2008) 'zoomusicology'<sup>1</sup>. According to Martinelli, zoomusicology is the study of the 'aesthetic use of sound communication among animals' (2008). Martinelli credits François-Bernard Mâche with inventing the discipline in 1983, in his *Musique, myth, nature, ou les Dauphins d'Arion* (translated in 1992 as *Music Myth and Nature*). Mâche's book posits a study called 'ornitho-musicology', analyses the structure of birdsong, which it claims to

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<sup>1</sup> 'Biomusicology', another recently delineated field, is similar to 'zoomusicology' but takes a more homocentric and a more traditionally scientific approach. 'Biomusicology' was defined by Nils L Wallin in 1991 as investigating the origins of music from the evolutionary, neurological and comparative perspectives (see also Brown, Merker and Wallis 2000:5; Arom 2000:28; Bickerton 2000:153-155).

be built on the principle of ‘repetition-transformation’, and states that it is time for humans to ‘begin to speak of animal musics other than with the quotation marks’ (Mâche 1992:114). Poets, of course, have always done this, as will be demonstrated in later parts of this paper.

## **The Nightingale and Its Song**

And this brings me to the nightingale, whose song, though widely spoken of as music, has, unlike the blackbird’s, not been universally accepted as an outburst of joy. The nightingale is a small, unremarkable, brownish bird belonging to the oscine (songbird) suborder of the passerines (small perching birds). It is a non-endangered species whose summer breeding-grounds extend almost throughout Asia and the warmer parts of Europe. Though it winters in Africa, it does not sing on this continent and so has not, as far as I know, entered African mythology at all. Nor is it known in the Americas, where its absence has been comically noted in poems by Wallace Stevens (1984:30) and John Crowe Ransom (1991:63-64) and its imaginary presence passionately asserted by Jorge Luis Borges (2008). For, almost throughout the Old World, the nightingale’s song has, from time immemorial, been regarded as the most beautiful of all bird-produced sounds—and even as an aesthetic ideal to which human art forms can only aspire. (This perception predates the invention of zoomusicology by millennia.)

In listening to the nightingale’s song, I am struck by its incredible variability. In fact, each bird possesses a repertoire of many thousands of individual songs (Slater 2000:54-55). Every song makes use of a dizzying variety of trills, whistles, chirps, rattles, ‘jug-jugs’ and twittering and fluting cries, both ascending and descending in pitch. The English Romantic poet, John Clare, wrote several transcriptions of the sound as he heard it, every song being of course different in its order and arrangement. Here is an excerpt from Clare’s ‘The Progress of Rhyme’:

—‘Chew-chew chew-chew’ & higher still  
‘Cheer-cheer cheer-cheer’ more loud & shrill  
‘Cheer-up cheer-up cheer-up’—& dropt  
Low ‘Tweet tweet jug jug jug’ & stopt  
One moment just to drink the sound

Her music made & then a round  
Of stranger witching notes was heard  
As if it was a stranger bird  
'Wew-wew wew-wew chur-chur chur-chur  
Woo-it woo-it,—could this be her  
'Tee-rew tee-rew tee-rew tee-rew  
'Chew-rit chew-rit'—& ever new  
'Will-will will-will grig-grig grig-grig  
The boy stopt sudden on the brig  
To hear the 'tweet tweet tweet' so shrill  
Then 'jug jug jug' & all was still  
A minute—when a wilder strain  
Made boys and woods to pause again (Clare 1998:3.500).

This nonsense verse may seem somewhat comical as well as perhaps an early sign of the poet's later insanity, but it should be remembered that twenty-first-century birding guides include not only sonograms to help would-be 'twitchers' identify birdcalls, but also nonsense words much like Clare's, mimicking birds' calls and songs in familiar syllabic forms. Many people find these written 'words' more useful for identifying sounds than they do the abstract shapes of sonograms. Clare's transcription is a helpful record not only of how the sounds are shaped, repeated and then changed, but also of how they are patterned with silence and surprise.

As we listen to the nightingale's song we perhaps automatically judge it on a number of musical criteria, including tonal quality as well as complexity of phrasing and tune. Boswall (1983:286) claims '[p]urity of tone' to be 'the major factor in judging the musicality of birdsong'; and, indeed, the nightingale's song excels mainly in tone, which is at all times extremely sweet and clear. But its melodic arrangement is also pleasing; for, though it often repeats one note or phrase several times in a sequence, it possesses a large repertoire of these phrases, as Clare shows, and always changes to another before (human) tedium sets in. Unlike some other birdsongs, it does not achieve a strong sense of closure at any point, perhaps because the male bird often continues to sing for a very long time, refusing the sense of an ending and imparting a feeling of unlimited time and space to the possible interpretations of his song. Contrary to the species' common

name in many languages, the nightingale is not merely a night singer but will sing day and night at certain times of the year, emphasizing this sense of overabundance for those who listen to the bird in its natural environment. Boswall (1983:287) describes the quality of nightingale song as 'rich and vigorous'; many of the trills and 'jug-jug' passages are performed decidedly *con brio* and, though some longish falling high notes do occur, these also have an energy of performance that does not suggest sadness. To my ear at least, the song is an outpouring of joy and exuberance.

Of course, we need to be suspicious of an interpretation of a sound as 'happy' or 'sad' in and of itself. That human music is capable of arousing specific emotions in a human listener is above debate, but whether the music itself expresses these emotions is a more complex question. Susanne Langer claims that 'formal properties' of human emotion may be imitated by music: 'patterns of motion and rest, of tension and release, of agreement and disagreement, preparation, fulfilment, excitation, sudden change, etc' (Langer 1942:193; see also Kivy 1980:146; Radford 1989:74; Robinson 1994:13-14). Following Langer, Leonard B Meyer in his seminal book on *Emotion and Meaning in Music* claims that human 'moods and sentiments' are often 'diffuse and characterless' and therefore not easily conveyed by music (1956:266). What music communicates is not so much the emotion itself as the *behaviour* associated in a specific culture with this emotion:

In Western culture, for example, grief is communicated by a special type of behaviour: physical gestures and motor behaviour tend to be minimal; facial expression reflects the cultural picture of sorrow; the range of vocal expression is confined and often sporadic; weeping is customary .... But such designative emotional behaviour is not the only possible way of denoting grief. Were the standardized expression of grief in Western culture different, were it, for instance, that of an incessant and violent wailing and moaning, then the 'expression' of grief in Western music would be different (1956:267).

Meyer goes on to explain how the representation of specific feelings becomes conventionalized in a culture by 'particular musical devices' (1956:267). If we are to regard nightingale's song as an example of music in



the human sense, we must surely acknowledge that it does not display any of the conventional Western tokens of grief, such as 'slow tempi and low ranges' (1956:258) in its structure; nor does it stylize in any way Meyer's alternative types of grief-expression, 'wailing or moaning', nor any other version of the animal kingdom's widely comprehensible cries of pain. Meyer also mentions that 'connotative complexes' such as associations between 'darkness, night and cold' or spring, youth, and carefree exuberance; or alternatively 'a text, a plot, or a program established by the composer' can help to fix the meaning and emotion of a particular piece (1956:265-266).

Of course, the conventions associated with feelings such as grief are *human* conventions; even weeping, which is biological as well as conventional, is an expression of *human* grief—though cries of pain are more-or-less universal. In old-style ethology, it would have seemed naïve anthropomorphism to assume that bird emotions closely resembled human emotions or that they were expressed in similar ways. However, contemporary zoomusicologists find many more points of contact between human and bird music than science would earlier have accepted. Birdsong, according to Hollis Taylor (2008), can fit human genres such as 'national anthem' (asserting territorial rights), 'serenade' (in courtship) and 'group password'. It would be difficult to imagine these genres devoid of the appropriate feeling, even in the repertoire of species that we must perceive as other than ourselves. And otherness is probably never absolute; intelligibly expressed feelings are evident throughout the animal kingdom. For example, health and exuberant life are always finding ways of flowing into physical expressions of easily interpretable joy. These are most often evident in spring and, in the case of birdsong, in the morning, when different bird species tend to combine their vocal talents in the dawn chorus.

We know that the recordings under study were made in spring and early summer—and that nightingales characteristically sing only in these seasons. We can assume from our knowledge of ornithology that the bird is singing for love—not with a broken heart but confidently, since his tone is similar when he warns off other males once he has established a family and a territory. The bird-composer's 'programme' is thus at least partly known to us. Our interpretation is also aided by one of Meyer's 'connotative complexes'—spring and exuberance—roused by that sexual spur of which Chaucer writes so eloquently in the *Canterbury Tales*:

And smale foweles maken melodye,  
That slepen al the nyght with open ye,  
(So priketh hem nature in hir corages) (Chaucer 1958:1).

In other words, both the composer's programme and the relevant connotative complex suggest a joyful message.

The song is also gratuitously beautiful, elaborated beyond any possible utility that it could serve and hence, with Boswall and other zoomusicologists (Boswall 1983:286; Taylor 2008), we may assume that the bird takes an artist's pleasure in the composition for its own sake. In fact, according to the famous British ornithologist, W H Thorpe, writing fifty years ago:

The idea that birdsong is often an expression of irrepressible joy can be supported with some plausible arguments and is certainly not without some scientific justification (Thorpe 1958:536).

In listening to these recordings, even without the natural accompaniment of moonlit woodland in the European or Asian springtime, I am incapable of interpreting them as anything other than an outpouring of joy—one which I, being human, am almost capable of sharing<sup>2</sup>.

## **The Nightingale in Poetry**

### *(1) The Sad Female Nightingale*

In poetry, the nightingale's song has usually been associated with love; science and most people's impressions of the song do not quarrel with this. The song is also a general symbol for music and poetry, which is also understandable, given its beauty, its widespread popularity and the immense period in which Eurasian humans have been exposed to it. If, as Lucretius and Hawkins speculate, we received our early aesthetic education from birds, their song may well have supplied some of the sparks of pleasure and awareness that kindled musical and poetic impulses in our ancestors in the first place.

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<sup>2</sup> According to Colin Radford, music that is 'gay, i.e., is expressive of gaiety, laughter, light-heartedness', is '*infectious*' (1989:74; author's emphasis).

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What is less easily accepted is that, in Western and Middle Eastern literature, the commonest affect communicated by nightingales and their song is profoundly sorrowful. This is despite the actual impression that the song makes and in the teeth of the fact that birdsong is part of the collocation of signs that include spring, morning, youthful love and new awakenings, as in:

Sumer is icumen in  
Lhude sing! cuccu.  
Groweth sed and bloweth med  
and springth the wude nu.  
Sing! cuccu (Davies 1963:52).

The nightingale has not been absolutely precluded from such spring associations. As we shall see later, from the beginning there have been joyful representations as well as unhappy ones. Significantly, the sad nightingale is almost always depicted as female, whereas the happy nightingale is usually male.

I should note here that, despite the clear connections between birdsong and music, the nightingale's song has come—by the same displacement that portrays the poet as singer—mostly to represent poetry rather than music. This connection has held for a very long time: as mentioned, the ancient Greek word for 'nightingale' can mean both 'poet' and 'poetry' as well (Williams 1997:20).

The association of the nightingale with poetry stems, at least partly, from the Philomela myth, which also accounts for the nightingale's feminine gender in many representations. In this myth, Philomela is raped by her brother-in-law Tereus, who also cuts out her tongue to silence her. However, she weaves a tapestry that tells the story of the rape and sends it to her sister Procne, with whom she then takes revenge on Tereus by serving him his own son Itys in a stew for dinner. After this the gods turn all the protagonists into birds. Although there are several versions of the story, Philomela is usually changed into a nightingale, Procne into a swallow, Tereus into a hoopoe and Itys into a goldfinch. Homer, Sophocles, Aristophanes and Ovid all make use of this myth; as do many later poets, including in English, Philip Sidney, John Milton, Mark Akenside, Mary Robinson, Matthew Arnold, Algernon Charles Swinburne, John Crowe Ransom and T S Eliot. Since Philomel has

been violated, deprived of the power of ordinary speech but given the magical gift of song instead, this is a very seductive image of the suffering artist, transforming pain into beauty.

The two Victorian poets probably portray the nightingale's song most tragically. Arnold favours a less common version of the myth, in which Philomela, the nightingale, is actually the metamorphosis of the other, married sister in the story. Witnessing her 'dumb sister's pain' has provided her with a kind of post-traumatic stress syndrome that bequeaths her so much 'passion' and 'pain' that she is inconsolable even by such British solaces as 'the sweet tranquil Thames' and 'this English grass':

Hark! ah, the Nightingale!  
The tawny-throated!  
Hark! From that moonlit cedar what a burst!  
What triumph! hark! what pain!

O wanderer from a Grecian shore,  
Still, after many years, in distant lands,  
Still nourishing in thy bewildered brain  
That wild, unquenched, deep-sunken, old-world pain,  
Say, will it never heal?  
And can this fragrant lawn  
With its cool trees, and night,  
And the sweet, tranquil Thames,  
And moonshine, and the dew,  
To thy racked heart and brain  
Afford no balm?

Dost thou tonight behold,  
Here, through the moonlight on this English grass,  
The unfriendly palace in the Thracian wild?  
Dost thou again peruse  
With hot cheeks and seared eyes  
The too clear web, and thy dumb sister's shame?  
Dost thou once more assay  
Thy flight, and feel come over thee,

Poor fugitive, the feathery change  
Once more, and once more seem to make resound  
With love and hate, triumph and agony,  
Lone Daulis, and the high Cephissian vale?  
Listen, Eugenia,—  
How thick the bursts come crowding through the leaves!  
Again—thou hearest?  
Eternal passion!  
Eternal pain! (Arnold 1897:204-205).

The speaker and his Eugenia seem unable to resist the compulsions of Philomela's passionate pain, the expressions of a tortured, 'rack'd heart and brain'. The poem is itself compelling and evokes with great compression the paradoxical attractiveness of tragic art. It also suggests both the rhythms of nightingale song and the excitement of the listener's reception, in the wonderful line: 'How thick the bursts come crowding through the leaves!' But, to me at least, it does not call to mind the actual sound of the nightingale at all. If Arnold's speaker had been paying real attention to the bird's song, surely he might have been able to hear, as Clare did, its admonition to 'Cheer-up, cheer-up, cheer-up'!

Swinburne, allowing Philomela herself to speak in his 'Itylus', uses the commoner version of the myth:

O swallow, sister, O fair sweet swallow,  
Why wilt thou fly after spring to the south,  
The soft south whither thine heart is set?  
Shall not the grief of the old time follow?  
Shall not the song thereof cleave to thy mouth?  
Hast thou forgotten ere I forget?

O swallow, sister, O fleet sweet swallow,  
Thy way is long to the sun and the south;  
But I, fulfill'd of my heart's desire,  
Shedding my song upon height, upon hollow,  
From tawny body and sweet small mouth  
Feed the heart of the night with fire.

.....

O swallow, sister, O rapid swallow,  
    I pray thee sing not a little space.  
    Are not the roofs and the lintels wet?  
The woven web that was plain to follow,  
    The small slain body, the flower-like face,  
    Can I remember if thou forget?

O sister, sister, thy first-begotten!  
    The hands that cling and the feet that follow,  
    The voice of the child's blood crying yet,  
Who hath remember'd me? who hath forgotten?  
    Thou hast forgotten, O summer swallow,  
    But the world shall end when I forget (Swinburne 1940:27-29).

There is something bird-like in the repetitions of this poem—repetitions that come with multiple variations, weaving an artefact of binding, hypnotic beauty. But, if the nightingale's astonishing voice does 'feed the heart of the night with fire', surely this 'fire' is animated by 'heart's desire', not perversely and violently 'fulfill'd' of it? The speaker contrasts the swallow's amnesiac spring songs with Philomel's unforgettable memories of love and horror. As in Arnold, these suggest the 'terrible beauty' (Yeats 1933:203) of tragedy, here opposed to more superficial and ephemeral art forms. But the poem, purportedly a representation of nightingale's song, is itself a lament, and when I return to the recordings and listen even with the most tragic thoughts I can muster, I cannot hear anything like it—though I do catch echoes of the spring song, of the 'fleet sweet' bird who cares not that the 'way to the sun and the south' is long, for her memory is short...

Another archetype is the Persian legend of the female nightingale in love with the rose, singing with her breast against a thorn to relieve love's pain. Perhaps because of the Western obsession with courtly love, this image, in which unrequited love is picturesquely stylized, has long been an emblem of the poetic vocation. In his 'Philomela', Philip Sidney binds it together with the Philomel myth and even so complains that his own love causes him more pain than the nightingale's:

The nightingale, as soon as April bringeth  
Unto her rested sense a perfect waking,  
While late-bare Earth, proud of new clothing, springeth,  
Sings out her woes, a thorn her song-book making;  
    And mournfully bewailing,  
    Her throat in tunes expresseth  
    What grief her breast oppreseth,  
For Tereus' force on her chaste will prevailing.  
O Philomela fair, O take some gladness  
That here is juster cause of plaintful sadness:  
    Thine earth now springs, mine fadeth;  
Thy thorn without, my thorn my heart invadeth.

Alas, she hath no other cause of anguish  
But Tereus' love, on her by strong hand wroken;  
Wherein she suffering all her spirits' languish,  
Full womanlike complains her will was broken.  
    But I who, daily craving,  
    Cannot have to content me,  
    Have more cause to lament me,  
Since wanting is more woe than too much having.  
O Philomela fair, O take some gladness  
That here is juster cause of plaintful sadness:  
    Thine earth now springs, mine fadeth;  
Thy thorn without, my thorn my heart invadeth (Sidney 1965:208).

This somewhat sexist argument—that rape, being an excess of love, is not as bad as deprivation of love, ‘Since wanting is more woe than too much having’—omits not only any real consideration of the nature of rape but also any reference to the cutting out of Philomela’s tongue. But, of course, we are not supposed take these aspects of the poem seriously; the lover is making witty use of hyperbole to argue a point. The excess is evident not only in the speaker’s extreme claims but also in his mixture of metaphor and of the two myths: Philomela is using the thorn in her breast as a ‘song-book’. Here the raped and mutilated heroine of one story is transposed into the unnamed protagonist of the other, the suffering of the two compounded together and

changed into something more like the poet's by a metaphoric transformation of the thorn into a 'song-book'. As Sidney reiterates throughout his work, the painful and unrequited nature of his love is the source of both material and motivation for his poetry; it acts as his 'song-book'. But perhaps Sidney is not quite as far away from the real sounds of birdsong as the artificiality of his *oeuvre* would suggest. His Philomela may be pictured as rather enjoying her supposedly mournful singing, since she has made sure that she is well 'rested' before starting, and her surroundings, particularly the self-satisfied and well-dressed 'earth', seem very pleasant. Perhaps the reader is intended to see the nightingale as accepting the speaker's advice and 'tak[ing] some gladness'.

The nightingale and thorn legend, which shapes Oscar Wilde's poignant little fairy tale, 'The Nightingale and the Rose', was also used by the eighteenth-century poets, Anne Finch and Mary Robinson. In 'To the Nightingale', Finch employs the image analogically, a parallel to the poet's striking up of an attitude:

And still th' unhappy Poet's Breast  
Like thine, when best he sings, is plac'd against a Thorn (Finch  
1979:154).

Finch's poem is not itself a very 'unhappy' one; rather, it dramatises a gentle and amusing lesson for poets. Addressing the nightingale as well as her own Muse, the speaker discovers that, in all moods, the nightingale's song 'far ... outflies' her own; she accuses the nightingale of neglecting its 'Bus'ness'; and she ends with the rueful self-admission that 'we Poets that have Speech' tend to '[c]riticize' and 'censure' those with talents 'transcendent to our own'. The comment about the nightingale—and the inferior, human poet—being essentially 'unhappy' and singing/writing best under the influence of pain is simply thrown out, as if it were an accepted commonplace needing no elaboration.

As might be expected in the later eighteenth century, Robinson's 'Ode: To the Nightingale' is a much more emotional poem, but its speaker appears to accept the same commonplace. The nightingale is addressed as 'Sweet Bird of Sorrow' and its song described as a 'plaintive Song of Care' whose 'heart-piercing' effectiveness is a direct consequence of loss. The



speaker speculates that, as in her own case, the nightingale's 'wayward fate / Hath robbed [it] of [its] bosom's mate'. This posture of sorrow, shared by both bird singer and human poet, is a potent sign of their sensibility. The speaker claims to have tried 'in vain' to take part in the superficialities of human pleasure<sup>3</sup>:

Vain was the Hope—in vain I sought  
The placid hour of careless thought,  
Where Fashion winged her light career,  
And sportive Pleasure danced along,  
Oft have I shunned the blithsome throng,  
To hide the involuntary tear,  
For e'en where rapturous transports glow,  
From the full Heart the conscious tear will flow (Robinson 1995:114).

Her 'full heart' and heightened, melancholic consciousness do not allow her to blend in with the 'blithsome throng'. Instead she seeks the company of the nightingale, whose sorrow is intricately connected with the beauty of its song. As the poem progresses, the speaker becomes increasingly self-absorbed and, as she sets herself more and more at centre stage, she abrogates even the nightingale's claim to the thorn in the breast:

Then come, Sweet Bird, and with thy strain,  
Steal from my breast the thorn of pain (Robinson 1995:115).

So much unhappier is the speaker that the nightingale's sad song is actually presumed to have the power to cheer her up. But its power is in the end found insufficient: 'not e'en [the nightingale's] melting Strains / Can calm the heart, where Tyrant Sorrow reigns'. Whereas Finch, who places a thorn in the breast of both poet and nightingale, explicitly judges the nightingale's song to be superior, Robinson takes the thorn for herself and implies that her own poetry is superior to nightingale's song because it is more inconsolably

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<sup>3</sup> Having been a celebrated Shakespearean actress, a mistress of the Prince Regent and the subject of a famous painting by Thomas Gainsborough, Robinson herself had certainly tasted the life of fashionable pleasure.

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sorrowful. In neither of these poems is there much direct observation of actual birdsong, though Robinson's does use the night setting and 'dark woods' of traditional nightingale singing to enhance her poem's Romantic melancholy.

Other poets, such as William Drummond of Hawthornden, Charlotte Smith and Robert Southey, represent the nightingale as female and sorrowful without directly evoking either the Philomela or the thorn myths. Drummond, writing in the earlier seventeenth century, questions the nightingale as to why she sends forth 'Such sad lamenting strains', since 'winter [is] gone' and the world is happy. The couplet of his sonnet offers ample reply:

The bird, as if my questions did her move,  
With trembling wings sobb'd forth, I love, I love! (Drummond  
nd:59).

Smith, who represents nightingales differently in different poems, in her sonnet 'To a Nightingale' (1993:14) addresses the bird as 'songstress sad', an epithet almost exactly imitated in Southey's sonnet, 'Sad songstress' (cited by McKusick 2007:38). In both of these late-eighteenth-century lyrics, which really belong to the age of sensibility rather than to the Romantic period, the speaker seems to integrate the nightingale's melancholy with the beauty of its song. It is as if the collocation of sadness, tenderness, sweetness, pensiveness, evening/night, 'woodland wild' and 'dark tower' is naturally entailed by the idea of beauty; a joyful sound would break the seamless sequence (Doggett 1974:554).

In his 'Nightingales', the late-Victorian Robert Bridges does not specify the birds' gender as such, but alludes to a 'dark nocturnal secret' that they 'pour' into 'the raptured ear of men':

Beautiful must be the mountains whence ye come,  
And bright in the fruitful valleys the streams, wherefrom  
Ye learn your song:  
Where are those starry woods? O might I wander there,  
Among the flowers, which in that heavenly air  
Bloom the year long!

Nay, barren are those mountains and spent the streams:  
Our song is the voice of desire, that haunts our dreams,  
    A throe of the heart,  
Whose pining visions dim, forbidden hopes profound,  
No dying cadence nor long sigh can sound,  
    For all our art.

Alone, aloud in the raptured ear of men  
We pour our dark nocturnal secret; and then,  
    As night is withdrawn  
From these sweet-springing meads and bursting boughs of May,  
Dream, while the innumerable choir of day  
    Welcome the dawn (Bridges *et al* 1955:55).

The nightingales' 'secret' could be either the Philomel story of rape, mutilation, murder and cannibalism or the thorn in the heart of the Persian nightingale. Either way, the song is an expression of a painful, perverse eroticism. Under its enchantment, the man who opens the dialogue in the first stanza yearns for a magical other place, where the mountains are '[b]eautiful' and the flowers unfading. This longing presumably causes him to neglect the beauty of what is real and transient in his own world: the 'sweet-springing woods and bursting boughs of May', serenaded innocently by the joyful—and nightingale-free—'choir of day'. And, in fact, the romantic world suggested by these nightingales is 'barren' and (perhaps sexually) 'spent'; its attractiveness lies solely in the compulsion of the 'forbidden'; it is invested with darkness because what it hides is the horror of the repressed.

James C McKusick (2007:35-36), echoing Williams's discussion of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's 'Bianca Among the Nightingales' (Williams 1997:9-10, 169-225), claims that the female nightingale is a female 'archetype', related to evil seductresses such as the Sirens, the *Lorelei*, Spenser's Duessa, Coleridge's Geraldine and Keats's Lamia. This theory may not seem widely applicable, since the female nightingale is usually portrayed as a victim, but in Bridges's poem, which neither Williams nor McKusick discusses, it resonates intriguingly. Bridges's nightingales, themselves 'haunt[ed]' by desire, use their nocturnal singing to contaminate men with the same obsessive unhappiness.

Writing somewhat earlier in the nineteenth century, Barrett Browning was, as Williams demonstrates, deeply concerned with nightingales and what they signified in the (masculine) poetic tradition. At times her nightingale is clearly female: in 'The Lost Bower' 'she leans on thorny tree', according to the Persian legend (Barrett Browning 1974:152). In her most important nightingale poem, 'Bianca Among the Nightingales', the birds are of indeterminate gender; but they are certainly implicated in women's suffering, for they represent to the female speaker both her own erotic desire and the madness that desire brings about in her:

We paled with love, we shook with love,  
We kissed so close we could not vow;  
Till Giulio whispered, 'Sweet, above  
God's Ever guarantees this Now.'  
And through his words the nightingales  
Drove straight and full their long clear call,  
Like arrows through heroic mails,  
And love was awful in it all.  
The nightingales, the nightingales!

.....

Giulio, my Giulio! —sing they so,  
And you be silent? Do I speak,  
And you not hear? An arm you throw  
Round some one, and I feel so weak?  
—Oh, owl-like birds! They sing for spite,  
They sing for hate, they sing for doom,  
They'll sing through death who sing through night,  
They'll sing and stun me in the tomb—  
The nightingales, the nightingales! (Barrett Browning 1974:428-430).

When her lover Giulio betrays her, Bianca blames the nightingales who serenaded and encouraged her moment of supreme love. The fatal enchantment of nightingale song here ensnares a woman, not a man as in Bridges's lyric, and the snare is laid not in a perversion of desire but in

female desire itself, which, in an oppressive age, is often allowed no expression at all.

## (2) *The Joyful (Usually Male) Nightingale*

As mentioned, this 'sad female' nightingale was never the only way of characterising the bird in poetry. Sappho, as far back as the seventh century BC, writes of 'the messenger of spring, the sweet voiced nightingale' (<http://sacred-texts.com/cla/sappho/sappho1.htm>). Many Mediaeval references also connect the nightingale appreciatively with spring, happy desire and a specifically masculine exuberance. In one version of the 'Holly and Ivy' carol, which is in fact a *querelle* or quarrel between male and female<sup>4</sup>, the masculine holly's superiority is asserted because:

Holy hath birdes,  
A full faire flock:  
The nightingale, the poppinguy,  
The gayntil laverok (Davies 1963:176).

Ivy can boast only the ill-omened owl, which is starkly contrasted to this merry 'flok'. In a more personal vein, the Provençal poet, Bernart de Ventadorn, claims: 'The nightingale rejoices beside the blossom on the branch, and I have such great envy of him that I cannot but keep from singing' (quoted in Dogget 1974:548).

Almost throughout the Early and Late Modern periods, an assortment of poems represents the nightingale's song as happy. Even Milton, who identifies the 'most melancholy' nightingale with Philomela in 'Il Penseroso' (1969:93), apostrophizes a very cheerful bird, '[p]ortend[ing] success in love', in his 'Sonnet I' (1969:78). Similarly ambivalent is Charlotte Smith, who matches her 'songstress sad' sonnet, written in 1784, with Sonnet LV, 'The Return of the Nightingale: Written in 1791', in which

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<sup>4</sup> In other Mediaeval *querelles*, such as 'The Owl and the Nightingale' and 'The Thrush and the Nightingale', the nightingale represents womanhood, and consistently wins her debate with the male bird; in these poems the female nightingale is not sorrowful and has no mythical ancestry.

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she associates the nightingale with 'Hope' and describes its song as 'the soft voice of young and timid Love' (Smith 1993:49-50).

In the high Romantic period, the nightingale is almost always happy. John Clare, that painstaking chronicler of the natural world, not only transcribes the actual syllables of the bird's song as quoted earlier, but asserts that his own (nonsense) 'words' are inadequate to communicate the 'spell' cast by the 'witching notes'; and he emphasizes the joyful nature of the song, imagining:

That musics self had left the sky  
To cheer [him] with its majic strain (Clare 1998:3.500-501).

To a Romantic poet, 'musics self'—and of course, poetry's self—would be essentially natural forces, exemplified not only in elemental sounds such as the 'tumult of [the wind's] mighty harmonies' (Shelley 1943:579; see Abrams 1960:38), but also in the song of a bird, be it nightingale, skylark or cuckoo. Bird poems proliferate at this time, for a bird is a beautiful, aerial, non-human but sentient being, lacking that fatal human self-consciousness (Hartman 1970:47-48) and hence remaining responsive to Nature's great shaping power, the 'intellectual Breeze' (Coleridge 1963:53), or the 'motion and ... spirit' that 'impels / All thinking things, all objects of all thought, / And rolls through all things' (Wordsworth 1971:164).

Samuel Taylor Coleridge's 'Conversation Poem', 'The Nightingale', explicitly associates nightingales' song with this 'correspondent breeze' (Abrams 1960:49); for when the moon suddenly emerges from clouds, he conceives its power sweeping as a 'gale' though the birds, whose singing harmonizes with the 'awaken[ing] earth':

the moon  
Emerging, hath awakened earth and sky  
With one sensation, and these wakeful birds  
Have all burst forth in choral minstrelsy,  
As if some sudden gale had swept at once  
A hundred airy harps! (Coleridge 1963:162)

Coleridge is quite didactic about the nightingale's 'joyance' in this poem. He explicitly contradicts Milton in 'Il Penseroso':

'Most musical, most melancholy' bird!  
A melancholy bird? Oh! idle thought!  
In Nature there is nothing melancholy (Coleridge 1963:160).

Like Clare, Coleridge has obviously paid close attention to the song of real birds (Hirsch 2007), for he describes it in detail:

They answer and provoke each other's song,  
With skirmish and capricious passagings,  
And murmurs musical and swift jug jug,  
And one low piping sound more sweet than all (Coleridge  
1963:161).

The Modernist D.H. Lawrence follows very closely in Coleridge's Romantic footsteps in his essay 'The Nightingale' for, where Coleridge pooh-poohs the idea of the 'melancholy bird' and suggests that some depressed poet was listening to 'his own sorrow' when he made up the tale of 'Philomela's pity-pleading sounds', Lawrence writes:

They say, with that "Jug! jug! jug!," that she is sobbing. How they hear it is a mystery. How anyone who didn't have his ears on upside down ever heard the nightingale's 'sobbing', I don't know.

Anyhow it's a male sound, a most intensely and undilutedly male sound. A pure assertion.... Nothing in the world so unforlorn (1936:40).

Lawrence of course cannot resist appropriating joyful exuberance as exclusively male, but his transcription into human words of the song has a certain amusing if anthropomorphic plausibility to it:

Hello! Hello! Behold! Behold! It is I! It is I! What a mar-mar-marvellous occurrence! What! (1936:41)

The main butt of Lawrence's essay is another Romantic poet, John Keats, whose 'Ode to a Nightingale' (1959:207-209) is probably the most famous of all nightingale poems. Lawrence completely misreads Keats,

whose nightingale, though female, is no sorrowful Philomela but a ‘Dryad’ so supremely ‘happy in [her] happiness’ that the poem’s speaker is pained by the discrepancy between it and the ‘weariness, the fever and the fret’ of human life. According to Karl Kroeber (1994:76), precisely by ‘not attributing his sorrow to the bird’ the speaker manages to show the ‘tragic implications in human self-consciousness’. His intense desire is to escape his world’s sorrows—or his consciousness of them—and fly to her:

That I might drink, and leave the world unseen,  
And with thee fade away into the forest dim:

Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget  
What thou among the leaves hast never known,  
The weariness, the fever, and the fret  
Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;  
Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last grey hairs,  
Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;  
Where but to think is to be full of sorrow  
And leaden-eyed despairs,  
Where beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,  
Or new Love pine at them beyond to-morrow.

Away! away! for I will fly to thee,  
Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,  
But on the viewless wings of Poesy.

The nightingale’s extravagantly beautiful song turns the human world by contrast into a spectral nightmare of agonies. This contrast is imitated in Thomas Hardy’s *fin de siècle* bird poem, ‘The Darkling Thrush’, except that Hardy’s speaker is simply mystified by the bird’s outpouring of joy in his bleakly depressing world, whereas Keats’s is transported with longing. And, *pace* Lawrence, Poesy’s ‘wings’ apparently answer to the speaker’s wish, for a few lines later he declares himself ‘Already with thee!’ and, forgetful of the tragic mundane world, he becomes increasingly absorbed into the beauty of the night and the song. Finally, his captivation in the moment of the song’s ecstasy tempts him to die:



Darkling I listen; and, for many a time  
I have been half in love with easeful Death,  
Call'd him soft names in many a mused rhyme,  
To take into the air my quiet breath;  
Now more than ever seems it rich to die,  
To cease upon the midnight with no pain,  
While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad  
In such an ecstasy!  
Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain—  
To thy high requiem become a sod.

This wished-for death would not—at least for the speaker—be sad, for it would annihilate his consciousness at the moment of supreme happiness. However, the thought of death itself awakes the distracting quality of human meta-consciousness, which nudges him into an awareness of the discrepancy between death and the nightingale's life-affirming song: 'Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!'. This realization sets off a chain of thoughts that finally brings the chime of the word 'forlorn', which 'tolls' the speaker back to his 'sole self' and the forlorn condition of being human. Though later (Victorian) poets, shifting their relation to nature toward a more subjective understanding and a stronger application of the 'pathetic fallacy', may have read Keats's ode as presenting a sad nightingale, it is in fact the speaker and humanity who are sad in this poem.

## **Conclusion:**

### **Gender, Melancholia, Poetry and Nightingale Song**

All this leads me to the crucial question: Why should the idea of the sad female nightingale become so widespread and popular—going, it seems, against the grain of the senses and the natural sciences? The answer of course lies in the fact that the bird's song itself has become—from early on—so heavily overlaid by cultural meanings that only the rare writer can apprehend the actual phenomenon of its sound—and this writer is sure to exist in a cultural moment that is uneasy about the status of traditional icons, so that these images have become 'more naked' as it were, and easier to 'see' or 'hear'. The Romantics lived through one of these moments, as did of

course the Modernists, though not so many of the latter were interested in natural history for its own sake.

The nightingale signifies poetry and erotic love, both of which may be portrayed as exuberantly joyful in an uncomplicated age; but both possess a depressing aspect, which may tend to fall uppermost in a period that visualizes itself as belated or decadent. The story of Philomela is very compelling; it is the ‘most suggestive’ of all the Greek transformation myths, according to Jeni Williams (1997:19). However early it was actually composed, it is ‘belated’ in that it already portrays the bird’s beautiful and intricate song as the result of trauma and as a magical metamorphosis of ordinary speech into art. Geoffrey Hartman picks up on this myth in writing about the state of poetic history after Milton, which he calls a ‘*philomel moment*’, ‘when the theme of loss merges with the theme of voice’, because at this point in history it is *loss*—of Paradise, of eyesight—that creates poetic inspiration (Hartman 2004:63). And Jonathan Goldberg, focussing on the Renaissance, sees melancholy at the heart of the writing process in every age. Using the Freudian explanation of melancholy as the result of the young child’s loss of the mother’s breast and resultant substitution of the narcissistic self, he claims: ‘The constitution of the *I* and the object in loss provides the scene of writing, the generation of the text’ (1986:47).

If poetry be founded on loss, then one meaning of the nightingale’s song—poetry or the poem—is likely to carry the affect of melancholy. This is even more likely if the subject-matter of the poetry should be—as it often is—loss, too. The compelling theme of courtly love, which outlives its late-Mediaeval invention, places deprivation of the beloved at the heart of love. Erotic love, as so many of its narratives outside the popular romance affirm, is a melancholy pursuit. The figure with the lute in the darkened garden, whose close double and companion is the nightingale, does not draw himself towards a happy ending.

But why, we ask, should this poetic love-melancholy become associated with a *female* nightingale, when the typical poet as well as the heart-broken protagonist of the courtly narrative is male? First of all, we should consider that the nightingale, to some poets, comes to occupy the role of a muse (Doggett 1974:550; Segal 1993:18; McKusick 2007:37). This role, very closely identified with the production of poetry, usually by a male poet, is traditionally a female one. According to Catherine Maxwell, even Milton,

who in *Paradise Lost* uses Urania and the Holy Spirit as muses, actually, in his blindness, more closely identifies his art with the nightingale, 'the wakeful bird' who in Book III '[s]ings darkling' and who, in 'Il Penseroso', to Coleridge's disgust, is described as 'most melancholy' (Milton 1969:257, 93). This, Maxwell claims, is because Milton identifies his blindness with a symbolic castration, a parallel to the mutilation suffered by Philomela. This loss of sight and of male gender is a 'necessary loss for the true compensatory vision that inspires song' (Maxwell 2008:24). The Philomela figure is thus an appropriate muse for the suffering poet.

More generally, love-melancholy may always have been associated more with women than with men. Jennifer Radden, in her history of melancholy from Aristotle to Kristeva (2000:40), shows that there was a general consensus about the female nature of insanity, including depression and/or melancholy, from the middle of the nineteenth century. The Victorian period was, of course, an age of great melancholy, despite public denouncements of the sentiment (Riede 2005:2). It is perhaps not surprising that Victorian nightingales are invariably grief-stricken and nearly always female.

But the correlation between women and melancholy goes back further than the nineteenth century. Elaine Showalter (1985:80-81), writing of Ophelia, identifies a Renaissance belief in a type of female melancholy that was deterministically biological, brought on, like hysteria, by women's physical make-up. This emotional, love-triggered state was very different from the fashionable melancholia affected at this time by men, which was essentially intellectual in origin (Radden 2000:81; Schiesari 1992:265). Whereas men had to think themselves into a melancholy state, to women in a patriarchal environment it perhaps came naturally. Certainly Dürer always depicts the figure of Melancholy as a woman.

This series of associations, circling around the seductive and troubling myth of Philomela, tinged with the sexist beliefs of various ages, leaning eastward toward the nightingale-and-thorn image and strengthened by every important writer contributing toward the sequence, has become over the ages an enclosing aura through which many poets have been unable to perceive any real nightingale or song. Of course not all poets possess the desire to 'draw from the life' anyway, the more classically-inclined being more interested in the myth than the bird in the first place. But the 'sad

female nightingale' perception does remain an incongruity in a culture in which nightingales' actual, awe-inspiring song has been audible in spring and summer in almost every woodland and open space for all the ages in which Europe and Asia have been inhabited by humans. It is a perception that testifies to the power of the imagination over the senses. Our present age is in the process of turning our senses as well as our intellect towards those aspects of the material world which we are in imminent danger of losing: the very many species that we humans have placed in jeopardy by our profligate use of the planet's resources. Although ours may be a period that allows us to hear the nightingale's actual song, we should perhaps strive not to lose too much of the mythology that made this song so poignant to the best poets of the past.

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**‘... singing at a work apart ...’:  
The Search for a Feminine Poetic Voice in  
Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s  
*Aurora Leigh***

**Taryn Laing-Cox**

**Abstract**

*Aurora Leigh*, Barrett Browning’s *kunstlerroman* written in the hybrid verse-novel form, is a brilliant and ground-breaking commentary on the Victorian literary tradition. Through the text’s protagonist, Aurora Leigh, Barrett Browning is able to challenge the Victorian social order—with all its implications for the working class and women, in particular. The character Aurora Leigh demonstrates the power of the poetic voice to challenge and even change the ‘birdcage’ of the Victorian woman’s life. As Aurora struggles to find her own authentic poetic voice, so she is able to expose the gendered literary tradition which so defined and limited Victorian women’s writing. Furthermore, through the characters of Romney and Aurora, Barrett Browning addresses the dialectic of the real versus the ideal which so concerned writers of the time. Aurora’s resolution of this dialectic as woman and artist inspires not only an original and authentic feminine poetic voice but also a vision for a new social order, a new world. Barrett Browning’s use of bird tropes, for example those of the eagle, lark, and particularly the nightingale, creates a subtle and intelligent commentary on this literary struggle. The myth of Philomela, implicit in the text, is re-written to show how the echo of the gendered literary tradition symbolised by the trope of the Classic, “masculine” eagle, and the melodious, lamenting song of the “feminine” nightingale, must be challenged (and ultimately silenced) to allow—in form and content—a powerful new poetic voice.

**Keywords:** *Aurora Leigh*; Elizabeth Barrett Browning; Bird imagery; Verse-novel; Feminine poetic voice; Victorian Literature; *Kunstlerroman*

Never nightingale so singeth:  
Oh, she leans on thorny tree,  
And her poet-song she flingeth  
Over pain to victory!  
Yet she never sings such music—or she sings it not to me  
(Barrett Browning [1844]1974).

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's groundbreaking verse-novel, *Aurora Leigh* (1857)<sup>1</sup>, has long been hailed by feminist critics as a hallmark of women's writing—a *Kunstlerroman* detailing the development of a successful Victorian poetess. However, in her poetry, and particularly in *Aurora Leigh*, Barrett Browning addresses and achieves far more than is immediately apparent. The nineteenth century was a period of clearly gendered literary traditions<sup>2</sup>, and this naturally informed women's writing. In this article I will show how in *Aurora Leigh* (AL) Barrett Browning creates not only a protagonist who breaks from the 'birdcage' of woman's place in the Victorian social order, but also attempts to forge a new literary tradition, and leaves one, finally, with a vision of a new world. Barrett Browning achieves this by considering content *and* form. By working with a hybrid form, such as the verse-novel, Barrett Browning is able to challenge conventional

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<sup>1</sup>Although dated 1857, *Aurora Leigh* was published in London by Chapman and Hall on 15 November 1856 (McSweeney 2008: xxxvi).

<sup>2</sup>"The literary space was increasingly contested in this period, reflecting, as many studies demonstrate, a fractured educational provision that allocated classical literature to upper-class men, and "English" (including medieval) literature to those excluded from the elite—as Brian Doyle points out, 'English was considered a "woman's subject" unsuited to the masculine intelligence' (Doyle 1982. *The Hidden History of English Studies*. In Widdowson, Peter (ed): *Re-reading English*. London: Methuen, (cf. Williams 1997:147).

Victorian literary content. Also, she works with bird tropes in challenging ways—using the literary (and social) symbolism of the nightingale in particular, to create a new feminine poetic voice.

In the first two books of *AL*, one encounters a young Victorian heroine typically ‘caged’. This is described with particular reference to Aurora’s education, taken upon by her spinster aunt who, ‘[...] had lived a sort of caged bird life, born in a cage, / Accounting that to leap from perch to perch / Was act and joy enough for any bird’ (Barrett Browning 2008:13). Aunt Leigh’s life is defined by discipline and denial—an abstemious life which upholds denial of the self, of pleasure, of comfort; and the denial of the spirit, tethered always by self-deprecating service to men. Aurora describes this ‘education’, aimed to form her into such a lady as her aunt, in terms of torture and death:

[...]In looking down  
Those years of education  
I wonder if Brinvilliers<sup>3</sup> suffered more  
In the water-torture...flood succeeding flood  
To drench the incapable throat and split the veins...  
Than I did. Certain of your feebler souls  
Go out in such a process; many pine  
To a sick inodorous light; my own endured (18).

Significantly, tasks are completed in a chair that deliberately faces away from the window and a view of the great lime tree, which suggests a denial of nature; of life. Furthermore, this reference to the lime tree, especially visible from Aurora’s ‘[...] little chamber in the house, / As green as any privet-hedge a bird / Might choose to build in...’ (21), calls to mind Barrett Browning’s ‘The Lost Bower’. This poem, published in 1844, describes the enclosed space of the bower as creative. Aurora explains that she is only able to survive the suffocation of her mind through a retreat to her inner life filled

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<sup>3</sup>The Marquise de Brinvilliers (1630-1676) plotted with her lover to poison her father and brothers. After her arrest, she was tortured by having gallons of water forced down her throat before being beheaded (McSweeney 2008:330).

with the echoes of her early childhood (and education) with her father in the Italian countryside:

I kept the life thrust on me, on the outside  
Of the inner life with all its ample room  
For heart and lungs, for will and intellect,  
Inviolable by conventions... (18).

However, in *Interpreting Nightingales* (1997), Jeni Williams analyses ‘The Lost Bower’ in terms of the gendered literary tradition that defined the period. The hills surrounding the bower are defined as masculine in opposition to the enclosed bower, ‘the wood, all close and clenching’ (EBB 1974:150), which Williams associates with women and medieval poetry (Williams 1997:183-184). The poem is a complex study of poetry, and questions the nature of women’s poetry—the ‘music [...] rather felt than heard’ (EBB 1974:152). The reference to the lime tree in *AL*, standing before the English hills Aurora begins to roam, signals the beginning of her literary journey; her search for a truly feminine poetic voice, which, ironically, must begin in the masculine tradition.

It is Romney—Aurora’s masculine opposite—who intervenes when Aurora begins to weaken under her aunt’s influence. He introduces her to the English countryside, and it is this which begins to revive her,

But wholly, at last, I wakened, opened wide  
The window and my soul, and let the airs  
And outdoor sights sweep gradual gospels in,  
Regenerating what I was (EBB 2008:24).

It is this natural and, ultimately, creative freedom that inspires Aurora’s later philosophy which eventually stands in opposition to Romney’s socialist philanthropy. There are echoes here of the Romantic ideas of Coleridge. His poem, *The Lime-Tree Bower my Prison*, is an expression of the power of nature to liberate the soul:

[...] nature ne’er deserts the wise and pure;  
No plot so narrow, be but nature there,

No waste so vacant, but may well employ  
Each faculty of sense, and keep the heart  
Awake to Love and Beauty! And sometimes  
'Tis well to be bereft of promis'd good,  
That we may lift the soul, and contemplate  
With lively joy the joys we cannot share (Coleridge 1963:120).

Revived by nature, Aurora returns to her father's books and what she can recall of his teaching—essentially an education in the classics. She encounters books her father had not shown her—the poets, which release Aurora from the 'cage' of a conventional life—

[...] thus, my soul,  
At poetry's divine first finger-touch,  
Let go conventions and sprang up surprised,  
Convicted of the great eternities  
Before two worlds (EBB 2008: 29).

Her meditations on poetry ('...poetry, my life / My eagle, with both grappling feet still hot / From Zeus's thunder...' (31)) and her own poems, discovered by Romney, written in 'lady's Greek'<sup>4</sup> (40) all suggest a masculine poetic tradition in which Aurora, determined to become a poet, must find a place. The reference to the Greek myth of Ganymede (p. 31) suggests violence and power, and the disturbingly sexual undertone of, '[...] My eagle ... hast ravished me / Away ...' is strongly reinforced by the later reference to the rape of Marian Erle, 'What, "seduced" 's your word? ... Do eagles, who have pinched a lamb with claws, / Seduce it into carrion?' (207). This use of the trope of the eagle stands in contrast to 'the holy lark' (32) with which Aurora begins to identify herself once she begins writing her own poetry. Though at first this trope is used in terms of aspiration to write truly great poetry, the repeated image of the soaring lark becomes a symbol of the feminine poetic, for example:

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<sup>4</sup>The reference to 'lady's Greek / Without the accents' is a comment (by Romney) of the inferiority of women's verse. Girls who learned Greek did so for the sake of reading, while boys had to pass examinations on the subject (McSweeney 2008: 333).

My soul was singing at a work apart  
Behind the wall of sense, as safe from harm  
As sings the lark when sucked up out of sight  
In vortices of glory and blue air (35),

and,

The music soars within the little lark,  
And the lark soars (79),

and finally, confident in her skill, and having fully embraced her own womanhood<sup>5</sup>, she writes in a letter to Romney, ‘My larks fly higher than some windows’ (296).

Of course the social and literary are intertwined—just as there is a defined place for the feminine poetic in the literary tradition as sentimental, lesser, and of little or no literary merit (emphasised by the contrast between the eagle and the lark), so there is no place for the poetess in the social order. This is no more apparent than in Book Two, when Romney proposes to Aurora in the garden on the morning of her birthday:

[...] Woman as you are,  
Mere women, personal and passionate,  
You give us doting mothers and perfect wives,  
Sublime Madonnas, and enduring saints!  
We get no Christ from you—and verily  
We shall not get a poet, in my mind (44).

Romney is (typically for his time) searching for a junior partner in his life’s work. However, Aurora counters by arguing, ‘You’d scorn my help—as Nature’s self, you say, / Has scorned to put her music in my mouth / Because a woman’s....’ She questions further how she can be, ‘...incompetent to sing, as blackbirds can, / Yet competent to love, like HIM’ (48).

However, this moment in the garden has a greater significance than a mere dramatic twist in a sentimental romantic plot. The setting itself would

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<sup>5</sup>This is discussed later in this essay.

seem to suggest that the climax of Book Two—the parting of ways of Romney and Aurora—mirrors ‘a fall’. Sarah Annes Brown suggests that, ‘...additional tensions and complexities may be identified if we place *Aurora Leigh* not simply within a biblical, but within a specifically Miltonic context’ (Brown 1997:724). Brown shows by a detailed reading of both texts, that, unlike the male-authored epics, *AL* is a poem about the search for a feminine poetic voice. ‘The fall’ marks the beginning of this journey for Aurora:

Both Eve and Aurora assert their wish for independence and for separation, whereas both Romney and Adam counsel caution and invoke feminine weakness to back up their case. In both works the argument is tossed back and forth, and in each case the woman has the final word and secures her desired independence. But whereas in the case of Eve the parting with Adam leads to her ruin, for Aurora it is the beginning of a successful career as a poet (Brown 1997: 730).

Where Brown’s otherwise excellent analysis of *AL* becomes problematic, however, is that she views this parting of Romney and Aurora as a mere ‘misunderstanding’ which eventually resolves and reaches ‘mutual comprehension and love’ (724). As a result, she also adopts the conventional interpretation of the conclusion of the poem—that Aurora and Romney are only able to marry because Romney, much like Rochester in *Jane Eyre*, has been ‘humbled’ (to the point of physical blindness), and therefore brought to a level of understanding that would make him a suitable partner for Aurora. I disagree with this interpretation of the relationship between the principal characters as well as the conclusion and resolution of the conflict in this relationship, because I feel critics ignore the very heart of the text. Such an interpretation essentially ignores the developments, the lessons, which *Aurora* undergoes to become the great poet she wishes to be. Furthermore, Barrett Browning’s profound vision of the feminine poetic and its social power, is consequently missed.

Romney and Aurora part, each to begin his or her work: Romney his Socialist, physical work with the poor; Aurora her artistic works. They thus come to symbolise the dialectic of the real versus the ideal; the material versus the spiritual. Dino Felluga, in his study of the verse novel, highlights

the ways this particular generic form creates an opportunity to question Victorian middle-class domestic ideologies in profound ways.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning brings to the fore this issue [of the ideologies that are inextricably connected to form] by superimposing a generic struggle onto the traditional domestic marriage plot. In so doing, Browning seeks to work out that most pervasive of Victorian dialectics, the real vs. the ideal, associating Romney with the real, the prosaic, the objective and the immanent while aligning Aurora Leigh with the ideal, the poetic, the subjective and the transcendent (Felluga 2002:177).

Felluga (like many literary analysts of *AL*) interprets the conclusion of the text in terms of *Romney's* development as a character—his new understanding and humility, symbolised by his blindness, and then his supposed ‘vision’ of a New Jerusalem interpreted by his sighted female partner. But such an interpretation fails to bring to any real resolution the dialectic symbolised by the two characters. In fact such an interpretation is problematic on many fronts. The text is entitled *Aurora Leigh*; this is *her* story, her *Kunstlerroman*. The text focuses predominantly on Aurora and her internal struggles—not Romney’s. To state the obvious, it is Aurora who actually sees in the concluding lines of the poem—it is *her* vision.

True, Romney is brought to a new wisdom and is indeed humbled. He learns the lesson he must, ‘[...] It takes a soul, / To move a body [...] / It takes the ideal, to blow an inch inside / The dust of the actual...’ (EBB 2008:274). But it is a lesson he learns by what he *sees* in Aurora’s poetry, which is a profound difference between himself and Rochester, of Bronte’s *Jane Eyre*, the hero to whom Romney is likened in terms of the conclusions of the texts.

[...] But in this last book,  
You *showed* me something separate from yourself,  
Beyond you, and I bore to take it in  
And let it draw me. You have *shown* me truths,  
O June-day friend, that help me now at night  
When June is over! truths not yours, indeed,



But set within my reach by means of you,  
Presented by your voice and verse the way  
To take them clearest. Verily I was wrong;  
And verily many thinkers of this age,  
Ay, many Christian teachers, half in heaven,  
Are wrong in just my sense who understood  
Our natural world too insularly, as if  
No spiritual counterpart completed it  
Consummating its meaning, (EBB 2008: 279 emphasis  
added).

And what then of Aurora's lessons, Aurora's humilities and wisdoms? In her insightful analysis of *AL*, entitled 'The Embodied Muse: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* and Feminine Poetics', Joyce Zonana points out that Aurora's chosen path of poetry is, ironically, a typically feminine choice. 'Aurora identifies herself as a disembodied, spiritual muse or Psyche, teaching truths to a world led astray by materialism. Though she rejects Romney's attempts to make her into an Angel in his House, she becomes an angel all the same—the Angel in the House of poetry' (Zonana 1996:61). In this sense Aurora does not defy the conventions of her times as absolutely as may be apparent. Her literary voice echoes the masculine tradition to which she has been exposed. However, there is no pattern for the feminine poetic voice, and Aurora's search for it is a surprising one. (Aurora's conclusion which captures Barrett Browning's vision for a greater literary tradition will be dealt with later in this essay.)

Aurora is dissatisfied with her poetry (including a descriptive poem significantly entitled 'The Hills'<sup>6</sup>): 'Even so my pastoral failed: was a book / Of surface pictures—pretty, cold, and false / With literal transcript—the worse done, I think, / For being not ill-done ...' (EBB 2008: 150). Aurora's journey of realisation begins when she turns her gaze from her classical heritage and looks to the world around her. This change is more profound than it may at first seem. In a letter to Mary Russell Mitford, Barrett Browning highlights her intention to create a 'novel-poem' that reflects the time: 'The poem I am about will fill a volume when done. It is ... written in blank verse, in the autobiographical form; the heroine an artist—not a

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<sup>6</sup>Refer to the earlier discussion on 'The Lost Bower' on p. 2 of this essay.

painter, mind. It is intensely modern, crammed from the times ... as far as my strength will allow' (Raymond & Sullivan 1983: 112). As her protagonist searches for a *true* poetic voice, ('For the truth itself, / That's neither man's nor woman's, but just God's), she too begins to turn her pen to the world around her:

I do distrust the poet who discerns  
No character or glory in his times,  
And trundles back his soul five hundred years,  
Past moat and drawbridge, into a castle-court,  
To sing [...]  
Never flinch  
But still, unscrupulously epic, catch  
Upon the burning lava of a song  
The full-veined, heaving, double-breasted Age:  
That, when the next shall come, the men of that  
May touch the impress with reverent hand, and say  
'Behold—behold the paps we all have sucked!  
This bosom seems to beat still, or at least  
It sets ours beating: this is living art,  
Which thus presents and thus records true life (EBB  
2008:152-153).

Beyond being Barrett Browning's contribution to the Victorian debate on suitable subject matter for poetry, noticethat the imagery she (and Aurora) uses changes. The physical, natural, palpable, elemental, and—of course—feminine begin to surface. Aurora's true voice is a voice of the physical *and* spiritual.

[...] Natural things  
And spiritual—who separates those two  
In art, in morals, or the social drift,  
Tears up the bond of nature and brings death,  
Paints futile pictures, writes unreal verse,  
Leads vulgar days, deals ignorantly with men,  
Is wrong, in short, at all points. *We divide*

*This apple of life, and cut it through the pips-*  
The perfect round which fitted Venus' hand  
Has perished as utterly as if we ate  
Both halves. Without the spiritual, observe,  
The natural's impossible—no form,  
No motion: without sensuous—spiritual  
Is inappreciable—no beauty or power [...] (EBB 2008:  
245 emphasis added)

This passage not only shows Aurora's burgeoning realisation of how to embrace a truer poetic expression, but also emphasises the dialectic between the physical and spiritual. Furthermore, it shows the split between Aurora and Romney in the garden scene as a version of 'the fall'. Barrett Browning's *artistic* philosophy offers powerful *social* commentary for her time. This is laid out even more clearly in one of the most stirring passages in the text:

[...] If a man could feel,  
Not one day, in the artist's ecstasy,  
But every day, feast, fast, or working-day,  
The spiritual significance burn through  
The hieroglyphic of material shows,  
Henceforward he would paint the globe with wings,  
And reverence fish and fowl, the bull, the tree,  
And even his very body as a man -  
Which now he counts so vile, that all the towns  
Make offal of their daughters for its use [...] (247)

Is Marian Erle, a symbol of this; a victim of the material and physical in all its guises—be they base, self-serving or even philanthropic?

[...] No place for her,  
By man's law! Born an outlaw was this babe;  
Her first cry in our strange and strangling air,  
When cast in spasms out by the shuddering womb,  
Was wrong against the social code—forced wrong:-  
What business had the baby to cry there? (EBB 2008: 99).

A victim of abuse and cruelty in both her childhood and later in her abduction and rape, Marian Erle's story provides Barrett Browning with dramatic instances in the narrative to comment on the ruthless debasement of the humanity of the lower class, 'The "social code" of wealth, class and, by implication, sex, makes Marian's life a kind of "wrong" from the beginning' (Leighton 1992:343). However, Romney's socialist and well-meaning philanthropy makes him equally complicit in the dehumanisation of Marian. His proposal of marriage is not founded on love, but is a political statement. The eagle metaphor surfaces again, and is a comment on the cruelty of this proposal, as well as a disturbing signal to the reader of what is to come, that is, the kidnapping and rape of Marian:

‘[...] may she come to me,  
Dear Romney, and be married from my house?  
It is not part of your philosophy  
To keep your bird upon the blackthorn?’

‘Ay,’

He answered, 'but it is. I take my wife  
Directly from the people—and she comes,  
As Austria's daughter to imperial France,  
Betwixt her eagles,' (122)

Certainly, the poetic and social become powerfully linked in the text and Barrett Browning repeatedly points to the overwhelming fall from all that is good and true in humanity when this is ignored. However, to return to a passage quoted earlier, Barrett Browning, through her protagonist, Aurora, is describing a philosophy far more profound than merely social. Consider:

Without the spiritual, observe,  
The natural's impossible—no form,  
No motion: without sensuous—spiritual  
Is inappreciable—no beauty or power [...] (EBB  
2008:245).

Felluga interprets this central passage in terms of Barrett Browning's '...appreciation of the ideological nature of all formal choices,' and feels she finally '...acknowledges that the philosopher-poet and the prosaic philanthropist ultimately betray the fact they are both reliant on ideological mystification to proceed' (Felluga 2002:178). Although I appreciate the subtext of genre and ideology, I feel that Felluga misses in this interpretation of this central concept of the text, the human element of the story.

At this point in the text Aurora has returned to Italy to set up a home with Marian and Marian's child. But she has returned to an 'empty nest' (EBB 2008:254). She feels disconnected from her surroundings, painting the scene of the Italian countryside before her in the fleeting wings of moths and butterflies and the dark music of owls and nightingales:

[...] melodious owls  
(If music had but one note and was sad,  
'Twould sound just so); and all the silent swirl  
Of bats that seem to follow in the air  
Some grand circumference of a shadowy dome  
To which we are blind; and then the nightingales,  
Which pluck our heart across a garden-wall  
(When walking in the town) and carry it  
So high into the bowery almond-trees  
We tremble and are afraid, and feel as if  
The golden flood of moonlight unaware  
Dissolved the pillars of the steady earth  
And made it less substantial (EBB 2008:253).

She has found success as a poet, she is loved by Marian and Marian's child, yet she admits she cannot write, read or even think, but '[sits] absorbed amid the quickening glooms' (260). In the text it becomes evident that she has fallen in love with Romney whom she believes to have married Lady Waldemar and is pining for him. However, if one considers Barrett Browning's careful and deliberate use of genre and structure, one cannot

help but view this moment in terms of its greater contribution to *AL* as a whole, and to Barrett Browning's philosophy inscribed therein.

Aurora has returned to her 'motherland'—not only the country where she was born and spent her early years, but also literally the land from which her mother came. The home she has created is entirely feminine; furthermore, it is a refuge of sorts for Marian, the mother. As discussed earlier, Aurora's true poetic voice is one that embraces the spiritual and the physical. Hers must be a poetic voice that is not merely *feminine*, but *woman*. It is at this point in the text—through her love for Romney, and that most physical manifestation of womanhood, mothering—that Aurora must come to acknowledge and accept the physical in herself.

Zonana addresses this challenge in terms of the symbol of the 'Muse'—not the spiritual muse of the masculine poetic tradition, but a muse that embraces, and is rooted in, the physical. In the words of Aurora herself:

No perfect artist is developed here  
From any imperfect woman. Flower from root,  
And spiritual from natural, grade by grade  
In all our life. A handful of the earth  
To make God's image! (EBB 2008:316).

Thus, in the conclusion of *AL*, where Aurora describes to a blind Romney the view before them in words that constitute a vision of the New Jerusalem, Aurora becomes an embodiment of the new feminine poetic.

Aurora here takes her place as a triumphant goddess, embodying through her words the promise of her name, conclusively demonstrating that the woman artist can both see and sing, by her own eyes inspired (Zonana 1996:54).

Zonana's otherwise uniquely insightful analysis of the text does not, however, make the all-important connection between the resolution of the real-ideal dialectic in the plot of *AL* and the author's greater concern with defining the female poetic voice in a divided literary tradition. To suggest that a marriage of the 'spiritual' and 'natural' is the answer, is hardly as simple as a romantic plot may suggest. Certainly, this 'resolution' becomes

complicated for the woman poet if the physical and poetic have been defined by the male voice; are, thus, subjective, and subjected.

Barrett Browning's poetry illustrates her awareness of, and concern with, the complexities inherent in finding a feminine poetic voice (I name the following separately though of course they are linked): an inferior education, social powerlessness, and, from a particularly literary point of view, a sense that the woman is the subject of the text; never its author. In Barrett Browning's poetry she confronts these concerns—be they social, political or literary—in a myriad ways. In terms of this paper's focus on *AL* and the search for the feminine poetic voice, I will concentrate on her literary concerns. Interestingly, Barrett Browning refers to bird tropes to confront the masculine poetic tradition (grounded in the classics).

Literary history offers a range of bird metaphors, but none evoke more powerful meaning than the nightingale. The classical Greek myth of Philomela has been woven into poetic discourse. Certainly a study of gender and poetry is incomplete without a careful understanding of the myth, the power of the nightingale metaphor, and the interpretation thereof by the poet.

After resolving a border dispute with the help of Tereus, king of Thrace (and one of the sons of Ares), Pandion, king of Athens, rewards his ally by giving him his eldest daughter, Procne, in marriage. After several years and the birth of a son, Itys, Procne yearns to see her sister, Philomela, again and Tereus travels to Athens to bring her back. But on the homeward journey, he takes her to a wood, rapes her, cuts out her tongue to silence her and shuts her away in a forest dwelling. He then deceives his wife by telling her that her sister has died. However, Philomela weaves her story into a tapestry and sends it to Procne who frees her. Together they revenge themselves on Tereus by killing Itys and serving him up to his father in a cannibalistic banquet. When he realises what he has done, Tereus snatches up an axe to hack them to death but, out of pity for their agonies, Zeus turns them into birds: Tereus becomes a hoopoe,

Procne, a nightingale, Philomela, a swallow, and Itys, a goldfinch (Williams 1997:16)<sup>7</sup>.

*Interpreting Nightingales: Gender, Class and Histories* by Jeni Williams is an extensive study of the nightingale trope throughout literary history. The trope of the nightingale becomes problematic for the Victorian woman writer.

But the myth is not interested in the precise meanings of individual, separate figures within the structure of the myth, rather it investigates the *relations* between them. What is central is the definite association of the nightingale with betrayed women and poetry: the Greek word *aedon* is used for the bird, poet and poetry. In addition the link with Philomela and/ or Procne points to a general background of pain, loss and lamentation associated with the feminine [... ] (Williams 1997:20).

The voice of the female poet becomes limited by the literary education she has received, and the 'song' she is expected to sing. Barrett Browning confronted these limitations in even her earliest works—challenging the limits of a feminine education and translating Greek drama. But it is in her later poetry that her most profound and exciting experimental challenges occur:

[Barrett Browning's] knowledge of languages (she commented particularly on Greek) attuned her to the *sound* of poetry and she could produce wonderfully modulated verse. That she chose instead to produce angular and choppy lines marked with uncomfortable if striking images is a choice that reflects her desire to write outside the affective and harmonious simplicity associated with the 'poetesses'

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<sup>7</sup> The *philomel mo[ment]* of English poetry is [... ] the postprophetic moment, when the theme of loss merges with that of voice—when, in fact, a 'lost voice' becomes the subject or moving force of poetic song (Williams 1997: 16).



of her time [... ]It is *not* the voice of the nightingale. These experiments with genre and rhyme seem part of a desire not just to *represent* women differently but to *speak* in a markedly different way. Her double traditions are drawn together in this search for a new voice which is unlike that of the nightingale (Williams 1997:191).

*AL* in particular is an example of a combination of genre which merges the double literary traditions in search of a new poetic voice: the classical (masculine) epic, and the medieval English (feminine) romantic genres. However, in *AL* itself, nightingales are very rarely mentioned<sup>8</sup>. Bird imagery is indeed used (some examples of these have already been quoted and discussed), but in connection with the poetic, and certainly with Aurora's poetic voice, the preferred image is the lark. How, then, is the nightingale trope and the myth of Philomela relevant to a study of *AL*?

Williams argues that the development of the female poet in *AL* is a re-writing of the Philomela myth. What is exciting about this interpretation of the text is that it elevates a *Kunstlerroman* to a level of philosophical commentary on a problem that deeply concerned Barrett Browning: the double literary tradition and the educational and social consequences thereof.

The degradation of the human spirit defined solely by a society of materialism and, in consequence, hierarchy, was something Barrett Browning addressed in much of her poetry. In *AL*, Barrett Browning offers a new vision; a resolution for a world divided. Consider the excessive descriptions of a grappling, debased mob (for which Barrett Browning has been criticised) bent, beyond reasonable understanding, on destruction of all that is good. Consider the frighteningly self-serving Lady Waldemar, supporting Romney in his various social projects in so far as her activities will catch his attention ('All things I did, / Except the impossible [...] such as wearing gowns /

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<sup>8</sup>There are three instances in *AL* where nightingales are mentioned: Book 2:11, 'The June was in me, with its multitudes / Of nightingales all singing in the dark', Book 6:303, 'I must not linger here from Italy / Till the last nightingale is tired of song', and Book 7: 1070, quoted on p. 13 of this essay.

Provided by the Ten Hours' movement' (92)), and all the while plotting to turn Marian away from her commitment to Romney, even resorting (allegedly) to the kidnapping and rape of Marian, her rival for his affections. Consider, even, Romney, blind before he is blinded, and unable to see anything for what it really is. Contrast this with the home Aurora and Marian create, '...a matriarchal community rooted in mutual respect, in art and in the nurturing care of the next generation ...' (Williams 1997:202). As Williams aptly puts it, 'The violator in this poem is not a single Tereus figure but a materialistic (patriarchal) system' (203). The birth of the *feminine* poetic voice of Barrett Browning's epic is not, however, the lamenting (feminine) song of the classical Greek nightingale. Rather, Barrett Browning rearranges elements of the myth to accommodate her new vision:

Aurora challenges the values of that [materialistic (patriarchal) system] by stressing the central importance of love: Romney can be detached from his 'misguided' materialist beliefs. Where Tereus married one sister and raped the other, silencing her in the process, Romney was to have married Marian but marries her 'sister', Aurora, instead. In that Marian and her child had made their home with Aurora, this marriage associates all four in a new community based on love, respect and art (203).

Williams also points to the inter-textuality of *AL* as a statement on Barrett Browning's part regarding the need for a new voice. She draws from a historically more 'feminine' literary tradition, and creates a unique text and a unique (un-nightingale-like) voice. I have already commented on the hybrid nature of the form, and its ideological implications, but Williams also highlights the inclusion of medieval patterns.

The romance landscape and allegory of medieval literature colours the backcloth to the events of the poems as much in *Aurora Leigh* as in earlier texts such as 'Hector in the Garden' or 'The Lost Bower'. As in those texts, indices of this influence lie in the pervasive use of both bird imagery and the enclosed space within *Aurora Leigh*: elements which continue to be associated with women and art (205).

In *AL* Barrett Browning shows through various means that it is the development of a feminine poetic voice which ultimately alters the hierarchies of dominance of class and gender. Her text, so unique in form—a ‘novel-poem’, epic and novel, poetry and narrative, captured in blank verse—challenged the ideologies inherent in the questions of form of its time. The subtle, extensive and varied literary references allow Barrett Browning to weave a tapestry of song bold and new. She challenges the real versus ideal dialectic and confronts the materialism of her time with a philosophy rooted in a feminine poetic voice.

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

**Wendy Woodward**

## **Abstract**

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

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

Wild and garden birds do not depend on or relate to humans as many nonhuman animals do. Consequently, their subjectivities tend to remain unacknowledged both in reality and in representation. Birds also appear different from nonhuman animals; descendants of dinosaurs, they retain lizard-like features in their legs and thus embody, even more than furred mammals do, apparently incontrovertibly, an alien other: their bodies feathered and clawed, their flight patterns relinquishing of the earth, their birth by hatching rather than from a mammalian uterus. They seem unknowable, too, their eyes dark and opaque, which limits visual connection with humans. Such are the prejudices held against birds, both in general and in the particular. For the last seven or eight years, I have been thinking and writing consistently about animal subjectivities, but birds only sneaked in as afterthoughts, like korhaans through the long grass<sup>1</sup>.

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

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

respects', but these 'spiritual assistant[s]' (2004:197) associated with the transubstantiation of the [human] body, barely embody their own lives apart from what they may offer humans<sup>2</sup>.

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

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

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

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

othered birds<sup>4</sup>. Spivak's contentious question, 'Are those who act and *struggle* mute as opposed to those who act and *speak*?' (1988:275), may be playfully transposed into a discussion about literary representations of birds and whether they can only be 'mute' and, implicitly, without subjectivity. Birds, like the colonised subaltern subject, may appear to be 'irretrievably heterogeneous' (Spivak 1988:284), but some of the narratives discussed below represent birds as possessed of agency, intentionality, and access to a voice which sings (or clucks). This suggests that in spite of the 'epistemic violence', to use Spivak's phrase (1988:280 and *passim*), of an anthropocentric view, it is possible to reach towards an appreciation of a bird as an individual subject.

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

The imported starlings seem to enact Homi Bhabha's notion of mimicry as a disturbing mocking device (1994), tricking colonial authority into believing in an obedient nature which will perform at the behest of a 'master consciousness' (Plumwood 1999:passim). The starlings, unexpectedly agentive in their learning, also mock the colonial consciousness which can only hear beauty in the authentic songs of British birds. Inevitably all these birds, apart from the adaptable, trickster starlings, perish when they are finally released on Rhodes's orders<sup>6</sup>.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Paradoxically, given the horror of the lives of battery chickens—imprisoned and tortured, the better to serve as human food<sup>9</sup>—the most dramatic instances of bird subjectivity in the South African media in recent years have been the chickens Veronica and Zola. In 2003, Brett Bailey’s *iMumbo Jumbo* staged the slaughter of a chicken by a sangoma on the play’s last night in Cape Town. Bailey was described by Barbara Mathers, general manager of the Third World Bunfight Theatre Company, as ‘working in two realms, between theatre spectacle and ritual. For him the slaughter was not senseless because it is a ritual that happens in everyday life’ (Kemp 2003:1), but the audience, predominantly, remained unconvinced. The outcry was huge. Members of the public walked out. Letters to the newspapers were tearful and offended. SPCA chief inspector Shaun Bodington confirmed that the production company did not have a permit to slaughter an animal in a public venue and wanted to ‘determine [...] whether the animal suffered before it was killed’ (Ndenze 2003:6). The debate soon became racialised as tensions between African and Western beliefs about animals and slaughter were highlighted.

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

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

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

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

maintain that even this sympathetic appreciation of her voice shifts between a recognition of her agency and the possibility that her subjectivity derives from her mere function as a dying metonym for condemned humans. Yet while subjectivity for birds may be contingent and fragile, they are represented as speaking/singing/clucking when they have agency, intentionality, or, in Camus's case, when they suffer. They are not, of course, exceptional, merely represented as such<sup>10</sup>. All other birds who may flap their wings so annoyingly on stage or who do not manage to prove that they are streetwise or agentive in their preference for the fast lane do not apparently merit such consideration.

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

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

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

spirituality, but they do so agentively rather than being the menacing or doom-laden symbolic creatures of Couto's *Voices Made Night*. Finally, one has to concede that even if many of the birds considered here are not represented extensively as subjects, that their lives have been imagined at all, like the eponymous, lyrical birds in *The Last Flight of the Flamingo*, constitutes some challenge to an anthropocentric worldview that cannot conceive of birds having lives, let alone subjectivities<sup>11</sup>.

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

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# Book Review

## *Material Feminisms*

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*Material Feminisms* is a thought-provoking collection of essays by writers such as Susan Hekman, Stacey Alaimo and Karen Barad. For Alaimo it constitutes a development on her earlier work, entitled: *undomesticated ground: recasting nature as feminist space* (published in 2000 by Cornell University Press, Ithaca). As the title of the earlier text indicates, Alaimo takes on the issue of the connection between representations of the female and nature. Some feminist critics have distanced themselves from the idea of identifying women with nature as it has essentialising tendencies, putting women in a weak position with regard to men, who are identified with culture and society – and power. While ecofeminists make a valid point that the exploitation of marginal groups, women and nature all stem from the same mindset, that is, an attitude of domination and patriarchal authority, there have remained some divisions between feminist theorists and ecofeminists. The essays in *Material Feminisms* provide stimulating arguments on these issues with important implications for feminist theory, ecocriticism, and critical theory in general.

Hekman's essay, 'Constructing the Ballast: An Ontology for Feminism' gives an overview of the direction which feminist theory has taken in the past few decades. She refers to Donna Haraway's attempt to

overcome the discursive/reality dichotomy, and indicates that ‘many feminists turned to discourse at the expense of the material’ (Hekman 2008:87). In addition to Haraway, Hekman invokes Bruno Latour’s view that the critique of empiricism has driven theorists away from facts into an over-emphasis on the discursive realm. She says that ‘the point is not to privilege the discursive over the material but to understand the material in discursive terms’ (Hekman 2008:88). While she acknowledges the contribution that theories of social constructionism have made to feminist theory, she feels that there has been a disproportionate loss of the material as opposed to the linguistic. This has important implications for a renewed conception of realism. Hekman states: ‘What we need now is not a return to a modernist conception of reality as an objective given, but rather an understanding of reality informed by all we have learned in the linguistic turn’ (2008:88).

Hekman advocates a move from epistemology to ontology in order to correct the imbalance between the discursive and the real. While supporting the conviction that ‘our only access to ontology is through the discursive’, she nevertheless maintains that ‘for the new ontology, our language structures how we apprehend the ontological but it does not constitute it’ (2008:98). One of the philosophers Hekman turns to is Ludwig Wittgenstein, even though ‘his work on language is seen as one of the major causes of the turn to discourse and away from the real’ (98). She disagrees with this interpretation of his work:

Wittgenstein, like the postmoderns, is trying to break philosophy away from the modernist conception of language as the mirror of nature. But Wittgenstein does not move in the direction of epistemological nihilism, of a conception in which language constitutes our world. Rather, his view is that language is what we do *in* the world. It is a central part, but not the only part, of our form of life. For Wittgenstein, language and the world are always intimately connected and interacting (Hekman 2008: 98).

Although ‘Wittgenstein’s linguistic philosophy and postmodernism are generally identified as the principal causes of the linguistic turn of contemporary thought’, Hekman argues that ‘Wittgenstein’s work does not, in fact, privilege the linguistic, but rather, it offers a way of integrating

language with reality (Hekman 2008:99). Hekman goes on to draw support for her argument from the work of Deleuze and Guattari and also Michel Foucault. Her re-reading and reinterpretation of these writers is both challenging and illuminating and provides ground for much interesting debate and discussion.



# **Springing the Cage: The Role of *Engaging the Shades of Robben Island* in Constituting the Field of Postcolonial Ecofeminism**

**Priya Narismulu**

## **Review Article**

*Engaging the Shades of Robben Island*

by Deela Khan

Cape Town: Realities, 2002, 80 pp.

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## **Abstract**

Critical connections between postcolonial studies, gender studies and ecological studies are beginning to be articulated, and it is significant that these liberating intersections are most developed in a poem about the iconic South African prison Robben Island. In the context of the escalating crises of neo-imperial globalization, the global financial collapse, global warming, and assorted domestic, institutional, national and transnational chauvinisms that have engendered all too many incoherences and silences, this essay draws on the eponymous poem in Deela Khan's collection, other indicative African literary texts and research from various fields to begin the work of constituting the field of postcolonial ecofeminism.

**Key Concepts:** postcolonialism, feminism, ecology, postcolonial ecofeminism, African literature, South African poetry.

An increasingly complex world requires the development of more integrated responses to experience and to the construction of knowledge. Postcolonial studies, ecological studies and gender studies are progressive approaches that deploy a variety of conjunctural constructs to make better sense of the difficult terrains that each traverses. It is not surprising to discover that it is in the genre of poetry that the connections between such conjunctures are beginning to be articulated. Innovative representation is a particular strength of poetry, which has long facilitated the introduction of new themes and ways of constituting experience, as well as more creative and critical articulations of the challenges of subjectivity and representation while affirming agency and audience from African and majority world locations even in the medium of English.

The Cape Town poet Deela Khan was involved in the anti-apartheid struggle and began writing resistance poetry in the mid-1970s. She published the collection *Engaging the Shades of Robben Island* in 2002. It comprises the eponymous poem and twelve shorter poems. Situated just off Cape Town the prison island has, since the 1990s, symbolised the end of colonial and settler colonial (apartheid) oppression in South Africa. Writing these poems during a residency on the island in 1997, the poet resists the ready-made option of adopting the iconic image in her work. Instead, she draws on a long tradition of liberation poetry and exercises her artistic and intellectual resources to engage with the centuries of political and environmental injustice on Robben Island. In doing so she attempts to articulate not just one but a range of subaltern subjectivities.

Beyond challenging the racial and androcentric biases of colonialism and settler colonialism the poet articulates the close connections between ecological imperialism, settler/colonialism and the attendant racism and sexism. The rationale for such an approach may be found in the work of a range of environmental and social justice writers. Pointing out that 'alienation from nature is the source of unjust social relations' (Snyder 1995, in Cock 2007:9), Jacklyn Cock argues that ignorance and hostility towards nature 'sets us up for objectifying and exploiting fellow humans' (9). Of course other factors such as national and cultural chauvinism, along with unrestrained avarice, also help explain the phenomenon of imperialism, and the poet takes account of these factors as well.

Ecofeminism is a movement of convergences based on the recog-

nition of the connections between environmental justice and feminism<sup>1</sup>: ‘it articulates the theory that the ideologies that authorise injustices based on gender, race and class are related to the ideologies that sanction the exploitation and degradation of the environment’ (Sturgeon 1997:23). 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. Ecofeminism recognises that human beings are an integral part of nature, even as many people have been unaware of the profound impact of the quality of air, water, land, and plant and animal life on the condition of their lives, and as more people have grown more alienated from their social and natural environments<sup>2</sup>. Ecofeminism recognises the interconnectedness of environmental and gender injustices as well as the urgent need to integrate individual, institutional and national responses to these challenges (Campbell 2008:vii).

Ecofeminism and postcolonialism engage in basic struggles over land, and both movements are critical of the destruction caused by colonial and neo-colonial forces. Like postcolonialism, ecofeminism challenges supremacist claims of belonging to a higher order of being while reducing the status of other human beings, life forms and natural elements to that of objects, so as to rationalise subjugation and abuse. Both movements reject what Donovan (1996:161) identifies as supremacist ontologies of domination which use binary epistemological modes and practices. This clarifies the reasons that ecofeminist and postcolonial movements reject the imposition of Eurocentric universals and master narratives. Instead, both movements subscribe to ‘the concept of the diversification of agency’ which ‘calls for the inclusion of as many speaking subjects as possible’ (Murphy 1997:55).

Ecofeminism recognises the significance of awareness, sensitivity

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<sup>1</sup> Links between ecological and feminist movements have grown over the years, even as African feminist groupings have become more visible (e.g., the Tanzanian Gender Networking Project, the African Feminist Forum, and the African Gender Institute).

<sup>2</sup> With global warming, awareness of the interconnectedness of global systems is growing, although perhaps far too sluggishly to effectively challenge the problems of neo-imperial globalisation.

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and systems approaches for overturning the operations of unfettered power. This is related to the concern postcolonialism shows for the recovery of oppressed subjectivities and voices, along with the hard won recognition of the importance of building unity (to produce a critical mass), which necessitates recognition of the significance of diversity, whether along gender, class, race, ethnic or national lines. In these ways both movements deconstruct monological colonial, neo-colonial and patriarchal discourses that have privileged tiny elites on the grounds of gender, race, nation or ideology, while infecting all other constructions of value. Both share the objective of social transformation and engage in wide-ranging initiatives to challenge ‘all relations of domination ... to transform the structure of power itself’ (Murphy 1997:49). Among the better known postcolonial ecofeminists are the environmental activists Wangari Maathai, who founded the Greenbelt Movement in Kenya and won Nobel Prize for Peace in 2004, and Vandana Shiva.

Postcolonial ecofeminism involves an integration of many of the goals and concerns of both the movements, as exemplified by Deela Khan’s pioneering collection of poems that engage with the significance of an island on the literal and metaphorical edge of empire and settler colonialism. Postcolonial ecofeminism challenges the conceptual and structural constituents of patriarchal colonialism and neo-colonialism. As is apparent in many of the poems, postcolonial ecofeminist art links the long history of anti-colonial struggles (including the anti-apartheid resistance) with the development of gender struggles against the patriarchal regimes that have controlled many institutions, the domestic, public, corporate, national and global levels<sup>3</sup>.

Although the minority governments that controlled South Africa did pay some attention to nature conservation, this was not done holistically but as part of the assertion of exclusivist notions of identity, to justify the dismissal of indigenous people as a problem rather than recognise the first nations as legitimate citizens, and to try to gain respectability in some

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<sup>3</sup> The current global financial meltdown exemplifies the problem of unfettered growth (driven by bravado, reckless machismo and unsustainable practices) in poorly regulated financial systems, to the detriment of people and life forms across the world and for generations to come.

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western circles (Cock 2007:33). There were a few progressive environmental groups in the 1980s but these poems are among the first South African anti-colonial ecofeminist works of literature in English.

Some literary texts that anticipated developments in postcolonial ecofeminist literature in South Africa include the proto-feminist fantasy 'The Floating Room' by Asilita Philisiwe Khumalo (1998). This is an early engagement, recorded in 1972, but likely to have been in existence much earlier. The story subtly challenges the limits of domestic patriarchy by pitting it against an alignment of animals with magical powers, natural elements and a studiously docile heroine. Bessie Head also made early contributions to postcolonial ecofeminism, both in her commentaries and in her prose representations of rural village life in Botswana, as stories in *The Collector of Treasures* (1992) demonstrate.

Other South African literary texts that show strong elements of postcolonial ecofeminist assertiveness include Kaatje Nieuwveldt's (2003) testimony before a commission in 1958, where she articulates a black woman's sense of agency over her rights to her land while accusing a colonial magistrate of malpractices. Lauretta Ngcobo published the novel *And They Didn't Die* (1990) which represents rural women's struggles to survive and challenge the oppressiveness of apartheid in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Zakes Mda's novel *The Heart of Redness* (2000) shows a rural teenage heroine to have a more authoritative grasp of local environmental issues than far more educated characters who have unsustainable and even neo-colonial conceptions of development. There are also some interesting references in Ingrid de Kok's *Seasonal Fires: New and Selected Poems* (2006). One of the most sustained and sophisticated instances of this emerging genre is to be found in the Zimbabwean writer Yvonne Vera's interweaving of anticolonial and ecofeminist poetics in her experimental novel *Nehanda* (1993), which is a writing strategy that Deela Khan also deploys in her poem 'Quarry Narratives' (55), in the second section of her collection.

It is seven years since *Engaging the Shades of Robben Island* was published by Realities (which was established by fellow Cape Town poet and veteran anti-apartheid activist James Matthews), time enough for a reading of this visionary and challenging collection to be undertaken. The following analysis focuses on the title poem 'Engaging the Shades of Robben Island' (2002:17-31).

Working as an artist and healer, Khan draws on various resources to address violations and detoxify the natural and social landscape. She uses her art to invoke a number of long suppressed or destroyed voices: these are the shades referred to in the titles of the collection and the first poem. In this engagement she takes on what Chinua Achebe (1975) observed to be the responsibility of the postcolonial artist, to render history in the absence of records or unsullied ones. She also uses her medium to attend to the many acts of destructiveness that occurred on the island, against freedom fighters, animals, plants and the land. This approach is clearly predicated on the healing of her own oppressions as a black woman and a black minority woman under apartheid, in that she speaks out of her own hard-won subject positions. In the following lines from the Poet's Note, she explains that she developed her position of articulation by tackling those elements that have been most silenced (Lorde 1993) in herself:

For me, *Engaging the Shades of Robben Island* has proved to be a crucial journey; a passage in which I, a black woman poet, to whom Robben Island was always an unspeakable place, was able to confront the island shrouded in its mystique and multilayered history (2002:13).

Khan uses her Poet's Note to affirm her intention to historicise and poeticise stories of the island from a long neglected and suppressed subject position (13). As a newly liberated South African living the daily contradictions of Cape Town, a city at once so beautiful and so segregated, she seems to have felt impelled to construct the thirteen poems, including the long six-part title poem, to contribute to what Lorde (1993:43) described as 'the transformation of silence into language and action'. Khan chooses to reach psychologically and politically beyond the existing blueprints for national reconciliation, as led in different arenas by Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu (in the Truth Commission)<sup>4</sup>, to engage with critical questions of environmental and social justice under different political regimes. She does this by going beyond the hyped up images of Robben Island and Cape

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<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, Tutu and the older Mandela both exemplify an interesting combination of masculine and feminine energies.

Town to offer a citizen and an artist's understanding of the key co-ordinates that inform her being and serve as resources. Adrienne Rich once articulated this challenge in words that resonate with key themes in Khan's work: 'I need to understand how a place on the map is also a place in history, within which ... I am created and [am] trying to create' (1987:212).

In the Poet's Note Khan suggests that although the historical challenges of settler colonialism, racism and sexism were nominally lifted by the ending of apartheid, opportunistic readings of reconciliation and resolution cannot bypass the hard work of undoing centuries of structural, coercive, cultural and psychological oppression. She draws on Milan Kundera's assertion that the 'struggle of [people] against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting' (13) and her poems in the collection underscore her rejection of the residual option of selective amnesia. Instead every poem acts to counter the old apartheid silences, the window-dressing of commercial interests, and the subtle cultural sanctions that have dealt with the 'unspeakable' history by excluding whatever is inconvenient. Recognising that such responses only defer and exacerbate the problem the poet opts, in a characteristically anti-colonial ecofeminist move (much like Yvonne Vera in *Nehanda*), for a more sustainable course, resolutely giving voice to the historical figures, events, land and other natural elements that have long been suppressed in colonial, apartheid and even supposedly postcolonial South Africa<sup>5</sup>.

Overcoming the bifurcations of intellectual discourse Khan links the history of Robben Island as a prison to the ecological degradation that occurred over four centuries. This is done not only for political redress, as justified as that is. Instead the poet draws on the resistance art against apartheid to offer a significant development upon it. She does this because she sees the challenge of environmental justice as being central to the restorative process in South Africa. The rationale for this may perhaps be explained by Patrick Murphy's axiom, 'Nature becomes crucial as a means for self-understanding' (1991:158), although the collection and the poet's

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<sup>5</sup> Frantz Fanon's (1963:148-205) characterization of post-independent states in 'The Pitfalls of National Consciousness' seems to describe many of the contradictions of post-apartheid South Africa even though it was written many decades earlier.

involvement in the struggle suggest a broader reference. In ‘Engaging the Shades of Robben Island’ Khan suggests that what is required for the psychic healing of self and society is the fine tuning of postcolonial, ecological and feminist (i.e., empowered and engaged) modes of thinking. While most of the poems deal with the colonial and settler colonial eras, it is clear that this project needed the post-apartheid context to be initiated.

The challenge of liberating people, land and voices, which is central to the work of many women and black poets in South Africa (Narismulu 2007), is tackled directly in the opening lines of ‘Engaging the Shades of Robben Island’:

*Robben Eylandt  
Isla de Cornelia  
Penguin Island*

I have said all the slave names your rapists called you.

The poem opens with a dramatic enactment of dialogical voicing, as the speaker succinctly asserts the long overdue need for naming, direct speech and direct forms of address and dialogue, while tackling environmental and human rights abuses that have characterised the island and those metonymically represented entities, South Africa, the African continent, and the world, for as the Poet’s Note asserts, the poems seek to present ‘Robben Island as a microcosm of global issues’ (13).

Summit of Ancient Mountain,  
Eden of seal, penguin, sandpiper, cormorant,  
oystercatcher, gull, tortoise, Arctic tern and sacred ibis,

What is your real name?

Do you own one?

Or have the unspeakable mutilations you’ve suffered made you unnameable?  
Maybe you will intuit a name into the ether;  
a name that would help you heal,  
help us heal.

The first stanza resembles an island (as do most of the stanzas with their centered lines of type in a sea of white), and celebrates birds and animals, which locates the poet in an orthogonal system from the forces of oppression. Further, it is interesting that poetry is the literary genre which most closely parallels song (including birdsong). Added to this, there has long been speculation that the development of speech in humans has avian links, at least at the behavioural level (e.g., see Goldstein, King and West 2003).

Many postcolonial African women poets have used their art to reject stereotypes of African women as submissive and silenced<sup>6</sup>, and Khan does this as well. That the speaker is unencumbered by the history of colonial and patriarchal silencing is apparent in the strong descriptions, questions and cauterising critiques throughout the poem, as praises and interrogative voices are elided but not conflated. The words ‘Summit of Ancient Mountain, / Eden of seal’ are suggestive of the invocatory naming practices of a praise poet (*imbongi*), an office traditionally reserved for men, although women resistance poets like Sankie Nkondo and Gcina Mhlophe have at times assumed such a mantle to address overlapping struggles against apartheid and patriarchy (Narismulu 2003). The voice of the *imbongi* also represents a break with the individual and more easily marginalised poetic voices (in modern western traditions) in favour of the combined roles of healer, social conscience and critic, as developed by poets like Wally Serote<sup>7</sup> (e.g., 1972,

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<sup>6</sup> Refer, for example, to the work of Sankie Nkondo (1990), Gcina Mhlophe (2002), Nise Malange (1986), the Thula Baba Collective (Lockett 1990), Freedom Nyamubaya (1986), Kristina Rungano (1984), Leila Djabali and Maria Manuela Margarido (both in Chipasula and Chipasula 1995).

<sup>7</sup> It may be argued that the Romantic poets were also deeply interested in the spiritual and healing qualities of nature, open to the influence of some popular art forms, attentive to the creative capacities of artists, and alert to the dangers of technology, with a few of them showing interest in either human rights or animal life. However, they were also very focused on the individual, on human feelings, intuition and imagination over reason, and on the exotic. They tended to see themselves as isolated geniuses, so they privileged the position of the artist and often valorised individual freedom over social concerns.

1978). The final lines ‘help you heal, / help us heal’ emphasise the speaker’s attentiveness to the challenge of global healing, and clarify the opening lines which, from this vantage point, take on the appearance of an exorcism (line four) followed by praises that seek to re-establish the integrity of degraded entities<sup>8</sup>.

Feminist retrieval is evident in the way the poet populates her poems about a place inhabited by very few women in 340 years with what are often understood as feminine energies of articulation (i.e., both expressivity and linkages), healing, and spirituality. The (usually female) *sangomas* that are referred to several times in the poems symbolise the poet’s attempts to divine suppressed histories and to heal deep and ancient wounds. Indeed the poet’s postcolonial ecofeminist approach draws her to take on a role closer to the poets of the African oral tradition, that is, taking on the roles of historian, healer, teacher and social conscience. This enables the reclamation and reconstitution of suppressed experiences and histories through art, so beginning the healing of violated relationships with nature.

The third question, ‘Or have the unspeakable mutilations you’ve suffered made you unnameable?’ reverberates against the opening assertion (‘I have said’). It works reflexively to expose the defence of ruling interests and logics as an anachronistic divine right in the still dominant discourses and even some incipient discourses (as in support for the use of public funds to prop up bankrupt corporations from ABSA Bank to General Motors, or to make specious arms acquisitions). It is against such regimes of studied silence or unaccountability that the poet produces a critique of one of the most eulogised cities in the world:

The scars inflicted by your intruders  
lie embossed like saltpetred welts on your hide.  
Necklacing your coastline are rotting military Installations,  
shell stores, water-logged underground bunkers; a menace for

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<sup>8</sup> Less dismissive of technology than the Romantics, though very critical of colonial and neo-colonial destruction of the earth, Khan tends to focus on the significance and interconnectedness of all life forms, and champions the rights of oppressed groups as much as individuals, while she is attentive to the past for she sees it as being intimately connected to the present.

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wild creatures, shooting ranges, zero beacons, rusting guns pointing  
heavenwards like a curse ....

All this waste;  
unnecessary eye-sores masterminded  
by Brit and Boer for the protection of  
Cape Town that was never under  
siege...

The poem throws up strings of challenges in ‘intruders’, ‘slave’, ‘rapists’, ‘mutilations’, ‘scars’, and ‘welts’ in the midst of the references to healing. It rejects the detritus of the old colonial military installations as well as the apartheid prison structures. There is criticism of colonial ruling class masculinity in the lists of ‘unnecessary eye sores’ that attest less to civilisation than to the spurious ‘waste’ of local resources to protect overweening characters in jingoistic boys’ own projects of global domination<sup>9</sup>. This is the how a postcolonial ecofeminist analysis renders history from the subject position of a black South African minority woman:

The poems have engaged her [the island’s] shadows with the sincere hope that as many of the shades, images and shadows encrusted in her past be recognized by our Time as one of its own concerns, be constantly re-membered and cautiously steered away from the precipice of forgetfulness and disappearance (Khan 13).

In retrieving ecological discourse from its settler colonial history of blaming oppressed indigenous people, the poet attempts to ensure that the reader is ‘steered away from the precipice of forgetfulness and disappearance’ (Poet’s Note 13). The use of the archaic forms suggests that time has been frozen by settler/colonialism. What is being challenged is the imprint of the early maps on which the colonial enterprises were launched, for instead of *finding* precipices and dragons what the colonialists actually

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<sup>9</sup> In yet another articulation of the power of rogue patriarchy, neo-imperial coup plotter Mark Thatcher, son of the former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, recently escaped justice.

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did was to *create* and sustain ‘forgetfulness and disappearance’, as exemplified in constructs such as the prison island.

Alluding to the anti-colonial resistance movements that challenged various colonially inspired ‘precipices’, the poet launches an important new challenge to a shadow that continues to obscure the history and lived reality of this society. She describes her poetic project as a ‘crucial journey’ (13), and the scale of development required applies not only to herself but also to her readers, who have still to come to terms with the complexities of our histories and subject positions. That the poet has the courage to confront these dragons shows the value of engaged artists to the healing, discursive development and leadership of this young democracy.

The following lines suggest how the island and its fauna and flora were as oppressed as the generations of South Africans who engaged in legitimate struggles for freedom. The ecological critique is expressed in lines of mourning that record the impact of a relatively short span of human devastation of land that was formed many millions of years ago<sup>10</sup>:

At the dawning of this century  
with every rock of your shores heavy with human scent,  
your waters contaminated with rotting carcasses  
of ships and whales and the blood of bird, human and seal,

your penguins had gone,  
your seals had gone,  
your whales had gone

You had become a desolate wasteland  
a waterless prison-hell  
for best forgotten *lepers, lunatics*, social deviants  
or any perceived threat or opposition to the Crown (18).

The lines ‘your penguins had gone / your seals had gone / your

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<sup>10</sup> In a striking twist of fate, various sites in southern Africa have been acknowledged as cradles of humanity (joining other well known sites on the east of the continent).

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whales had gone' reverberate desolately against the lush lines in the opening stanza which celebrate seven varieties of birds:

Eden of seal, penguin, sandpiper,  
cormorant,  
oystercatcher, gull, tortoise, Arctic tern and  
sacred ibis.

The speaker's use of the vocative case when addressing the island underscores the width and depth of the poet's perspective. These verses offer a powerful model for navigating the old exclusive binaries that were entrenched in dominant South African discourses and which treated social justice and environmental justice as competing oppressions. Clearly the poet does more than accept the recoding the island as a valued place, she recognises it as a living entity with a particular history and rights:

What were you like prior to the predation of your wild,  
long before the first longboats invaded your shores?  
Ocean teeming with whales all around you—  
Coastline alive with penguins, ibises,  
cormorants, pelicans, gulls, tortoises, seals ...  
You were wild, you were free (18).

Notwithstanding Spivak (1988) and Trinh's (1989) work, environmental justice is based on rights that extend beyond those who are able to speak and even beyond those who are still not heard, such as the many natural entities that have been disregarded for centuries (except when pushed to extremes, as with animals forced to deal with encroaching humans or, on a far greater scale, the warming of the earth). The poet does this conscientiously, deploying the genre (in the last six lines below) not just to assign responsibility but to educate readers as well. The conceptual sweep of these stanzas suggests that the critique does not stop at challenging the exclusive constructions of subjectivity<sup>11</sup> that characterised previous regimes but also encompasses those that have persisted through the 1980s and into

<sup>11</sup> The hegemonic subjectivity of the previous regime is still heard across the country in the opposition of entrenched groups to democratizing processes.

the 2000s in the culture of executive presidents, denialism and clandestine arms deals:

... It was no explorative urge expended for the good-of-all;  
it was a resource-hunting, bounty-snatching lustfulness  
... To conquerors, life, land and ecology were never sacred things.

The moment they saw you,  
they had discovered you.  
You were their prize—  
They had the right to take you,  
name you, loot, plunder and destroy you -  
Your protracted rape across the timeline  
began with the breaking of your birds, your beasts  
and the rockshelf that undergirds  
all that grows on you ...  
Whole colonies of trusting penguins.  
called 'feathered fish', by the English,  
were herded into longboats to be butchered,  
their eggs harvested by the boatload  
not allowing them the grace of time to recover  
to regenerate their kind (18-19).

Besides exposing the gender, cultural, religious and national chauvinisms behind colonial plunder, these lines effectively challenge readers about our own neo-colonial subject positions, and record the alienated relations that people still have with their fellow creatures and the natural environment. The word 'rape' is used again to highlight the link between violations of nature and pathological constructions of masculinity. That women have also been party to the development of these crises, if only in a failure to challenge them, is implicit.

The repetition of the non-specific pronoun 'they' flags the recognition of another anomaly. No postcolonial feminist can afford to join in the pretence that about half of the sovereign colonial/apartheid subjects were female and, despite patriarchal socialization and repression, enjoyed the

vote (by secret ballot) for most of the twentieth century. But, despite the work of progressive organisations and activists like Ruth First and Jenny Curtis (Schoon), most women were not noticeably more progressive than ruling class men. Engaging with such contradictions are a necessary part of an engagement with the dominant, for denialism achieves little against such material manifestations of power. Despite such sobering subtexts, the final lines of the section confidently assume the subject position of healer and teacher:

With blue-print of mistrust-for-humans imprinted within their genes,  
your seals are still gone,  
your whales are still gone -  
Your penguins have returned  
but scuttle away at the threatening  
sounds of approaching footfalls—  
Our generation needs to earn their respect,  
needs to regain their trust once again (19).

Again, in stanzas such as these, instead of just rejoicing in the shutdown of the globally excoriated prison, or being content to lionise the freed political prisoners, or anticipating the declaration of the island as a UNESCO World Heritage Site (as happened in 1999), the poem focuses on the problems that need attention. The speaker carefully maps the deep links between environmental and social justice, exploring the long parallel history of injustices to people and nature, and weighing up the responsibilities of the present. The Foreword to the poems, written by Ahmed Kathrada (a long term political prisoner) bears out the poem's inclusive focus on the rights and well being of all the inhabitants of the island:

The diversity and freedom of the bird, marine and animal life on Robben Island have also long been a source of great joy to us and have provided meaningful contrast to the prison conditions that pertained in the past. Khan's work captures the sense of creative diversity, of a home for many creatures, birds of different species, buck and other life forms (11).

Although Kathrada does not say as much, his words show that the long period of incarceration did not blunt the sensitivity of political and human rights activists to the rights of all creatures. Instead it may have had the unintended consequence of expanding consciousness (springing the cage), so triumphing both politically and spiritually over the apartheid state's quintessentially selfish and repressive agenda. The expansive consciousness that the poem articulates is balanced with an acute concern for the challenges of the present, as a line in Poet's Note states: 'Robben Island [is] a microcosm of global issues' (13). This explains the poet's attentiveness to offering a carefully contextualised and historically informed engagement with this part of the South African and African landscape. Of course by suggesting close parallels between Robben Island and mainland South Africa, the poem also counters hype about the exceptionalism of Cape Town (especially as such discourses reproduce the divisions entrenched by apartheid).

The short second section of the poem, which deals with the early centuries of colonial presence, reiterates the established formula like a refrain from an oral poem. However, the vituperative echoes in the lines below slip out of any poetic mode to render the prosaic reality of the long years of oppression:

*Robben Island*  
*island prison*  
*purgatorial dumping-ground*  
*hell-hole*  
*cosmic joke*

these are but a few of the monstrous shapes you had been made to take:  
a perverse perpetuation of settler punishment  
you had to carry across 400 yoked years (20).

Not only were the land and its fauna and flora destroyed but numerous captives were judged deviant and interred by the colonialists as they entrenched their settlements in the Cape:

Flung into an existence of hard labour  
    *swart slawen en bandieten* hammered and dislodged  
muscle-busting slabs of Malmesbury shale in *Jan se Gat*, the first  
of your multiple hack-wounds gouged out in the name of civilization,  
with the flog-sting of a cat o' nine-tails clawing their mutilated backs.

Shuffling amidst the ear-blasting cacophony of shattering rock,  
    with taste, smell, sight obliterated by ceaseless storms of dust  
and skin slit and arrowed by raining fragments of rock, they plodded  
precariously on wetting their dust-cracked tongues with salt water.

Breaking rock they broke their backs,  
    lost their ears, eyes, souls to build  
Van Riebeeck's castle, the slave-lodge, the prisons,  
    the mainland bridges they would never cross,  
    the churches, schoolhouses & halls (20)

Such descriptions of the abuses that were part of the early colonial projects contradict what is presented to schoolchildren and tourists as heritage buildings in the 'Mother City'. Encoded in poetry, a genre attuned to emotions and the subtlety of the senses, the destructive culture that accompanied the invasion is communicated very powerfully. But the poet is not content just with tackling the colonial violations. By constituting Robben Island as having 'breasts of solid rock' (20), she challenges the old idea that woman is to man as nature is to culture (Norwood 1996:324), and exposes another patriarchal maxim.

The third section of the poem begins by focusing on the island as a prison in the eighteenth century, although the narrative resists dwelling on the most dismal aspects of the period by focusing on the irrepressible earth and incorrigible prisoners:

The 18<sup>th</sup> century chronicled you as a fully-fledged  
convict station Robben Island. Yet, somehow, your  
atmosphere of relentless hardship and abuse did not bar  
love from blooming and bursting all seals of silence;  
    rock from sprouting flowers.

The spirits of your people were far from crushed  
and seers still walked your waters (21)

The narrative then moves back in time to offer an alternative account of the lives of the Khoi leader Autshumato (who was described in the colonial-apartheid texts as Harry the Hottentot, or Harry the *Strandloper*) and his niece Krotoa:

Divested of names and birthright  
Autshumato and Krotoa were ferried  
*oor die see, oor die see, in die eiland stemertjie*  
every time they incurred the wrath of their insatiable masters (22).

Autshumato eventually secured his freedom by escaping from the island and ‘he was not re-captured / but his land had already slipped into Dutch hands’ (22). The poem contradicts the colonial claim that the Khoi were wanderers (*strandlopers*) and therefore had no rights to the land. It is interesting that the poem challenges the colonial view of history just about every time it refers to Autshumato. Given that no restitution for descendants is envisaged this late in the new dispensation, it seems that the poet is exercising the anticolonial option of thinking beyond the secured box of colonial entitlements and neo-colonial deals.

Krotoa’s fate was more complicated, as the narrative recounts. She was renamed Eva by the van Riebeecks, who took her into their household:

Robbed of her Khoikhoi identity at eight  
Krotoa, *pygmalioned* into a Dutch girl,  
was baptised 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.

...The Company buried baptised Krotoa  
away from her kindred spirit-soil...  
in a remote corner of the  
Castle-fortress where she had served,

had loved & married, was widowed,  
lost her children, lost her people,  
her head, heart & carved-up soul (23)

Like the land, black women and men were used, abused ('carved-up') and summarily discarded. Krotoa's story is presented as a cautionary tale to postcolonial subjects, much like Zakes Mda's satirical representation of members of an Eastern Cape community who imagine that the building of a casino will alleviate poverty and joblessness (2000). Using criticism and irony these lines mourn and rage against the fate of the abject Krotoa and the countless, nameless others who have been conscripted into serving various empires against their own interests.

The fourth section of the poem critiques the colonial encroachment on land through the experiences of various Eastern Cape leaders who were imprisoned for refusing to serve as imperial instruments:

a line of prominent Xhosa chiefs abducted  
from the colonist-coveted valleys of the Eastern Frontier  
... driven off ancestral-lands  
like the wildlife before them; legitimate leaders torn away ...

... Displaced from acres-upon-acres of lush,  
arable terrain they were re-settled on the craggy,  
petrified stretch of moonscape adjacent  
to [the] sand-beach at Murray's Bay (24).

One of these chiefs was the prophet-warrior Makana, who was imprisoned by the British colonialists in the nineteenth century. Makana escaped on a boat with thirty fellow prisoners, and the narrative constitutes their bid for freedom as a heroic journey. What in other contexts would arouse feminist concerns about an overemphasis on masculinist expressive energies are treated as necessary in the struggle against the larger evil of colonialism<sup>12</sup>, and the following stanzas participate energetically in the

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<sup>12</sup> Such are the contradictions that African and other southern feminisms are obliged to integrate into their already complicated agendas.

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drama of the escape, while only hinting at the tragic outcome in each of their final lines:

... The flesh-eating cormorants  
hovering overhead echoed Makana's cries as he hollered  
words of encouragement to the billow-battling warriors  
swimming toward their freedom, towards the deceptively  
close shore or the uncharted ocean floor (24).

... Makana rode the slapping, slamming, crashing  
dragonbacks of water as cresting and falling  
they ferried him to the sacred cavern of  
talking bones and judging stones  
unknowable leagues beneath the ocean bed (25).

The stanza that follows offers an interesting representation of anti-colonial heroism. The speaker still does not refer directly to the drownings, but telescopes the tragedies of incarceration by quickly moving on to other tragic figures (Siyolo, Fadana and Maqoma), while drawing the reading audience into the oral performance:

If you listen to the voices in the water  
they whisper the saddest requiems ...  
The pictures of history are treated with acid:  
Scratch them listener, they burn! (25)

The last two lines, which allude metaphorically to old photographic processes, represent a displaced climax as the poet elects to focus on her audience with the reminder that the history of struggle is not without pain, even for subsequent generations. This is another instance of a characteristically feminist articulation of an anti-colonial incident. The actions of the speaker serve to draw readers closer in a move that sacrifices a structural feature (the tragic ending) to redirect energy into strengthening the emotional engagement with the audience. This is not just a sentimental move that unwittingly caricatures women's supposed preference for emotional



connections over historical facts (which have in any case been communicated quite poetically in the previous stanzas). Rather it represents a strategic choice to connect with the always living audience, who may be catalysed into action to redress and not just accept all the facts of history. Such a reading is supported by a subsequent stanza that depicts the unequal struggles that characterize the history of colonised people:

History perpetuates the same old worn-out story:  
Superior weaponry and settler-induced  
starvation swindled indigenous people  
out of their territory—  
Spear, shield, club & assegai,  
no match for gun, cannonball & firestick (25)

Certain that the reader knows that Maqoma was the renowned Eastern Cape leader who developed a form of guerrilla warfare used by subsequent generations of freedom fighters, the narrative deals with his vain hope that the Governor of the Cape, George Grey, would free them as well as their land, which had been seized by the British (26). When Maqoma was eventually released after twelve years he continued with the struggle for liberation:

Armed with an undying love for the land  
and a death-defying desperation  
to reclaim his people's dignity,  
Maqoma and his tribe reoccupied the land  
that had always been theirs.  
A truly heroic gesture that angered the British  
who had him re-exiled to you devoid of a trial;  
his people's land now indisputably Crown-land,  
they owed him no second hearing (26).

In these passages the poet shows that her subject position is as much informed by the history of anti-colonial struggles as it is by the more recent struggles for gender equality. This seems to be the case with a range of women who were involved in the resistance movements, for whom the early

anti-colonial struggles cannot be separated from the newer forms that evolved, such as gender and ecological struggles. Indeed, attentiveness to the early struggles over land are part of an integrated vision of freedom, as is apparent from the African feminists who have an inclusive approach, even as they focus on securing women's interests (e.g. Lauretta Ngcobo and Yvonne Vera), and as they focus on securing gender and environmental justice simultaneously (e.g., Wangari Maathai). The poem then moves on to examine one of the most controversial episodes in South African history:

Were the apocalyptic images in Nongqawuse's visions  
engineered by gluttonous settlers who hankered  
after Xhosa ancestral land?  
Was the Cattle-Killing [a]  
Holocaust or [a] death-wish  
come to pass? (26)

The narrative touches on the dominant reading that what happened in 1856-7 may have been a mass suicide, and it engages with the suspicions about colonialist manipulation. Notwithstanding the persuasive arguments of Jeff Guy, Helen Bradford (1996) and Meg Samuelson (2007) about gaps in the scholarship and unaddressed questions of gender, there is the intriguing possibility that the widespread destruction of crops and cattle may have been part of an early and desperate anti-colonial resistance project. Such are the yields of an integrated approach to the challenges of this conjuncture.

The beginning of the rehabilitation of Robben Island during the 1990s (as a result of the long association with the imprisoned leaders of the resistance) freed the poet to focus on its long history as a site of multiple oppressions, not least of which was its use as a dumping ground by medical professionals who took care of 'the contamination- / paranoia of the fast-expanding colony':

Dr Birtwhistle and the management of Somerset Hospital  
decided that exile to the ultimate  
periphery was the only antidote for people  
saddled with incurable diseases, rotting  
bodies and fragmenting souls

... you had to be the colossal junkyard;  
a container for all the colony's outcasts (27)

That the medical personnel violated their patients, their own humanity and their professional ethics seems to be offered (particularly through the sarcasm of words like 'antidote' and 'fragmenting souls') as a cautionary tale for modern professionals, and particularly those in the civil service who seem to believe they are not subject to public scrutiny. The metaphors 'junkyard' and 'container', piled dissonantly one upon the other, pithily render the range of abuses perpetrated by the state and its professional dispatchers. Besides this the poet also offers a critique of patriarchal imperial science:

[The] universalizing texts of science and medicine [and literary studies] have elided the anomalous, the marginal, the local, the particular, erasing them, absenting them, dominating them.... Some [feminist/poststructuralist] theorists have called for a revalidation of narrative, telling the history of a particular individual, as a means of restoring the absent referent, the thou, to the texts (Hunter, 1991, in Donovan 1996:163).

... [This is because] Western symbolic discourses, then, often operate in this way as dominative practices. Their signifying texts take over and reshape the literal, the material, expunging in the process the living being, the thou, the subject, casting it in the passive form as a signified, while retaining agency for the dominative signifier. Such a mentality has enabled destructive Western dominative practices toward nature (Donovan 1996:164, my square bracket insertions).

This helps clarify the reasons the poet felt driven to construct a complex, wide-ranging and integrated poem about the island in Table Bay. Ecofeminists try to halt the degradation of the Earth by raising awareness and constituting it not as an object but as the primary subject upon which all other life forms are dependent. This postcolonial ecofeminist uses the modern equivalent of the vocative case 'thou' (i.e., 'you') to restore all those entities that had been objectified (earth, human beings and other life forms)

to full discursive subjectivity and sovereignty. Asserting the subjectivity of the earth and other life forms is an apposite way for this poet-activist to announce, extend and underwrite her own liberation from oppression.

The poet's interest in both the spiritual and the material forms of ecofeminism is also apparent in the fifth part of the poem which deals with the era before the formal end of apartheid. The idea that 'bones persist' and 'bones are indestructible' (29) is worked into a metaphor celebrating literary art that preserves shared history (much like the core-cliches of oral stories):

The stories are bones  
that would always  
re-member  
your oppressed past,  
our oppressed past (30).

Khan's commitment is clearly not just to speaking about the subject of resistance but to letting the subject speak through the medium. This is in keeping with her restorative mission, as outlined in her Acknowledgements (2002:9).

The sixth and final section opens with the recognition that, despite centuries of exclusionary logics, no human being faces the future alone. The end of the opening stanza and the beginning of the second (and final) stanza capture the speaker's resolve that despite ongoing challenges there will be a better outcome through greater unity between people and all of the rest of nature:

Sure-footed we walk towards the delta  
still flooded with blood ...

We squirm as unabated its bloody tributaries  
still course across our warring planet and  
History still writes itself in blood -  
Together we look into the heavens and welcome  
the breaking storm as it thunders its promise to  
unclog every river and wash all the spilt

blood of the centuries away,  
Robben Island.

Another resistance poet with a very early and sustained interest in the postcolonial challenge of healing is Wally Serote, as is evident in early poems such as 'My Brothers in the Streets' (1972) and in a range of poems in his collection *Behold Mama, Flowers* (1978). The speakers in these poems show close correspondences to the speaker in 'Engaging the Shades of Robben Island', in that there is deep faith in grassroots resources, a willingness to engage frankly and constructively with the horrific effects of oppression, and a capacity for the transcendent creative thinking necessary to progress beyond the pervasive madness of empire.

Central to the production of such innovative ways of seeing are new forms of articulation, spoken out of a more integrated understanding of the world. This reinforces the ethic of respect for diversity (if Darwin's theory is not persuasive). It also underscores the importance of attending to the most neglected and oppressed demographics. The agency shown by the poet, not least through the construction of a confident and assertive speaker<sup>13</sup>, offers a reminder that most black women emblemise a range of groups that are most vulnerable to the forms that capitalism has taken under colonialism and neo-colonialism. That the poet is interested in working with earth, gender and anti-colonial challenges while resisting ghettoisation is instructive. That she is not content just to articulate her own interests is refreshing in a world still struggling with racial, gender, cultural, class and national chauvinisms.

It is sobering that in literary studies there seem to be scarcely any parallel developments as yet. The 2009 comparative literature study 'Consuming Subjects: Theorizing New Models of Agency for Literary Criticism in African Studies', by Wendy Laura Belcher, looks promising but records no parallel, advance, or conceptually integrated response to the challenging conjunctures experienced by the majority of the world's people. However,

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<sup>13</sup> Women's voices are often ignored, and the problems are usually compounded in the case of black women. In her work on black women's voices Carole Boyce Davies (1995) delineates not just the impact of the oppressions but the importance of women's agency in overcoming the challenges.

there are references in Sociological literature (notably the review essay by Ann Denis, 2008) that show that integrated responses to social challenges are new (dating from 2005) and are the contribution of feminist sociologists. But these are analytical approaches and not creative approaches as well.

In 1999, two years after 'Engaging the Shades of Robben Island' was written (but not yet published) the economist Amartya Sen made the observation that, 'Nothing, arguably, is as important today in the political economy of development as an adequate recognition of political, economic and social participation and leadership of women' (1999:203). Clearly, in inaugurating a postcolonial ecofeminist subject position Khan pre-empts and in fact supersedes this call, from the 'developing world' itself. The poet's resourceful response to one place that has been desecrated offers a powerful model of how the multiple facets of imperial and neo-imperial globalization may be apprehended and engaged more comprehensively. Each new global health, environmental, financial and political crisis jolts us into deeper recognition that we live in a very small neighbourhood, and that the solutions require more than technological fixes; they require shifts in how we see ourselves and our world, and shifts in our value systems. While the social sciences have long recognised how difficult it is for human beings to make cognitive shifts, such a challenge is in fact a particular strength of the arts, for artists tend to be the harbingers of new ways of making sense of who we are and what we need to do to take better care of our world and the generations to come.

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# Celebrity Monkeys and Other Notables: Recent Life Writing Publications Reviewed

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## **Abstract**

James Franklin observes that research has shown that thirsty rhesus macaque monkeys would rather look at pictures of celebrity monkeys than drink water; humans share this fascination with extraordinary con-specifics. The desire to get information about the minutiae of other people's lives is manifested across the publishing spectrum from the sensationalist and trivialised to the erudite. In this essay I comment on what can be learnt from the reviews of recent life writing publications I have collected. Going by what is reviewed here, between 2005 and 2008 (which is when most of these auto/biographies were published) an average of about 17 autobiographies and biographies were published per year. Given the relatively small numbers of South African book-buyers, this is an indisputably generous allocation of publishers' resources to life writing. I consider the ratio of biography to autobiography, and who is deemed a worthy subject in each genre.

The differences between the two genres are analysed. I argue that the issue of how telling one's own story might empower the storyteller is no less important in post-apartheid South Africa than it was during apartheid.

**Key Concepts:** autobiography, biography, post-apartheid, South Africa, reviews.

In a review of Susan Tridgell's study of biography, James Franklin observes that in the latest Weird Science research, rhesus macaque monkeys, who had been deprived of water and were thus thirsty, were found to prefer looking at pictures of celebrity monkeys to drinking cherry-flavoured water. I am not

sure what a celebrity monkey is, though I am sure I have never encountered one, and my inquisitiveness about such pre-eminent primates is not the reason why I mention Franklin's comment. It is rather because of what he has to say about how we humans share with our hairier cousins this fascination with what extraordinary con-specifics are doing. There is, he says, no point in resisting the allure of information about others' lives. For some of us Franklin's insistence that we should give in to the primates' (perhaps even primitive) enthrallment with luminaries might go against the grain: those above a certain age or of a certain bent might be dismissive of apparently endless celebrity gossip in the popular media. So this pop/film star is single (or involved) again, that one in (or out of) rehab, another one losing (or gaining) weight ... so? The thing is, though, that our fascination with the lives of notable individuals is not confined to sensationalist mass media. The reading public are, like television viewers and the YouTube generation, drawn to life stories. The desire to get information about the minutiae of other people's lives is manifested across the publishing spectrum from the sensationalist and trivialised to the erudite. That this is not merely an unsubstantiated opinion is borne out by the fact, reported by Franklin, that biographies outsell novels in English-speaking countries.

We cannot assess, from the reviews of life writing summarised here, the relative weightings—in publications or in sales—of fiction to non-fiction in South Africa but we can ascertain that non-fictional life stories are seen as worthwhile publishing ventures: a total of almost 80 biographies and autobiographies, the vast majority of or by South Africans<sup>1</sup>, are featured. This is not a complete inventory of all life writing published recently by or

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<sup>1</sup> I am interested in South Africans who are the subjects of life writing, and also in life writing texts (sometimes by non-South Africans) that focus on South African experiences. For instance, journalist Peter Hawthorne is English by birth but has spent most of his working life in South Africa ([http://www.litnet.co.za/cgi-in/giga.cgi?cmd=cause\\_dir\\_news\\_item&cause\\_id=1270&news\\_id=52918&cat\\_id=557](http://www.litnet.co.za/cgi-in/giga.cgi?cmd=cause_dir_news_item&cause_id=1270&news_id=52918&cat_id=557)) and Zambian born Elaine Maane and Zimbabwean born Judith Garfield Todd are, as far as I can ascertain, both now living in South Africa. It is not too important, for the purposes of this survey, to be punctilious regarding the nationality of the subject of the auto/ biographical text. The intention is to get a sense of whose life stories, related in some way to South Africa, are being published.

about South Africans. Rather, it represents those books that have been reviewed, in a range of sites (mostly English, but with some Afrikaans)<sup>2</sup>. Aided by the sterling efforts of the National English Literary Museum, I have gathered these reviews in the last few years<sup>3</sup>. Some biographies and autobiographies are not reflected here as the books reviewed are all in English, so there may be some (a small number, judging by previous research) which are published in other languages<sup>4</sup> and which are not included. Furthermore, there are probably review sites that escaped the net<sup>5</sup>. The point is that the 78 biographies and autobiographies featured here represent an impressive output in any case, and the fact that the total number of life writing publications in the period covered will certainly be higher than this is remarkable. If we go by what the reviews collected, we can see that between 2005 and 2008 (which is when most of these auto/biographies were published) an average of about 17 autobiographies and biographies were published per year<sup>6</sup>. Given the relatively small numbers of South African book-buyers, this is an indisputably generous allocation of publishers' resources to life writing.

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<sup>2</sup> Reviews come from predominantly South African and a handful of overseas sources, including newspapers such as *Beeld*, *Sowetan* and *The Guardian*, academic publications such as *The African Book Publishing Record* and *English in Africa*, and popular magazines such as *Fair Lady* and *Bona*.

<sup>3</sup> Most of the reviews were originally published in English; a few from Afrikaans publications were translated by myself. I summarised the reviews.

<sup>4</sup> Andre Brink's autobiography is rather rare in that it appeared in both English and Afrikaans. It is, however, not unique, for Krog's *A Change of Tongue* shares this distinction.

<sup>5</sup> I cannot say how many life writing texts, not included in the reviews, appeared in the years covered here. It is my belief, however, that the majority of the new publications are represented.

<sup>6</sup> In some instances there is a considerable time lag between the publication of the book and the date of the review. Thus the seven publications which appeared between 2001 and 2004 would have featured in previous *AlterNation* review collections had the reviews been available when those articles were prepared. For instance, the *African Book Publishing Review* of Antjie Krog's *A Change of Tongue* appeared three years after its release.

But when Franklin avers in his review of Tridgell's book on biography that *biographies* outsell fiction in the English-speaking world, he is, we can assume, speaking specifically about biography, not life writing in general<sup>7</sup>. Can we infer a predilection for biography amongst South Africans from these reviews? One way to consider this, while excluding fiction from the equation, is to look at the ratio of biographical to autobiographical. Whichever features more prominently is likely to be the genre that more writers choose to employ and that publishers think readers will want to buy. The findings are somewhat surprising. Compared with autobiography, biography has a relatively small showing. In fact, the ratio is slightly more than two autobiographies to every biography. I shall return to the autobiographies later, for the moment I would like to consider the biographies. As Lynn Z. Bloom observes, 'In theory, biography is democratic. Anyone can be a biographical subject, whether ancient or contemporary, historically significant or personally notorious' (2001:190). In practice, however, subjects with no notable achievements are unlikely to be chosen, unless their lives or the era in which they live or lived exemplify particular concerns of contemporary readers. Typically, successful people, in a diverse range of occupations, are more likely to be the subjects of biography than are those who do not distinguish themselves. Biographical subjects will in all probability be those 'rich and poor, known and unknown, [... whose] accomplishments are worthy of notice' (Bloom 2001:190).

Twenty-one biographies are reviewed in the collection, and of these only two (Joseph Silver and the pseudonymous 'Sizwe Magadla') are of unknown or little known people. These subjects, although not themselves prominent, nevertheless have, or represent a group who has, experience of an event or condition which enjoys public attention. For a biography to attract popular readership there are two crucial factors: sensationalist or topical interest, and the celebrity factor. These biographies of unknown or little known people fall into the former category: scandalously, Silver was, the subtitle informs us, a racketeer and psychopath; the story of 'Sizwe Magadla' focuses on his attitudes to HIV-AIDS. Since South Africa is a country with the one of the highest HIV-AIDS infections in the world, a biographical

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<sup>7</sup> The term biography is sometimes used to denote both biography about oneself (i.e. autobiography) and biography about another. For instance, the journal *Biography* encompasses both genres.

study such as Steinberg's of a man who falls into a high risk category is bound to command considerable notice.

The lives of famous people are obviously in greater demand than those of obscure folk, thus biographies which capitalise on the celebrity factor, predictably, make up the bulk of those published in this period. The remaining nine-tenths of the subjects of biographies covered in the reviews include authors (Herman Charles Bosman, Olive Schreiner, Bessie Head, Nadine Gordimer and the lesser known oral poet David Livingstone Phakamile Yali-Manisi), an artist (Gerard Sekoto), a sportsman (Papwa Sewgolum), MK activists (the story of the Delmas Four—Jabu Masina, Ting Ting Masango, Neo Potsane and Joseph Makhura—is told in a joint biography) and politicians (Nelson Mandela, Thabo Mbeki, Oliver Tambo and Frank Mdlalose).

Judging by the reviews, these stories of people with varying degrees of fame seem to belong to Bloom's category of popular biographies, rather than celebrity biographies. Popular biographies, she argues, are generally well substantiated by archival research and are usually analytic; they present their subjects 'as complex, multi-dimensional characters in multiple roles, or in many facets in a single role' and 'consider complex motivations and a host of familial, social, political, economic, religious, environmental, and other factors that influenced the subject's life and were in turn influenced by him or her' (Bloom 2001:190). In contrast, 'the subjects of celebrity biographies are likely to be presented as 'flat' characters', fitting 'the stereotyped image in the public eye or [inverting this] to reveal an alternative self previously undisclosed' (Bloom 2001:190). Such texts tend to cite few sources, playing 'to the same audience for whom the celebrities perform: fans, foes, and [...] sensation seekers' (Bloom 2001:191).

The biographies reviewed here vary from popular forms like the comic to the scholarly tome. The biography as pictorial comic is represented by *Nelson Mandela: The Authorised Comic Book*. This is no superficial lightweight. At 193 pages, the book would appear to attempt serious biographical treatment of Mandela's life for young readers. One reviewer deems this a very special book which gives much personal detail; it brought tears to her eyes (Samantha Bartlett 2008:10). Even a very slim (32 pages) biography of Oliver Tambo by Luli Callinicos is, according to the reviewer, informative and fluently written. At the other extreme are scholarly

heavyweights. The expansive biographies of Thabo Mbeki by William Mervin Gumede (476 pages) and Mark Gevisser (650 pages) seem to earn the respect of reviewers, as does Luli Callinicos' biography (672 pages) of Oliver Tambo.

Erudite biographies might, because of the research ballast, be supposed to carry greater legitimacy than less explicitly referenced life stories. However, both scholarly works and scantily annotated or referenced biographies are the result of selection, interpretation and shaping of material. In an essay entitled 'Biography: Inventing the Truth', Richard Holmes expresses what is now the generally accepted view (amongst scholars, at least): 'a final, truthful, "definitive" account must always be something of a chimera. We get back only the answers to the questions we ask of a life. The picture lives only within the frame we have invented for it' (1995:19). An important part of the biographer's task lies in persuading the reader to judge the portrait as truthful, and the success of this depends not only on the inclusion of verifiable information but also on the writer's ability to make the reader *want* to trust the author/narrator. In considering the credibility of a biography, the role of the rhetorical construction of narrator should not be underestimated as opposed to the more obviously necessary research component. Readers' willingness to trust the authorial narrator is often (but not always) tied to the portrayal of the narrator as neutral, objective and balanced. The longest biography reviewed here (an impressive 733 pages), by Ronald Suresh Roberts, fails to win confidence in the narrative voice. Although reviewer Robin Visel commends Roberts' biography of Nadine Gordimer for 'relative objectivity' and its 'nuanced analysis', she also criticises it for being 'loosely structured', 'confusing and repetitive' and, significantly, for having a narrator who is 'opinionated and defensive' and whose tone is 'inappropriately informal' (2007:320). So, despite the seven years' research on which it is based, Roberts' biography still (for Visel, at any rate) lacks authority<sup>8</sup>.

G. Thomas Couser avers that, when it comes to biography, authority involves rhetorical and ethical dimensions: 'is the narrative balanced and fair in its portrayal of its subject?' ('Authority' 2001:73). In a review of Charles van Onselen's 646 page biography of Joseph Silver, Philippa Levine focuses

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<sup>8</sup> The biography has to work especially hard to establish its worth since Gordimer withdrew her authorisation of the biography.

not on the rhetorical device of narrative voice and the justness of its claims, but rather on another rhetorical feature which is similarly tied to interpretation (and which thus has ethical implications): namely, narrative structure. Levine praises van Onselen for painting 'a vivid picture' on the strength of 'research [that] is nothing short of magnificent', but dislikes the story's 'moralistic [form which is] without a hint of nuance' (2008:217-219), leading inexorably, she charges, to its inadequately substantiated conclusion.

When the conclusion about the subject and her or his life is foregone, as is generally the case with everybody's hero, Nelson Mandela, how can a biographer approach the subject with a new question or tell the life story from a new angle? Judging by the numbers of new biographies, new Mandela biographers reviewed in this collection are undaunted. These new biographers have to establish their own take on a man that people feel they know and who has already been the subject of many biographies (the authorised biography by Antony Sampson appeared in 1999 but others preceded it); he has, furthermore, featured large in other people's autobiographies. Mandela is a key person in the autobiographies of both James Gregory (1995), Mandela's Robben Island jailor, and Rory Steyn (2000), his bodyguard. Their autobiographical accounts of their relationships with Mandela secure a potentially large readership by foregrounding Mandela's name in the books' titles. Incidentally, both of these are 'as-told-to' autobiographies. This strikes me as significant: can we not infer thereby that more or less anything to do with Mandela is worth publishing, even if the autobiographers cannot tell their stories well enough to make it in print on their own? Collaborators ensure that potentially popular (read lucrative?) narratives are publishable. And publish they, along with many new writers, do.

New books about Mandela can bank on a market which is far from saturation point. Of the total of twenty biographies reviewed below, over a quarter—that is seven new biographies—published between 2006 and 2008 are on Nelson Mandela! Six of these, by the Nelson Mandela Foundation, Elleke Boehmer, John Carlin, Peter Limb, Peter Magubane and Anna Trapido, were published in 2008, apparently seeking to capitalise on the publicity around Mandela's 90<sup>th</sup> birthday. How do these distinguish themselves from each other and from earlier biographies? The Nelson Mandela Foundation's *The Authorised Comic Book* targets young readers

who favour visual representation. Boehmer employs a postcolonial theoretical frame and examines the multiple representations of Mandela, his status as a site for symbolic struggles. Carlin traces South Africa's recent history, culminating—as the cover photograph indicates—in Mandela's strategic wooing of the rugby-mad sector of the electorate at the 1995 Rugby World Cup<sup>9</sup>. Limb's biography, tailored for high school pupils and public libraries, serves as an introductory biography. Magubane's biography is *A Photographic Tribute to Nelson Mandela*. In *Hunger for Freedom*, Trapido has composed an award-winning gastro-political history of Mandela and his times, a story told, one reviewer tells us, recipe by recipe. Doubtless, the Mandela well is not yet dry and we can expect more biographies, with foci even quirkier than Trapido's, and more autobiographies of people who have known the man (however slightly).

The contemporary South African biography market is, we see, heavily dominated by Mandela-magic. This Madiba-marketing is apparent also in new autobiographies that draw attention to the authors' relationship with Mandela in their titles: represented in the reviews are autobiographies by human rights lawyer George Bizos (*Odyssey to Freedom: a Memoir by the World-Renowned Human Rights Advocate, Friend and Lawyer to Nelson Mandela*), by priest Harry Wiggett (*A Time to Speak: Memories of Mandela's Prison Priest*) and journalists Andrew Drysdale (*My Neighbour Madiba... and others*), Peter Hawthorne (*The King's Eye and John Vorster's Elbow: Reporting the Mandela Years*) and Gerald Shaw (*Believe in Miracles: South African from Malan to Mandela—and the Mbeki Era*).

Mandela is widely revered as a unique individual, a moral giant in a world too often led by leaders of questionable ethics. But Mandela has resolutely denied that the honours belong to him as an individual; as a steadfast African National Congress party man he insists that he learned the meaning of courage from 'comrades in the struggle' (1994:615) and could accept the Nobel Peace Prize 'as nothing more than a representative of the millions of our people who dared to rise up' (1993:n.p.) against an unjust social system. His commitment to the ANC is unquestionable. The ANC thus looms large in life stories such as Mandela's; since the ANC is the governing party, it also dominates South African biographical production. If we place the biographies of Mandela reviewed below together with those of the other

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<sup>9</sup> The movie, titled *Invictus*, was released in 2009.



party faithful one can see that the ruling party is also currently ruling biographical output. Eleven (that is, more than half) of the recent biographies featured in the reviews are on three ANC politicians (including the two who became President): seven on Mandela and two each on Thabo Mbeki and Oliver Tambo.

This attention to politicians, especially ANC leaders, in the genre of biography is not a new trend. There have been many biographies of prominent ANC members in the past: several on Mandela, on Winnie Madikizela-Mandela and on Walter and Albertina Sisulu, to name only those that come immediately to mind. One might argue that a strong motivation for biographies of key politicians is the publishers' recognition of citizens' and international stakeholders' need or desire to know something of how this particular mover and shaker ticks. Marginal political figures are seldom the subjects of biographies. A case in point is Jacob Zuma. A biography of the erstwhile Deputy President only appeared once he was no longer in disgrace with fortune and his boss's eyes and his star had risen in the political firmament. Jeremy Gordin's *Zuma—A Biography* was published in 2008, the year that the ANC 'recalled' Mbeki from the presidency and the Zuma camp gained the upper hand.

However, Ruth Hoberman's observation that 'biography and politics are intimately related' (1995:111) refers not to the understandable attentiveness of the electorate and other international parties to decision makers' lives, nor to the way in which key politicians' lives tend to be favoured material for biographers, nor even to the fact that biographers need to be fully appraised of the historical and political context of the subject's life<sup>10</sup>. Rather, Hoberman points to the fact that,

a culture's dominant ideology—generated and sustained by those in power—will inevitably determine whose biographical data gets preserved and how the successful life is conceptualized. By focusing on those who achieve in visible, culturally sanctioned ways, biography has tended to overlook anyone marginalized by that culture—generally women, the poor, and ethnic minorities—and to

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<sup>10</sup> James L. Clifford (1970:106) argues that for biographers knowledge of the times is as essential as involvement with character.

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overlook aspects of the life, such as homosexuality, that might disturb its values (1995:112).

This is itself an area worthy of research. For the moment, it is remarkable that only two of the twenty-one biographies have women subjects (Gordimer and Schreiner) and two have subjects who could perhaps be described as poor (the Delmas Four and 'Sizwe Magadla')<sup>11</sup>. The majority have subjects that are or were sympathetic to the broad terms of what is now South Africa's 'dominant ideology'.

By keeping those in positions of power in the public eye, biography reveals its essentially conservative nature. Power is, by and large, consolidated in biography. Indeed, biography runs the risk of exaggerating the importance of the individuals it selects<sup>12</sup>. Biography reinforces political power by adding to it a human, individualistic gloss. The minutiae of the biographical subject's life are shown to be important beyond the events or positions in which actual public power is wielded. Personal relationships, family history and so on are, in the context of the biographical narrative, often accorded at least as much significance as issues related to the exercise of power; in this way, it is implied that the person has some sort of essential importance. This applies to biographies of political figures as well as those of individuals whose achievements may be less—shall we say—momentous. (I am thinking of celebrities like the Victoria Beckhams and Paris Hiltons of the world.) For Jürgen Schlaeger, biography is 'fundamentally reactionary, conservative, perpetually accommodating new models of man, new theories of the inner self, into a personality-oriented cultural mainstream, thus always helping to defuse their subversive potential' (1995:63). The 'personality-

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<sup>11</sup> It is not possible to ascertain with certainty from the reviews whether these individuals are indigent or not.

<sup>12</sup> In their 'Introduction' to *The Challenge of Feminist Biography: Writing the Lives of Modern American Women*, the editors cite David Brion Davis's caveat: while pointing out that biography might exaggerate an individual's historical importance, it can also provide 'a concreteness and sense of historical development that most studies of culture lack. And by showing how cultural tensions and contradictions may be internalised, struggled with, and resolved within actual individuals, it offers the most promising key to the synthesis of culture and history' (cited in Alpern et al 1992:15).

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oriented cultural mainstream' is self-perpetuating: psychoanalytic, poststructuralist and postmodernist understandings of how the self is constituted and how it achieves agency are subordinated or ignored as the biographer traces the subject's life story. And the subject chosen is, as has been pointed out, usually one who sits comfortably in the 'cultural mainstream'.

Is autobiography any different? Decidedly! The human fascination with celebrities affects autobiographical output far less markedly and autobiography seems more readily able to veer away from a 'personality-oriented' conception of self. This is in part because autobiographical form is more likely to bow to pressures of content than is biography. The writing and experiencing self in autobiography conveys unique experiences and memories in ways that might require novel techniques. To give some rather extreme examples, St. Augustine blends recollection with prayer; Roland Barthes, in seeking to portray a decentred self, a self which has no 'truth', no adjectivally-limited core personality, composes an autobiography which eschews the coherence of narrative and is fragmented, a generic agglomeration. Gertrude Stein writes Alice B. Toklas's autobiography so as to recount their lives together and—sneakily avoiding contravening the taboo against self-adulation—repeatedly reminds readers of Stein's own genius. And closer to home, in *Call Me Woman* Ellen Kuzwayo incorporates key elements of the praise poem in the tripartite structure of the autobiography so as to place her life in the context of the lives of courageous and successful South African black women<sup>13</sup>. One could cite many other examples which show how autobiography can reject formal conservatism and move, in fundamentally different ways, beyond the ego-centric 'personality-orientated mainstream' referred to by Schlaeger.

Recent South African life writing shows that autobiography also differs from biography in that, as far as representing all sectors of the population goes, it is conspicuously more democratic. While the illustrious (not an absolute distinction) make up *nine tenths* of biographical subjects, they make up *fewer than half* of the autobiographers<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> I have written about this in 'The Space Between the Frames: A New Discursive Practice in Ellen Kuzwayo's *Call Me Woman*' (1996).

<sup>14</sup> The weighting in favour of autobiographical narratives is far greater if one considers that some texts—which I am counting as a single autobiographical

High-profile people—of course, such a class cannot be identified with absolute certainty: a person who is well known in some circles may be unheard of in others<sup>15</sup>—include world class sportsmen (all men in this collection), prominent lawyers, writers and journalists, politicians and religious leaders. Distinguished South Africans whose autobiographies are reviewed below include the Catholic Archbishop, Denis Hurley (*Memories: The Memoirs of Archbishop Denis E. Hurley*, OMI, 2006, published posthumously), the well-known lawyer, George Bizos, and a number of journalists and writers. From the Fourth Estate are Andrew Drysdale (editor of *Pretoria News* and *The Argus*), Peter Hawthorne (*Time Magazine*), Bridget Hilton-Barber (once editor of the SAA in-flight magazine) and Gerald Shaw (*Cape Times* and others). Successful writers whose autobiographies are reviewed include Rayda Jacobs (she has two: *The Mecca Diaries*, 2005, and *Masquerade: The Story of My Life*, 2008), Andre Brink (*A Fork in the Road*, 2009, published in Afrikaans as *'n Vurk in die Pad*), Ronnie Govender (*In the Manure: Memories and Reflections*, 2008) and Ivan Vladislavic (whose essayistic account of his life in Johannesburg, *Portrait with Keys: Jo'burg and What-What*, 2006, is more autobiographical than autobiography). Both Breyten Breytenbach (*A Veil of Footsteps: Memoirs of a Nomadic Fictional Character*, 2008) and Antjie Krog (*A Change of Tongue*, 2004) play with the thin line between fiction and non-fiction. Another famous writer is Englishman Anthony Sampson. His autobiography is included here because of his ties to South Africa and the importance these are accorded in the narrative: he was one-time editor of *Drum*, was a

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text—have numerous contributing autobiographers. If one were to count these as individual autobiographers, the proportion of relatively obscure autobiographical subjects rises dramatically. Examples of grouped concise life stories include those by Indian women, a mixed race and gender group writing about experiences at boarding school, women prisoners and two books by African refugees. For ease of reference, in the reviews I have listed these multiple autobiographical texts separately under the heading 'Multiple subjects'.

<sup>15</sup> I have included in the high-profile category people whose achievements would probably have distinguished them from their peers.

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supporter of the international anti-apartheid movement and was chosen to be the writer of the authorised biography of Mandela (published in 1999)<sup>16</sup>.

Also represented in autobiographical production, predictably, are well-known politicians: Ben Turok, of the SACP and ANC, published *Nothing but the Truth: Behind the ANC's Struggle Politics* in 2003. The following year Ahmed Kathrada's *Memoirs* appeared. *A Simple Freedom: The Strong Mind of Robben Island Prisoner 468/64*, a second autobiographical account by Kathrada (with Tim Couzens) appeared in 2008. In 2006, the short autobiography of Frank Mdlalose, *My Life: The Autobiography of Dr F T Mdlalose, First Premier of KwaZulu-Natal* was released. In 2007, the memoirs of ANC defector, Andrew Feinstein (*After the Party: A Personal and Political Journey inside the ANC*) and the autobiography of past member of the Zimbabwean Senate, Judith Garfield Todd (*Through the Darkness: A Life in Zimbabwe*), were published. Tony Leon, the man ANC supporters loved to hate, published *On the Contrary: Leading the Opposition in a Democratic South Africa* in 2008.

It is, in my view, unsurprising that politicians choose to disseminate their own interpretations of their lives and beliefs since they are in the business of persuading people that they are likable, trustworthy and decent and that their political convictions are sound (while their opponents' are self-serving and/or misguided and/or dishonorable and/or incoherent and/or preposterous). So why don't more politicians publish memoirs? There must be many reasons, but probably include the fact that some might doubt their ability or willingness to record their stories; some might not want to expose themselves; some might see little benefit in such an enterprise; and some may not seek to petition the (admittedly small) book-buying sector of the electorate.

The thing is, whatever other motives there might be, one writes autobiographically because of a desire firstly to delve into one's own memory store and secondly to share one's worldview and life story with readers. In addition, a perceived need to correct skewed interpretations of one's behaviour or character could be motivating, especially to people in the public eye who believe they are, or are in danger of being, misrepresented.

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<sup>16</sup> I have not included amongst the prominent the writer and poet A.S. Mopeli-Paulus as he is not widely known.

While all autobiographers are likely to want to share their remembered experiences, not all court public recognition. Amongst the autobiographies reviewed are a number by relatively obscure people, people who see themselves as voiceless, who purposefully repress their true identity, yet who want to tell their stories so as to change public perceptions. *The Suitcase Stories*, the collection of life stories of child refugees living in Johannesburg, was inspired by the plea of one of the children: ‘Help me make a book about my story. People need to know why we are here. We don’t choose to come here. They need to know’ (Clacherty 2006:13)<sup>17</sup>. Researcher Glynis Clacherty found that because of their vulnerability as refugees, the children all introduced themselves as South African (not as nationals of their native countries), trying ‘to deny their own identities’ (2006:18). So as to assist them to reclaim memories and their identities in a way that did not resemble trauma counselling<sup>18</sup>, each child was invited to choose a suitcase to decorate. On the outside of the suitcase they were to depict their present lives in Johannesburg and on the inside they were to represent their past lives. Art facilitator, Diane Weltering, explains how these children had come to suppress identity:

The very nature of their tragic life circumstances compromised all sense of who they were—their own personal histories were invalid within the South African context. They had become completely disenfranchised through their placement within South African society—they were ‘foreign’ and ‘outsiders’, and as such, did not have the right to own anything. They were left with none of the social privileges required to be able to develop a concrete sense of self. The individual suitcases become significant, not only as metaphors for their identities, but also as powerful representations of ownership—ownership of identity, ownership of physical space, ownership of something special and treasured—something they could take with them wherever they went; [...] a concrete place

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<sup>17</sup> The children chose to remain anonymous (Clacherty 2006:6).

<sup>18</sup> The children had had negative experiences of such counselling. One of the children told Clacherty that counselling had not helped. The psychologist ‘just wanted me to cry [...]. I got bored so I did, and then she felt better’ (2006:19).

where they could leave a sign or trace of themselves [...]. (Welvering in Clacherty 2006:158).

The storytelling emerged as the children explained why they had decorated the suitcases as they had. The stories were published in order to make the children 'visible in a society where they had learned to remain largely invisible', so as to build 'their sense of identity and self-worth' through the 'powerful healing tool' of narrative (Clacherty 2006:166).

Part of the empowering process in autobiographical narrative comes from the storyteller's ability to shape the story in accordance with her or his own interpretation; it also comes from being able to exercise the right to decide when to tell, what to tell and what to leave out. All of the children chose not to reveal their real names. A Rwandan boy says he had not shared his experiences with anyone before as no-one had been worthy of hearing his truth: 'That's it. It's a sad story. I get on with my life. If I think, it's too much. I haven't told no-one this story. People don't know this. They don't deserve it' (Clacherty 2006:55). Some, like Jenny who arrived from Burundi when she was eleven years old, chose to omit painful parts of their stories: 'There are some other parts to this story that aren't good [...]. I have not told everything' (Clacherty 2006:75). Being *unable* to tell your story because you run the risk of ridicule or violence is a position of extreme disempowerment; *choosing* not to tell your story (in full or in part) puts the individual in a position of relative power.

The issue of how telling one's own story might empower the storyteller is no less important in post-apartheid South Africa than it was during apartheid. In the last decades of apartheid, the disenfranchised and oppressed told their stories (often through scribes, as happened with Clacherty's refugee children) so as to exercise a right denied them, namely, to be knowing subjects (rather than objects of other people's knowledge), to claim for themselves what I have elsewhere referred to as 'the power to name the real'<sup>19</sup>. In the recent past, after the first post-apartheid decade had passed, we find that most of the autobiographies reviewed here are by 'ordinary' people, that is, people who would seldom, if ever, be described as renowned.

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<sup>19</sup> I used this phrase (taken from Felicity Nussbaum's book on eighteenth century literature, 1989:xxi) in the title of a 1997 paper on worker autobiography.

These life chroniclers range from those who have experienced extremes of poverty and political disempowerment, like the child refugees, to educated professionals<sup>20</sup>.

Catherine Parke argues that minorities generally gravitate toward autobiography, wanting to share with readers the inside views of their lives and experiences. In contrast to the biographer, who offers an *outside* view of the subject and must persuade the reader that her or his interpretation of the subject is authoritative, the autobiographer explores much that is unverifiable. Minorities are drawn to the autobiographical discourses of confession or witnessing, she argues, 'until such time as their group politics and position become, either in their own or other people's eyes, better served by the rhetoric of argument' which characterises biography (1995:31). The need or desire to explain oneself, to present self and life to anonymous readers, may mask a plea to be understood. In this regard, it is worth noting, in passing, that since the demise of apartheid whites represent an even greater proportion of published autobiographers than they did during apartheid; this I attribute in part to the need of whites, now a political minority, to explore their discomfort or unease at being out of the main arenas of power<sup>21</sup>. Some autobiographers do not conceal their appeal for sympathy. Jean-Jacques Rousseau is arguably the most famous of these. Of the relatively unknown South African autobiographers included in the reviews, the request for understanding might be less blatant or emotive than Rousseau's, but it is implied nevertheless. It is there, to give just a few examples, in the memoirs of 'a teenage mom', Tracy Engelbrecht; in the narrative of a police reservist, Andrew Brown; in the story of Hilary Maraney, a daughter whose mother suffered from depression; in Buyi Mbambo's account of how, as a *sangoma*, she is able to embrace traditional African religion, Christianity and Western psychology; and in Thembelani Ngenelwa's recollection of his life before and after finding himself the victim of violent crime.

Although all of the autobiographies referred to above are well received, one may still wonder why publishers would commit themselves to the publication of autobiographies by unknown individuals. Is there not a

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<sup>20</sup> The educated professionals who are not household names include an occupational therapist, a doctor, a game ranger and a teacher.

<sup>21</sup> See my 'Apartheid and Post-Apartheid Life-writing' (2001).



danger that readers will ignore memoirs by people whose names are unfamiliar to them? Perhaps. Yet a life story about an ‘ordinary’ life (though I would argue that there is no such a thing), one which raises issues of current concern and is well written (though this seems to matter less), seems to have a fairly good chance of making it into print and, once published, seems likely to be reviewed and thus to receive some publicity. These ‘unknown’ memoirists come from all walks of life: there is a teacher, an occupational therapist, a mountain climber, a soldier, a doctor, a minister, refugees, and some whose occupations are irrelevant, such as HIV-positive people as well as many individuals who merely recount their childhood experiences.... The allure of such life stories for publishers lies, beyond the generally positive sales generated by non-fiction, in the stories’ topicality and/or narrative effectiveness. The autobiographies reviewed here include a fair proportion by people whose lives, though lived in relative obscurity, highlight issues which are topical or record experiences which readers, or specific sectors of the reading public, deem interesting. There are life stories which reveal experiences in contemporary China (Robert Berold); experiences of refugees (there is Glynis Clacherty’s book and another by Joanne Bloch and Sue Heese); of crime (Bridget Hilton-Barber and Thembelani Ngenelwa); of addiction (Donald Paarman and Harry Wiggett) and HIV-AIDS (Derrick Fine and Elaine Maane); of growing up during apartheid (Richard Poplak, Mokone Molete, Tim Ecott and others); of teenage pregnancy and motherhood (Tracy Engelbrecht), and so on.

Of course, what fascinates one generation or sector of the population may not tempt another. Shifts in taste and preoccupation over time and between communities can reveal important information about socio-political trends—desires and anxieties—and life writing is a particularly sensitive marker of these. Life stories, as we saw during apartheid in the collected stories of the poor and uneducated, alert readers to the harsh realities of lives that might otherwise have remained hidden. They often seek to humanise people who are oppressed or whose voices are not heard. And when someone tells their own story, even if it is through an interlocutor, they assume agency and authority as knowing subjects, not objects of researchers’ knowledge. In the recent autobiographies reviewed here, there is, for example, a new concern for the lives of refugees which arises out of—and attempts to prevent in future—the xenophobic violence which has, on several occasions

recently, put South Africa in international news headlines. Another new progression in life writing concerns a group of people whose sexual orientation makes them vulnerable to ostracism or worse. My own research into apartheid autobiography indicates that books by South Africans focusing on their gay or lesbian identities were seldom, if ever, published. In this batch of reviews, we find Nkunzi Zandile Nkabinde's *Black Bull, Ancestors and Me: My Life as a Lesbian Sangoma* (2008) and Derrick Fine's story about his coming out as a gay man and his infection with the HI-virus in *Clouds Move: My Journey of Living Openly with HIV* (2007). Even amongst the biographies, there is a biographer's declaration that he is gay (Jonny Steinberg in *Three-Letter Plague: A Young Man's Journey through a Great Epidemic*, 2008). The last two books remind us that life stories by members of this frequently stigmatised group of people, namely, those who are HIV-positive, have been appearing regularly in the past few years. Another new development, one which seldom surfaced during the police-controlled apartheid years, is the revelation of addictions: we find autobiographies by a drug trafficker (William Bosch), a Springbok surfer (Donald Paarman) who chronicles his descent into drugs, alcoholism and lunacy, and a recovered alcoholic Christian minister (Harry Wiggett).

Not all of the novel themes in life writing, however, arise out of new social concerns or the aim to sensitise readers to specific life challenges. Sales of books may also indicate interests, unrelated to identity politics or social ills, which have a long history. Sports fall into this category. There are three such autobiographies reviewed in this collection: one on surfing (Paarman), one on tennis (Abe Segal) and one on rugby (Jake White). The latter is the collaboratively-written life story of the man previously known as Jacob Westerduin (he changed his name to Jake White), past Springbok rugby coach. This outsold all other local publications when it was released in South Africa. In fact, one reviewer (Simon Borchadt) remarks that in less than a year 'this book sold more than 25 000 copies in South Africa—the highest sales of any book in any genre in South African publishing history' (2008:19). The highest sales of *any book in any genre* in South African publishing history! Yet the 25 000 copies on which Borchadt's claim is based were only a fraction of subsequent sales: the publisher's website newsletter of 2 September 2008 states that over 200,000 copies of White's autobiography were sold in 2007 (<http://www.randomstruik.co.za/>). Sales of

books by our world famous Nobel prize-winning *literati* like J.M. Coetzee and Nadine Gordimer do not even come close. The astronomical sales of *In Black and White: The Jake White Story* (book buyers being undeterred by its corny title) are perhaps more remarkable when one considers that the book is criticised in the review summarised here for revealing very few 'juicy bits' apart, that is, from the revelation of interference by political heavyweights who replaced White as Bok coach because he refused to include the politically well-connected Luke Watson in the team.

Clearly, we South Africans share with rhesus macaque monkeys and the English-speaking world a fascination with what celebrities like the Springbok rugby coach have experienced. We have paid a great deal of money to get our own copies or to give such life stories as gifts<sup>22</sup>. These and other autobiographical accounts lure readers because, for many, the self is the ultimate authority on the self and experience. So while we may applaud biography for its objectivity, for depth and breadth of research, for offering a multi-faceted portrait of the biographical subject, and for situating the subject in her or his life and times (as a person immersed in the business of living a life is seldom able to do), we are nevertheless drawn to the idea that someone can tell us about aspects of her or his own life and experience that must remain inaccessible to a biographer. A biographer, as an outsider, cannot *know* with certainty the thoughts and feelings that the subject may have had but not expressed or acted on; the biographer can, for the most part, only guess at dreams, desires, fears, likes and dislikes (records are not always left of such things and other people's perceptions of these are notoriously unreliable), and is obliged to assume (perhaps mistakenly) that what the subject says and does signifies much about the inner self. This is not to say that biography fails to attract readers. I have spoken about the success (worldwide) of the Mandela-biography machine. Moreover, South Africa has produced some fine biographers whose books are likely to sell well. The following biographers feature, and are praised, in reviews: Gillian Stead Eilersen (of Bessie Head), Stephen Gray (of Herman Charles Bosman)<sup>23</sup>, and

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<sup>22</sup> As I recall, Jake White's autobiography was released just in time for the Christmas rush.

<sup>23</sup> Gray's biography of Beatrice Hastings was also well received.

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Charles van Onselen (of Joseph Silver)<sup>24</sup>. Nevertheless, my point, based on the fact that biographies make up less than half the number of life stories that are reviewed, is that the story most readers want is the one the person tells about her or himself.

I wonder if this imbalance in favour of autobiography over biography is evident elsewhere in the world. Franklin, you will recall, referred to the popularity of biographies when he remarked on the English-speaking world's preoccupation with the stories of particular lives. Collaborative autobiography, such as that by Jake White and co-writer Craig Ray, straddles the two genres of autobiography and biography. It is often impossible to tell, in such collaboratively written narratives, whether autobiography (the telling of the subject's own story by her/ himself) or biography (the telling of the subject's story by the writer) predominates. This can be true even of the avowedly 'as-told-to' autobiography when the influence of the co-writer in eliciting and shaping content is usually impossible to measure: was the story 'told to' the writer spontaneously, or did the writer request that certain issues be attended to or others omitted? And how does one measure the precise contribution of the writer in creating the textual characters of first-person narrator and protagonist for the 'autobiography'? Indeed, the exact nature of the collaborative relationship, the precise demarcation of who was responsible for what parts of the life writing venture, might be, and usually is, deliberately concealed<sup>25</sup>. The occult presence of the writer is obscured behind the foregrounded autobiographical subject, the one readers want to read about. Many famous, and some not so famous, South Africans have published their life stories with the help of a ghost writer. Our joint Nobel Prize winners, Nelson Mandela and F.W. De Klerk, both published autobiographies (which have remarkably similar titles)<sup>26</sup> penned by or with the help of co-writers. Neither mention these co-writers on the covers or copyright pages, and it is rare for reviewers, or even academics, for that matter, to take cognizance of the role of these ghost writers. In the

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<sup>24</sup> Van Onselen is also acclaimed for biographies of Kas Maine and 'Nongoloza' Mathebula. Other famous South African biographers, not featured in these reviews, are Lyndall Gordon (she has several: on her Capetonian school friends, on Charlotte Brontë, Virginia Woolf, Mary Wollstonecraft, T.S. Eliot and Emily Dickinson) and Jeff Guy (on John William Colenso and Harriet Colenso).

Acknowledgements, Mandela credits the otherwise invisible Richard Stengel with a collaborative role, 'providing invaluable assistance in editing and revising the first parts and in the writing of the latter parts' (1995:n.p.) and in the Preface to his autobiography de Klerk refers to 'Dave Steward's key role. [...] His research and contributions were indispensable and it would not be out of place to give him recognition as co-author' (1998:xiv).

Questions of who had the greater influence in the composition of the life narrative seem to be of little interest to readers who seek knowledge about how other people live and how they make sense of their lives. Alexander Pope's assertion that 'The proper study of Mankind is Man' is one that is often reiterated. As Franklin remarks, though, for all the promises of general knowledge of humankind in disciplines like psychology and, I might add, anthropology, history and sociology, generality has to be founded in and checked against the stories of particular lives, and for that, Franklin argues, we turn to biography and, as we see in these reviews—even more enthusiastically—to autobiography. Autobiography 'dramatizes and perpetuates the universal human struggle to live an examined and meaningful life' (Bonnie Gunzenhauser 2001:75-78). For many readers, the attraction of such life writing texts, diverse as their auto/biographical subjects are, lies partly in the readers' quest to find vicarious coherence and significance in their own superficially unexceptional, yet in reality uniquely particularised, lives.

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<sup>25</sup> This is not the case in *The Suitcase Stories*. The editor, Clacherty, carefully explains how stories were gathered and exactly what her role was.

<sup>26</sup> Where Mandela remembers a *Long Walk to Freedom*, de Klerk, three years later, recalls *The Last Trek*.

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*Judith Lütge Coullie*

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# Recently Reviewed South African Life Writing Publications VI

**Reviews Editor: Judith Lütge Coullie**

## List of Publications Consulted

Most prices are quoted in South African Rands.

Reviews which were originally published in Afrikaans are marked with \* and have been translated into English by Judith Lütge Coullie.

<i>The African Book Publishing Record</i>	<i>Journal of Southern African Studies</i>
<i>African Studies Review</i>	<i>Jozi Weekly</i>
<i>Weekend Argus</i>	<a href="http://kalkbaybooks.co.za">http://kalkbaybooks.co.za</a>
<a href="http://artsmart.co.za">artsmart.co.za</a>	<a href="http://litnet.co.za">litnet.co.za</a>
<i>Beeld</i>	<i>Mail &amp; Guardian</i>
<a href="http://blogs/thetimes.co.za">blogs/thetimes.co.za</a>	<i>NELM News</i>
<i>Bona</i>	<i>New contrast</i>
<i>Bookmark</i>	<i>New Contree</i>
<i>Die Burger</i>	<a href="http://news24.com/">news24.com/</a> <i>Beeld</i>
<i>Business Day: Weekender</i>	<i>The Observer</i>
<i>Cape Times</i>	<i>The Oprah Magazine</i> (South Africa)
<a href="http://citizen.co.za">citizen.co.za</a>	<i>The Pink Tongue</i>
<i>City Press: City Pulse</i>	<i>Postamble</i>
<i>Daily Dispatch</i>	<i>Protea Boekwinkel Stellenbosch</i>
<i>English Academy Review</i>	<i>Newsletter</i>
<i>English in Africa</i>	<i>Research in African Literatures</i>
<a href="http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk">entertainment.timesonline.co.uk</a>	<a href="http://sabookworm.blogspot.com">sabookworm.blogspot.com</a>
<a href="http://entertainment/thetimes.co.za">entertainment/thetimes.co.za</a>	<i>Saturday Dispatch</i>
<i>FairLady</i>	<i>Saturday Star</i>
<a href="http://financialmail.co.za">financialmail.co.za</a>	<i>Sowetan</i>

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*Financial Times*

*Free State Libraries: Book*

*Highlights*

*The Guardian*

H-SAfrica@H-NET.MSU.EDU

*The Herald: TGIF*

independent.co.uk/arts-

*Irish Times*

<http://www.itch.co.za>

jhblive.co.za

*Journal of African Studies*

*Sunday Independent*

*The Sunday Times*

surfpixphoto.com

telegraph.co.uk

tonight.co.za/

Times Online

*The Sunday Times*

*The Star: Tonight*

*The Weekender*

*The Witness*

*Wordstock*

## **Arnold, Maurice**

*A Weenen Childhood*. Maurice Arnold. West Lakes, South Australia: Seaview Press, 2007. 366pp. Price unknown.

Arnold's interesting account of his childhood in Weenen, Natal and schooling in Estcourt in the 1930s, and university in Durban during the war years, is illustrated with family photographs, sketches and a map and floor plans. Sadly, Arnold died shortly after completing the manuscript so there will be no further volume concerning his adult life in Canada and Australia.

Cecilia Blight. *NELM News* (48), 2008:12.

## **Bakkes, Christiaan**

*In Bushveld and Desert: A Game Ranger's Life*. Christiaan Bakkes, translated by Elsa Silke. Cape Town: Human and Rousseau, 2008. 295pp. R175.

Game ranger Christiaan Bakkes paid a high price for his recklessness—his left arm—and all because he decided to cool off in a dam near Timbavati on the western side of the Kruger National Park. Amazingly, he fought off the first croc until a friend could fire at it, but then a second took his arm with one bite.

Bakkes tells the story in detail this fascinating diary of his audacious

search for adventure over many years, mainly in the desolate wastes of Namibia. In pages so atmospheric that you can almost taste the bushveld dust, there are poachers and hunting, wild animals and wild parties—even a little of South Africa’s unspoken history when he served ‘on the border’ in the apartheid days.

Bakkes can certainly spin a yarn, but his uniqueness lies in what he’s done rather than in the way he puts it down on paper.

Peter Godson. *Saturday Dispatch*. June 28 2008:23.

As a young game ranger working in the Kruger National Park, Christiaan Bakkes achieved a degree of notoriety when he lost his arm to a crocodile as a result of a foolish dare. While this encounter may have taught him to value caution, it did not dampen his passion for the great outdoors. Having literally escaped from the jaws of death—but losing his job—Bakkes journeys through Africa before settling in Namibia, in one of Africa’s last true wilderness areas. Bakkes writes about his experiences in a stripped-down, economical prose style that manages to capture the desolation and magic of the landscape. His writing is evocative and informative. This is a highly readable, honest and humorous account of a life spent beyond the fringes of civilisation.

Anthony Stidolph. *The Witness*. August 20 2008:11.

## **Berold, Robert**

*Meanwhile Don’t Push and Squeeze: A Year of Life in China*. Robert Berold. Johannesburg: Jacana, 2007. 246pp. R155.

In 2005, Robert Berold, a South Africa poet, editor, and literary mentor travelled to Hangzhou (a sister city of Cape Town) to teach English at the Zhejiang University. This is his account of his year there. Part his own travel memoirs, part a collage of various contributions from his Chinese students and his partner, Mindy Stanford, the result is often amusing and stimulating, but sometimes also tiring and, unfortunately, verging on the plain boring. Most of the laughter generated in the book stems from Chinese misconceptions about English language and grammar.

Berold realises that in China ‘the rest of the world doesn’t exist’. What prevails is Chinese ‘good news propaganda’, an unstoppable zeal for construction works, stifling bureaucracy, Big Brother surveillance, extreme competitiveness and an unbreakable work ethic. At first his students seem naïve, but he discovers they are interested, talented and generous. As a result of his decision to teach English via creative writing, he is able to select a number of their essays which offer unique insights into their daily lives.

*Meanwhile Don’t Push and Squeeze* seldom engages intellectually. Not without charms, it is nevertheless largely predictable and stylistically not particularly attractive.

Karina Magdalena Szcurek. *New contrast* 36 (4), 2008:88-91.

## **Bizos, George.**

*Odyssey to Freedom: A Memoir by the World-Renowned Human Rights Advocate, Friend and Lawyer to Nelson Mandela.* George Bizos. Johannesburg: Random House, in association with Umuzi, 2007. 616pp. R273.

In post-apartheid South Africa, the proliferation of biographical and autobiographical works might encourage one to call this the Age of South African (Auto)biography. George Bizos, friend and lawyer to Nelson Mandela, released his mammoth work of personal and public history. Bizos is a brilliant storyteller. This compelling read tells of the history of the anti-apartheid struggle through the eyes of one its practitioners. In his foreword Mandela writes that Bizos’ ‘contribution towards entrenching human rights [in South Africa] is impossible to overrate’. Born in a Greek village, a teenage Bizos and his father assisted a group of stranded New Zealand soldiers to escape from the Nazis; when rescued, they were taken to North Africa. When father and son decided to migrate to then booming South Africa, Bizos was deeply distressed by the sight of black men pulling carts. This was one of his first conscientising experiences.

Bizos met Mandela when he was studying law, and there are long chapters devoted to the major trials that Bizos participated in as an advocate, from the 1950s right up to his recent defence of Zimbabwean opposition politician, Morgan Tsvangirai.

Gerald Ralphs. *Postamble* 3 (2), 2007:80-2.

**Bloomberg, David**

*My Times*. David Bloomberg. Vlaeberg: Fernwood Press, 2007. 366pp. R195.

A man of extraordinary versatility, David Bloomberg was an acclaimed theatre director and impresario in the 1950s and 1960s, a prominent lawyer whose cases included the defence of Dimitrio Tsafendas, the assassin of South Africa's Prime Minister Verwoerd, a talented businessman, and a long-serving city councillor who was the youngest person to become the mayor of Cape Town. This book is special because it is filled with amusing anecdotes and interesting profiles of the remarkable personalities the author encountered in South Africa and abroad.

Unnamed reviewer. *Bookmark*. October 2007- January 2008:37.

**Bosch, William**

*Royal Pardon: One Man's Journey Out of Darkness*. William Bosch. Vanderbijlpark: Carpe Diem, 2007. 173pp. R90.

William Bosch survived nine years in a Bangkok jail. He hopes that his experience will serve as a warning to others. Bosch, who in 1992 was a professional dancer, found himself and two friends in a Chinese jail on trumped up charges. The South African ambassador negotiated their release three days later, but they had been stripped of their belongings and money and were out on the street. Bosch yielded when a Chinese man asked him to take marijuana to Hong Kong. Part of the payment was in the form of 50,3 gram of tik, which was taken to Bangkok. He and his friend were arrested there and sentenced to ten years in jail. In jail, he experienced a spiritual conversion and he was able to study theology by correspondence. Eight years into his jail term, he wrote to the Thai king. The king then ordered them to be released and acquitted.

Erika Gibson. *Die Burger*. August 2 2008: 4.\*

## **Bosman, Herman Charles**

*Remembering Bosman: Herman Charles Bosman Recollected: Tributes, Memoirs, Sketches, Interviews.* Stephen Gray, ed. Johannesburg: Penguin, 2008. 189pp. R230.

Not recognised as a gifted writer in his own lifetime, Herman Charles Bosman is now widely regarded as South Africa's foremost storyteller. This collection of tributes, memoirs, sketches, interviews and autobiographical fragments is a valuable supplement to the body of work on Bosman. Compiled by Stephen Gray, who, as Bosman's biographer, probably knows more about the life and times of Bosman than anyone else. The multiple perspectives offered in this collection help to illuminate the life and times of one of South Africa's most gifted writers.

Rob Gaylard. [http://www.litnet.co.za/cgi-bin/giga.cgi?cmd=cause\\_dir\\_news\\_item&cause\\_id=1270&news\\_id=57185&cat\\_id=558](http://www.litnet.co.za/cgi-bin/giga.cgi?cmd=cause_dir_news_item&cause_id=1270&news_id=57185&cat_id=558). December 8, 2008.

## **Breytenbach, Breyten/ 'Breyten Wordfool'**

*A Veil of Footsteps: Memoirs of a Nomadic Fictional Character.* Breyten Breytenbach. Cape Town: Human & Rousseau, 2008. 304pp. R169.

Towards the end of *A Veil of Footsteps* a 'Declaration' simply states that Breyten Wordfool, the book's 'fictional' voice, and 'I, Breyten Breytenbach' are one and the same. In this account of a series of journeys to, from and through Spain, Vietnam, Senegal, Mali, South Africa, Mozambique and the United States, the blurring of fact and fiction does not invigorate either, but means that the work has neither the solidity of fact nor answers fully to the pressures of imagination. The trips provide some insights, but mostly they are the vehicle for an inner journey across the landscape of Breytenbach's increasingly rancid ruminations about failed revolutions, a dying Africa, the idiocy of humanity.

Shaun de Waal. *Mail & Guardian: Friday*. April 4-10, 2008:2-3.

*A Veil of Footsteps* is a grab bag of Breyten Breytenbach's travel diaries around Europe and Africa, his observations on the cosmos and the human condition, and his experiment with an alter ego, Breyten Wordfool. If the premise of this narrative sounds confused, that is because it is. Breytenbach mistakes random mental events for thoughts; his trademark obscenity in what he calls this 'black book of impressions' goes wrong from sentence to sentence; the jerry-built form of this book of scribbles and pretentious notes squanders a reader's time and trust. Poets don't have a clue how to write prose; nevertheless, most of the faults of this book arise from grandiosity. A poet who is insulated by his fame and egoism as Breytenbach is can no longer tell what makes sense.

Imraan Coovadia. *Sunday Independent*. April 27 2008:17.

### **Brink, André**

*A Fork in the Road*. André Brink. Johannesburg: Random House, 2009. 448pp. R300.

Andre Brink grew up in the deep interior of South Africa, as his magistrate father moved from one dusty dorp to the next. While living in Paris in the sixties, his desire to become a writer was confirmed. At the same time, the tragedy of the Sharpeville Massacre crystallised his growing political awareness and sparked the decision to return home and oppose apartheid. This resulted in years of harassment by the security police but also in extraordinary friendships sealed by meetings with leaders of the ANC.

He tells the story of his love affair with music, art, the theatre, literature and his relationships with remarkable women. Above all, *A Fork in the Road* is a love song to the country where he was born and where he still lives.

Unnamed reviewer. <http://kalkbaybooks.co.za/reviews-and-articles-detail.php?cat=1&order=alphab&...> November 5, 2008.

Born into a God-fearing Afrikaner family, André Brink was early on initiated into the Broederbond, the Afrikaner secret society that saw itself as the source of the South African nation's future leaders. Yet he broke away,

denounced apartheid, and endured the premature closing of his plays, the banning of his novels and decades of surveillance by the South African security police. Now 73, Brink ponders in this memoir the brutality that lay just below the surface in the devout rural communities of his youth. His political awakening was partly brought on by a woman—the chapter on his relationship with the poet Ingrid Jonker is one of the most compelling, even if it threatens to topple into Mills & Boon territory—and partly by his love affair with Paris and his experiences of the *soixante-huitards* storming police barricades.

Complacency is an easy trap and these memoirs would undoubtedly have benefited from an editor wielding a sharper knife. Yet by the end one is still left applauding a kindly, principled iconoclast who played a not-inconsiderable part in the dismantling of apartheid. It seems only fitting that the elderly Brink should now be denouncing the mushrooming corruption of South Africa's new, black Administration.

Michela Wrong. *TimesOnline*. [http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts\\_and\\_entertainment/books/article56174...](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/article56174...) February 11, 2009.

Brink is a South African novelist, born to an Afrikaner family in 1935, whose opposition to his country's racist regime has gained him heroic status. Now he has undertaken to examine 'some things in my life I have not yet faced or probed sufficiently'. Brink triumphed over handicaps of racist family and culture and also (or so his lazy use of language implies) nature and instinct. There is very little about his mother, and his magistrate father isn't a towering presence—more of a towering absence, distorting everything from a distance. Brink's father drops out of the book for hundreds of pages, but in life there was no rupture. Father and son simply didn't talk about politics. To challenge your government's deepest principle but back down from upsetting your father!

Brink is fond of thinking of himself as a heretic. He remarks that 'it is the very presence of authority, the fact of power that evokes rebellion and makes it possible'. This sounds more like existentialism than political awareness, a struggle for identity rather than justice.

Brink is quite rightly a fierce critic of the new dispensation, and he cites plenty of evidence in support of his claim that the ANC government is



‘the enemy of the people’. But he’s not entitled to say, ‘today I find that there are some blacks standing between Africa and me’, because he doesn’t own the view, and it’s not up to him to decide who belongs and who doesn’t.

Adam Mars-Jones. *The Observer*. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/boks/2009/mar/08/memoir-andre-brink-fork-road/print> March 8 2009.

André Brink has written over 20 books, forged links with African National Congress members, and acquired a large black readership, including Nelson Mandela. In this memoir he faces two problems: the first is what to do about people who don’t want to be in his memoir (this he solves by telling us the names of his first two wives and little else, thus dodging his marital infidelities); the second problem is to adopt a chronological structure or allow the material its associative autonomy. Wisely, Brink decided on the latter and organises his material thematically. This makes the book a tough read; there are huge leaps in time and, moreover, as a reader you have to hold a lot in your head in order to make sense of everything. On the plus side, what you get because he’s replicated his thinking processes is Brink without spin, Brink the rugby-mad, highly sexed, greedy, venal, gullible, thin-skinned, tenderhearted, fully paid up member of the awkward squad who believes his duty is to stand up against tyranny regardless of the tyrant’s colour. Few memoirs communicate such a strong sense of the writer’s character as this one does.

Brink is a brave man, and this is an extraordinary book because it combines, uniquely, angry forensic polemic with writing of the highest order.

Carlo Gébler. *Irish Times*. [http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/weekend/2009/0124/1232474677758 pf.html](http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/weekend/2009/0124/1232474677758_pf.html) February 3, 2009.

For those who have had the pleasure of reading André Brink’s earlier works, this memoir will provide moments of *déjà vu*. An image, an anecdote, an action here described will have been used in a novel. To him, in writing ‘nothing is left unused’.

From the outset, Brink makes it clear that *A Fork in the Road* is no conventional autobiography. Rather, it is an assemblage of fragments that

weave back one on to the other. It is an examination, and a commentary, on a life, a body of work, and a country. His fork in the road is a cluster of possibilities.

There is so much in this memoir, much of it personal, yet it remains oddly impersonal. Perhaps this is because, as he is at pains to tell us, Brink is not interested in kiss and tell. Which doesn't stop us from gathering from the women who litter its pages, that there has been, and still is, even now when he is in his 70s, a lot of kissing.

Among this book's considerable achievements it offers an insider's view of the Afrikaner mindset that surpasses any I have so far read.

Gillian Slovo. *Financial Times*. <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/1562cd96-ee5b-11dd-b791-0000779fd2ac,dwp uuid=b7cf...> February 11, 2009.

The most authentic part of André Brink's autobiography deals with his years of persecution and censorship as a determined anti-apartheid writer. To be known as courageously anti-apartheid was, of course, quite a selling point in the rest of the world and led to a certain inflation of careers and reputations.

On the basis of this memoir, Brink does not emerge well from that process. Part of the problem is, as he confesses, that 'by temperament I was never a political writer', yet, in the apartheid context, 'I could not write anything that was not political'. The results are obvious as soon as he strays from his personal experiences in judgments that are often ponderous and clichéd. Moreover, there are frequent political and historical slips. There is, too, a continuous vein of personal melodrama. There is also the problem of Brink's interminable affairs and marriages (three at last count). No reader could possibly keep a tally of the huge numbers of young women he beds throughout these pages, yet there is no personal reflection about what his behaviour says about him. At one stage, Brink recounts with pride how one of his sons, discovering that his father had produced a brother he hadn't known about, would thereafter 'eagerly point at every boy we passed in the street and ask, "Is that also my brother?"' One looks in vain, here and elsewhere, for any hint of self-irony.

R.W. Johnson. *The Sunday Times*. <http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/artsandentertainment/books/non-fiction/a...> February 18 2009.

**Brown, Andrew**

*Street Blues: The Experiences of a Reluctant Policeman.* Andrew Brown. Cape Town: Zebra, 2008. 209pp. R140.

I was engrossed by the book from the very first page. Brown, an advocate, has been a police reservist in South Africa for a decade. The chapters in *Street Blues* each cover an incident or chain of events that would have the average citizen crying, screaming, hyperventilating or gagging in the gutter. There is a twist in many of the tales, emphasising the utter unpredictability of the situations the police must face. It's extremely well written, peppered with humour and insight into human emotions and not in the least self-indulgent. Colourful characters, from hookers to hobos, are described with warmth and affection. He clearly cares deeply for the people he serves yet despairs at the lack of resources, having to use his own car, with a malfunctioning radio, when out on patrol; being issued torn latex gloves to wear at accidents; finding too few ambulances and some colleagues who just could not be bothered anymore. *Street Blues* will make you rethink your attitude to the police.

Lesley Stones. <http://www.businessday.co.za/weekender/article.aspx?ID=BD4A840806>. September 9 2008.

**Cohen, Ivan**

*Fight of my Life: A Doctor's Battle with Cancer.* Ivan Cohen. Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2008. 168pp. R150.

This is the first-person account of a doctor's struggle with two lethal cancers. Ivan Cohen chose not to be a victim, and educated himself and enlisted the help of the finest specialists in South Africa and abroad. The deep depressions following diagnosis and surgery took him by surprise, affecting not only the progress of his healing but also his family relationships.

It is inspiring to read of someone who is passionately determined to live, but the average person is not able to pick and choose practitioners, as Cohen was able, or to make well-informed decisions about treatment. Many, too, might feel envious of Cohen's warm and supportive family. They're certainly essential to his survival, but it's a pity he chose to fatten this

otherwise slim volume with largely redundant chapters by several of them. Not really a cover-to-cover read, but a book to dip into. It has a useful bibliography and index and a valuable chapter on dietary measures to help in cancer prevention.

Stephanie Alexander. *The Witness*. July 23 2008:11.

This dramatic account of a doctor's life-and-death struggle to survive two lethal cancers, and the associated periods of despair and triumph, includes chapters by his children, showing how illness can affect the whole family. It deals with personal issues with complete honesty. It is an inspiration.

Unnamed reviewer. *Protea Boekwinkel Stellenbosch Newsletter* 139. April 2 2008:5.

### **Colenso, Rachel Kelsey**

*In a High and Desperate Place*. Rachel Kelsey Colenso. Cape Town: Aardvark Press, 2008. 118pp. R125.

This is the inspiring first-person account of a late summer mountain climb in the Italian Alps to a height of more than 3000 meters. Everything goes terribly wrong as cold closes in on Rachel Colenso and her partner. Colenso recounts the climb and the subsequent rescue well, so that one is transported to the top of the mountain. With every turn of the page, you can feel her fear and desperation.

Tebogo Monama. *Sowetan*. September 9 2008:13.

### **Cronwright-Schreiner, Samuel**

*Olive Schreiner: Her Reinterment on Buffelskop*. Samuel Cronwright-Schreiner. Paul Walters and Jeremy Fogg, eds. Grahamstown: NELM, 2005. 185pp. R140.

Published first in 1983 and edited by Guy Butler and N.W. Visser are excerpts from the diary of Olive Schreiner's husband, Samuel Cronwright;

this 2005 republication marks the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Olive Schreiner's death. Walters and Fogg, the editors of the new edition, wanted to produce an easily readable version in a more portable format and have also been able to trace all but one of the quotations and allusions recorded in the first edition as 'Not yet traced'.

The selection covers the brief, but momentous, days between 7 and 15 June 1921, when Cronwright travelled from Cape Town, where Olive had been buried in the Maitland cemetery on 12 December 1920, to Cradock to prepare for her reinterment on Buffelskop, a hill on which the two of them had decided, shortly after their marriage in February 1894, to be buried together. Also included are the diary entries for 8-29 August, during which time Olive's body was exhumed and she, together with their baby who had lived for only one day and one of her favourite dogs, was transported to Cradock by train. All three were buried in a sarcophagus on the peak of Buffelskop on 13 August 1921.

The diary entries may concern the burial of Schreiner, and be considered an important part of her archive, but the value of this republication for the contemporary reader may reside more in the honest and lugubrious disclosures of Cronwright's plain but lucid prose. Rich in recollected memories, ultimately it is the pain of reflective individuality that pervades these diary entries. This is the account of a man who struggles to convert an acute sense of loss and loneliness into a stoical solitude, in the face of the ultimately incomprehensible and ineffable. As the partner of the literary celebrity, Olive Schreiner, Cronwright was and is a relatively minor figure, but his sincere narrative and reflections are a sobering record of the mortal condition to which his wife's literary talents gave enduring expression.

Mike Kissack. *English in Africa* 33 (2). October 2006:173-176.

### **Drysdale, Andrew**

*My Neighbour Madiba... and others*. Andrew Drysdale. Cape Town: Lion's Head Publishers, 2007. 310 pp. R175.

*My Neighbour Madiba* is an entertaining and illuminating anecdotal account of the author's journey from cadet reporter to editor of the Cape Argus and

the Pretoria News, and a chronicle of the years that intervened. Replete with off-the-wall detail and penetrating nuggets of journalistic perception, Drysdale traverses brutal repression, violent upheaval and the inspirational leadership of the title character, Nelson Mandela, in swift but telling strokes of an erudite pen.

Gavin Barfield. *Cape Times*. December 27 2007:9.

In reminiscing about his career in journalism I'm not sure Andrew Drysdale has done himself any favours. He retired in 1996 after 20 years as an editor, first of Pretoria News and then of The Argus in Cape Town. This book recalls a number of flashbulb moments in his passage as junior reporter in Port Elizabeth to pensioner. In many he was only peripherally involved. Drysdale writes fluently and amusingly but offers few insights into yesterday's people, places or events. Drysdale is at his best when he tells of the snuffing out of editorial independence, in favour of ANC functionaries' influence on editorial policy. Drysdale fought this war—and the squeezing out of good journalists because they were white—and lost. What a shame that he did not see this as the one issue that still has legs.

Bill Krige. *The Herald: TGIF*. July 4 2008:8.

## **Ecott, Tim**

*Stealing Water: A Secret Life in an African Country*. Tim Ecott. London: Sceptre, 2008. 304pp. R220.

This delightful account of Ecott's adolescence in 1970s Johannesburg presents an unbelievable cast of characters: Carl the Cat-Burglar, Gerry the Forger, Sarah the Sangoma, Marco the Maltese cab-driver and Babette the Tart. Having left middle-class Bangor, Northern Ireland, for apartheid South Africa, the family was declared bankrupt and evicted from their home. Ecott's mother opened up a junk shop—was arrested for dealing in stolen goods—but retained a sense of humour. Ecott hopes that what people will draw from the book is that the worst of times can sometimes, in retrospect, be the most valuable times.

Heidi Kingstone. *Saturday Star*. April 12 2008:15.

Tim Ecott tells the unique and funny story of his life in Johannesburg, where his family lived after his father resigned from the British army in 1977. They lived on the edge of legality in a seedy flat in Hillbrow. His Irish mother barely managed to keep the family afloat from the proceeds of her junkshop in an underground arcade. More often than not, the goods she bought and sold were of dubious origin, and the shop attracted a mishmash of clients, including vagrants, thieves and prostitutes. Ecott spent many years shuttling between Ireland and South Africa, studying at Queen's in Belfast and working at the Carlton Hotel in Johannesburg during the summer holidays.

The joy of the book is that there is little in the way of agonised reminiscences or political angst, with the author preferring to let people—a veritable Dickensian cast of characters—drive the story. These memoirs are written honestly, with a sense of humour as well as a pathos that never becomes mawkish.

Lauren de Beer. *Business Day: Weekender*. <http://www.businessday.co.za/weekender/article.aspx?ID=BD4A759190>

Tim tells the story of his ex-soldier father (a standard English emotional cripple), his wild Irish mother and the unsavoury characters who hang around his mother's junk shop. *Stealing Water* has its moments whenever his mother and the South African landscape appear but instead of real engagement, Ecott gives us sketches and naïve reflections.

Carole Angier. March 28 2008. *Independent*. <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/stealing-water-by-tim-ecott>

Praise be, Tim Ecott has avoided the haunting memoir of an African childhood, the agonised memoir of Africa in time of change, and the mellow, funny or bittersweet memories of colonial days. With growing admiration you realise that though most of *Stealing Water* is set in Africa, and most of the people are white, this isn't a story about race or place. It is about people.

Tim Ecott tells of his boyhood in which debt and fear of debt haunts every step, luck never lasts, and nobody ever seems to own anything for long.

There are belly laughs enough, and some serious criminality to boot, but Ecott's outstanding talent as an author is for pathos and more than once I was moved to tears.

Stick with this book. It gathers force as the story's elements gradually weave together.

Matthew Parris. *Times Online*. February 29 2008. <http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts>

## **Engelbrecht, Tracy**

*The Girl Who Couldn't Say No: The Memoir of a Teenage Mom*. Tracy Engelbrecht. Cape Town: Struik, 2007. 256 pp. R130.

With wit and humility, Engelbrecht shares her story of becoming pregnant and, at the age of fifteen, giving birth to a son. She shares her mistakes and triumphs, regrets and pleasures. She achieves a well-settled truth in her book, and bounces all her ideas off the reader with a giggly hysteria we associate with teenage midnight feasts or slumber parties.

Phil Murray. *Cape Times*. December 14 2007:13.

## **Feinstein, Andrew**

*After the Party: A Personal and Political Journey inside the ANC*. Andrew Feinstein. Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2007. 300pp. R170.

Andrew Feinstein—for seven years a bright-eyed and bushy-tailed African National Congress Member of the South African Parliament—shafts a large number of ANC bosses. But if it's any consolation to them, there's no-one more deeply wounded than the author. Feinstein's adoration of the liberation movement was immaculate; his pain at its betrayal is heartfelt.

*After the Party* is a gripping horror story. Feinstein, a man with sharp financial skills, led the ANC contingent in the Standing Committee on Public Accounts (SCOPA), which is perhaps parliament's foremost instrument to keep the nation's executive honest and accountable. And therein lies the rub. SCOPA's probe into the controversial 70-billion rand arms deal found corruption on a staggering scale. Feinstein worked to expose what ANC



bosses wanted flushed away, so they flushed him instead. He now lives in London.

Feinstein tells of the emasculation of parliament, of the triumph of the party over the people, of the president over the party and, saddest of all, of the subversion of the ANC's sterling principles by deceit, lies and strong-arm tactics.

Bill Krige. *The Herald: TGIF*. February 15 2008:5.

### **Fine, Derrick**

*Clouds Move: My Journey of Living Openly with HIV*. Derrick Fine. Kommetjie: The Openly Positive Trust, 2007. 260pp. R200.

Derrick's story of living openly with HIV in South Africa is expressed in words, poems, photographs and Zapiro cartoons. This is also the story of many people fighting for access to treatment and searching for light in a bleak political landscape.

Unnamed reviewer. *The Pink Tongue*. January 2008:2.

### **Gordimer, Nadine**

*No Cold Kitchen: A Biography of Nadine Gordimer*. Ronald Suresh Roberts. Johannesburg: STE Publishers, 2005. 733pp. R220.

In 1997, Ronald Suresh Roberts, a British West Indian non-fiction writer resident in South Africa, was granted unprecedented access to Nobel Laureate Nadine Gordimer's private papers for an authorised biography. It was Roberts' refusal to omit or change material from some of these sources that led to Gordimer's de-authorising of the biography.

Roberts, who steeped himself in his subject for seven years, has the virtue of insider-outsider status and thus of relative objectivity in the insular, partisan world of South African letters. He offers a nuanced analysis of Gordimer's social and artistic evolution, providing a sense of the complexity and ambiguity of the work of a major writer who has been too neatly pigeonholed by her critics.

The title alludes to Georg Lukacs's metaphor of the writer's study as a 'witch's kitchen' in which socio-historical forces are transmuted into realist art and the biography traces the influence of Lukacs (and other unorthodox Marxists) on Gordimer's movement from aestheticised *New Yorker* stories to politically engaged anti-apartheid fiction.

While Roberts' accusations of censorship sparked a media storm in South Africa, he does include intimate details about Gordimer's family members that are of tangential relevance and could have been omitted. The book is so loosely structured as to be confusing and repetitive. Roberts' tone is inappropriately informal, opinionated and defensive. Nevertheless, the biography will be of interest to Gordimer scholars.

Robin Visel. *The African Book Publishing Record* 33 (4). 2007:320.

## **Govender, Ronnie**

*In the Manure: Memories and Reflections*. Ronnie Govender. Cape Town: David Philip, 2008. 224pp. R162.

Ronnie Govender first made his name as being part of a wave of writers who refused the Eurocentric cultural currency of the 60s and 70s and started writing about South Africans. In his own inimitable style he created comedies about peculiarly indigenous conflicts concerning religion, race and culture. This, his much anticipated autobiography, contains a wealth of history, digging up whole strata of unmined records, involving, for instance, the author's relentless contribution to non-racialised sports, arts and culture in South Africa. Govender's upfront style is in evidence. Though it is not as funny or as warm as some, it's an important historical document.

Anton Kruger. *Wordstock*. July 3 2008:3.

In this autobiographical account Ronnie Govender takes on the persona of his given name Sathie (Sathieseelan—meaning man of truth), feeling that if he distanced himself somewhat, the narrative could take on a more impersonal aspect. The title refers to the numerous times he 'put his foot in it', dropping him in the 'manure'.

He grew up in Durban's multi-racial Cato Manor. Dominated largely by the descendents of Indian indentured labourers, it was one of the first and largest districts to be destroyed under the apartheid regime. In this autobiography, he deals with the challenges that have faced the Indian community over the years. His humorous, tongue in cheek style makes for compelling reading, offering a glimpse into his involvement in teaching, journalism, sport and theatre while providing an insightful view of an important period of South Africa history.

Caroline Smart. <http://artsmart.co.za/literature/1180.html>. August 12 2008.

### **Green, Lawrence**

*Cape Town: Tavern of the Seas*. Lawrence Green. Alberton: Galago Publishing, 2006. 205pp. R150.

Originally published in 1948, and then again in 1975, this new publication with additional photographs and foreword has been enthusiastically greeted by many who remember this prolific author fondly. Lawrence Green was born in 1899 (and died in 1973), so many of his recollections of life in Cape Town and elsewhere date back to as much as a century ago. Green's work is almost stream-of-consciousness as he moves from one topic to another to provide a glimpse into a way of life that was fading even as he wrote about it in the 1940s. *Cape Town: Tavern of the Seas* records a world gone by and reveals the world-view of an English-speaking, white South African from that era.

Green was a good writer and this is an easy read.

Paul H. Thomas. *The African Book Publishing Record* 34 (2) 2008:99.

### **Hawthorne, Peter**

*The King's Eye and John Vorster's Elbow: Reporting the Mandela Years*. Peter Hawthorne. Wandsbeck: Reach Publishers, 2008. 221pp. R180.

Since 1994, many books have been published by journalists who were on the 'front line' in South Africa. *The King's Eye and John Vorster's Elbow* is significantly different from other such books. Written by a veteran journalist

who spent much of his career reporting for *Time Magazine*, it is a memoir of the life and times of a political reporter who worked all over Africa for over 40 years. While it is structured around the 30-year span marking the rise, fall and rise of the ANC in South Africa, it is full of fascinating, touching and sometimes downright hysterical anecdotal asides. This intelligent, easy-reading book will appeal to anyone interested in Africa.

Unnamed reviewer. [http://www.litnet.co.za/cgi-bin/giga.cgi?cmd=print\\_article&news\\_id=52918&cause\\_id=1270](http://www.litnet.co.za/cgi-bin/giga.cgi?cmd=print_article&news_id=52918&cause_id=1270)  
December 10 2008.

### **Head, Bessie (née Emery)**

*Bessie Head: The Thunder Behind Her Ears: Her Life and Writing*. Gillian Stead Eilersen. Johannesburg : Wits University Press, 2007. 374pp. R220.

One of Africa's finest writers, Bessie Head was alone in her Coloured-ness in African society, in her woman-ness in patriarchal society, and in her writer-ness in an art and industry dominated by powerful white men and sometimes patronising white women. But as Eilersen asserts, Bessie always stood up to power.

Eilersen's full-length biography of Bessie Head first appeared in 1995. This second edition sees changed layout and design, with photos (some new to this title) bunched rather than dispersed as in the first edition. Eilersen tells the Bessie Head story chronologically, and the narrative derives its power from the liberal use of Bessie's own voice.

Eilersen analyses the novels: pre-publication build-up, textual critique, and post-publication analyses. Head wrote most of her work as a stateless person in Botswana, where she and her son experienced African racism. Eilersen's narration is empathetic, the biography exquisitely written.

Cornelius Thomas. *New Contree* (53). May 2007:157-160.

### **Hilton-Barber, Bridget**

*Garden of My Ancestors*. Bridget Hilton-Barber. Johannesburg: Penguin, 2007. 186pp. R164.

South African Bridget Hilton-Barber's humorous and touching salute to her ancestors, her love of flowers, and her willingness to expose her own pain through trying circumstance from her terrifying Afro-Tarentino moment to the deaths of her beloved brother and nephew is an absorbing and evocative read. Written from the heart, it's sad, funny and philosophical.

Caroline Hurry. *Saturday Star*. March 22 2008:2.

In the space of one year, Bridget Hilton-Barber lost three loved ones and was the target of an armed robbery. To recover some peace of mind, she heads for the family farm in the misty of Limpopo (South Africa). It's not only in the place itself that she seeks refuge—it's also in the ghosts of her ancestors, still present in the stories of their colourful, chaotic lives, and in the exquisite gardens they created. Deeply personal and painful, but also fierce and oddly funny.

Suzy Brokensha. *FairLady*. January 2008:164.

## **Hugo, Gert**

*Africa Will Always Break Your Heart*. Gert Hugo. Durban: Just Done Publications, 2007. 246pp. R260.

The title of this book is somewhat misleading: instead of a tale of death and destruction that go with the wars that have ravaged the continent, this is just another of those bitter accounts by former apartheid foot soldiers who have found the going tough in post-1994 South Africa. The author was a career soldier in the apartheid Defence Force who quit just before the country's first democratic elections. He tells the story of his upbringing (his father was also a soldier). Apart from the chapter in which he tells of his seduction, when he was in his teens, by an older family friend the narrative does not come to life. For the most part, Hugo reports the facts and leaves the rest to the imagination.

Lucas Ledwaba. *City Press: City Pulse*. January 6 2008:16.

## **Hurley, Denis E.**

*Memories: The Memoirs of Archbishop Denis E. Hurley, OMI.* Denis E. Hurley. Ed. Paddy Kearney. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2006. 208pp. R250.

Irish born Denis Hurley was the youngest and longest serving Catholic bishop ever. Hurley regarded his appointment to the Preparatory Commission of Vatican Council II by Pope John XXIII as the highlight of his life, but there was another: he galvanised his church behind the opposition to apartheid and was, the TRC found, regarded by the apartheid security police as one of the state's most wanted political opponents.

This work, written in 15 chapters, consists of two major parts: first, the autobiography of Denis Hurley for his first 50 years, and secondly, the account of his last 38 years, carefully synthesised by the Bishop's contemporary, the editor.

The work provides lots of insights into apartheid and its opposition forces. It is a work of erudition and deserves to be compulsory reading in the church ranks, for political sociologists and students of African history.

Daniel Noni Lantum. *The African Book Publishing Record* 33 (4). 2007:319.

## **Jacobs, Rayda**

*Masquerade: The Story of My Life.* Rayda Jacobs. Cape Town: Umuzi, 2008. 320pp. R155.

In her autobiography, novelist Rayda Jacobs chronicles her life as a young girl in Diep River, Cape Town, her forced removal by the apartheid authorities, her try for white status, many betrayals and family losses. She spent 27 years in exile and the troubled father-daughter relationship (her father came of Jewish/Muslim stock) is a thread through the book. The pictures of the three generations are one of the best parts of the book.

Jean von Witt. *Cape Times*. August 8 2008:11.

The autobiography of this award-winning novelist gives a good picture of South Africa as it was and is now, and of a steadfast woman who does not let

misfortune get her down. She tells of how, when caught 'trying for white', she was forced at the age of 21 to leave South Africa. She spent 27 years in exile in Canada. Time and time again, she withstood setbacks and became stronger. This is a gripping and uplifting book.

Margot Pakendorf. [http://www.news24.com/Beeld/Vermaak/Boeke/0\\_3-2109-2112\\_2381567\\_00.html](http://www.news24.com/Beeld/Vermaak/Boeke/0_3-2109-2112_2381567_00.html). August 24 2008.\*

The memoir begins with South African novelist Rayda Jacobs' unhappy childhood in Diep River. Her parents get divorced and soon thereafter the coloured neighbourhood is declared a white area and the family are forced to move in with the strict grandmother. In order to give Rayda the best opportunities, her mother buys her a 'white' card which enables her to train and work as a white legal secretary. Someone alerts the authorities and Rayda and her sister are forced to leave for Canada. There she marries twice and has two children from her first marriage. Twenty-seven years later she returns to South Africa. Although her life is beset with hardship, her unwavering love for her children and writing sustains her.

Unnamed reviewer. *Ideas*. October 2008:136.

### **Jacobs, Rayda**

*The Mecca Diaries*. Rayda Jacobs. Cape Town: Double Storey, 2005. 160pp. R190.

Travel accounts of pilgrimages to Mecca and Medina are not uncommon, however the present book is of interest because it is from an unmarried Muslim woman who is a prize-winning novelist. While Jacobs' diary details all she went through both before and during her journey, this book is equally the story of her spiritual journey. The text is full of Islamic terms, but she does provide a glossary for non-Muslims. Perhaps a glossary of Afrikaans terms would have been useful for the non-South African reader as well. This is a well-written, interesting account.

Paul H. Thomas. *The African Book Publishing Record* 33 (4). 2007:323-4.

## **Kathrada, Ahmed**

*Memoirs*. Ahmed Kathrada. Cape Town: Zebra, 2004. 400pp. R186.

In *Memoirs*, Ahmed Kathrada tells South Africa's story through his own personal experience as an activist, saboteur, and minister in post-apartheid South Africa. This beautifully written account illuminates the bond amongst diverse groups fighting against a common enemy and the price they paid for their participation in this struggle. Imprisoned on Robben Island, he describes the extreme suffering experienced by prisoners.

Mueni wa Muiu. *African Studies Review*. 50 (1):133-139.

## **Kathrada, Ahmed**

*A Simple Freedom: The Strong Mind of Robben Island Prisoner 468/64*. Ahmed Kathrada with Tim Couzens. Johannesburg: Wild Dog Press, 2008. 148pp. R149.

There were several things that enabled African National Congress stalwart to survive 26 years in jail. They include friendships with Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu and Govan Mbeki; family letters, church services and even some prison guards; and Kathrada's habit of making notes about anything and everything. In time he filled seven notebooks. These were confiscated but, exploiting the gullibility of inexperienced guards, later retrieved. Based on those notebooks, this beautiful small book is a collection of aphorisms and historical anecdotes regarding the experiences of the apartheid state's most famous political prisoners; it is accessible to anyone from historian to schoolchild.

Sue Grant-Marshall. *The Weekender*. December 6 2008. <http://www.businessday.co.za/weekender/article.aspx?ID=BD4A898091>.

*A Simple Freedom* by former Robben Island inmate Ahmed Kathrada manages a balance between the written word and illustrations, making it an easy read. From his early incarceration, detention, the trial and subsequent arrival at Robben Island, the writer effortlessly takes the reader with him by giving a concise description of each of the unpleasant episodes which



political prisoners would have to endure. The reader also gets a glimpse of how far the apartheid government was prepared to play the race card as a means of dividing comrades who came from different racial backgrounds.

It is a book about courage in prison; readers may take the prison experience as a metaphor for any of life's challenges. It reminds one that while inspiration can be drawn from intellectual giants, it can equally be drawn from ordinary people.

Bheki Mbanjwa. *The Witness*. December 3 2008:10.

This attractive book arises out of quotations from prison compositions of the anti-apartheid activist, Ahmed Kathrada. Kathrada spent most of his term on Robben Island, and was a friend of Nelson Mandela. The anecdotes are well written, and we learn how Kathrada maintained courage and hope during his 27 years in prison. The book is beautifully laid out, with photos that illustrate the narratives.

Jan-Jan Joubert. [http://www.news24.com/Beeld/Vermaak/Boeke/0,,3-2109-2112\\_2434923,00.html](http://www.news24.com/Beeld/Vermaak/Boeke/0,,3-2109-2112_2434923,00.html) December 2 2008.\*

## **Krog, Antjie**

*A Change of Tongue*. Antjie Krog. Johannesburg: Random House, 2004. 376pp. R190.

*A Change of Tongue* follows the pattern the author of *Country of my Skull* has used before. The book is divided into six chapters and deals with contemporary happenings in South Africa and the events that preceded the advent of democracy as well as her personal journey to the *boer* town of Kroonstad where she was born and her ancestors had lived since before the outbreak of the Anglo-Boer War.

In the first part, she provides hilarious but truthful accounts of both successes and failures of post-apartheid governance. She shows that reconciliation between whites and blacks is still a long way off. In part 2, the writer spends time on the farm where she was born, introducing us to various members of her close and extended family and to other Afrikaners. Through Krog's sketches we observe a society that is struggling to be born. In part 3,

Krog concentrates heavily on Mandela's release from prison and her difficulties as a journalist. In part 4, she focuses on translation and in parts 5 and 6 returns to the family farm—the need to sell it as it is no longer profitable—and her father's death.

*A Change of Tongue* is a mixture of good and bad storytelling and reporting. While the story of the 'new South Africa' struggling to break away from the old is well told, there are many stories that seem to be mere fillers. The book is overly long and unwieldy, lacking unity. Krog's fans will find interest in this book, but for the general reader there is not much to take away.

Cecil Abrahams. *The African Book Publishing Record* 33 (2). 2007:111.

### **Kruiper, Belinda**

*Kalahari Rain Song*. Elana Bregin and Belinda Kruiper. Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2004. 168pp. R170.

*Kalahari Rain Song* is the story of the Khomani of the Northern Cape Kalahari in South Africa, told largely through the life of Belinda Kruiper, a woman with ancestors from the San or Bushmen. The instigator of the project, Elana Bregin, is a white South African who had become interested in the plight of the San. The book is divided into 12 short chapters with Author's Notes, Prologue and Epilogue. Photographs by Dirk Skorski, graphics and colour drawings are inserted among the chapters. From an aesthetic point of view, the book holds together well. It provides the curious, rather than the expert, with some insights into the culture of the Khomani.

Kruiper's telling of her own story and that of the Bushmen is told simply and well.

Cecil Abrahams. *The African Book Publishing Record* 33 (2). 2007:111.

### **Leon, Tony**

*On the Contrary: Leading the Opposition in a Democratic South Africa*. Tony Leon. Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2008. 766pp. R325 (hardcover) R250 (paperback).

The erstwhile leader of the South African opposition the Democratic Party, later the Democratic Alliance, tells the story of a man who wants the world to know how great he is and, equally, wants to ensure that his enemies sink. By virtue of this score-settling—as in life, so in this book—Tony Leon is hoisted by his own petard. He comes across as a man who does not know himself. The best writing is found in the chapters about the failures of Thabo Mbeki's presidency and indeed the value of this book is its insight into the disintegration of this regime.

Maureen Isaacson. *The Sunday Independent*. August 17 2008:17.

*On the Contrary* is Leon's memoir of his life in opposition politics in South Africa. This impressive tome is a testimony to his contribution to the cause of opposition. It's also a great insider account of the most significant and momentous political events in South Africa since 1994. Its style is remarkably honest and even self-deprecating. The recollections of internal politics of the official opposition party make the best reading, though there are also fascinating sections on his run-ins with Thabo Mbeki over AIDS and race and with Winnie Mandela over her notoriously violent 'football club'.

Carol Paton. <http://free.financialmail.co.za/08/0815/life/clife.htm>. August 15 2008.

## **Maane, Elaine**

*Umzala: A Woman's Story of Living with HIV*. Elaine Maane. Cape Town: The Openly Positive Trust, 2009. 224pp. R195.

Born in Zambia, one of ten children, Elaine Maane tells a story that is almost too much to absorb. It is shocking, desperate and yet uplifting. Her journey encompasses her South African husband's betrayal, his non-disclosure of his HIV status, her contraction of HIV, the stigma, the denial, the insensitivity of family and society, the attitude of some doctors, and the dedication, warmth and caring of others. Woven through this poignant story are the deaths of six family members.

*Umzala* is the isiZulu word for cousin; it is Elaine's name for her new life companion, the HI-virus. This book is the second in a series of

books published by the Openly Positive Trust whose members aim to be positive role models for those living with HIV.

*LitNet*. February 16 2009. [http://www.litnet.co.za/cgi-bin/giga.cgi?cmd=cause\\_dir\\_news\\_item&cause\\_id=1270](http://www.litnet.co.za/cgi-bin/giga.cgi?cmd=cause_dir_news_item&cause_id=1270).

## **Magadla, Sizwe**

*Three-Letter Plague: A Young Man's Journey through a Great Epidemic*. Jonny Steinberg. Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2008. 342pp. R180.

This prize-winning author is one of the best-known non-fiction writers in South Africa. A writer who writes with insight, integrity and empathy, Steinberg's books are intellectually stimulating page-turners. *Three-Letter Plague* is a real eye-opener, taking the reader into the heart of the most enigmatic aspect of the epidemic—the stigma attached to the HI-virus and its consequences.

Initially, two men stand at the centre of Steinberg's inquiry: a doctor from Doctors Without Borders running the anti-retroviral programme in the rural district of Lusikisiki in the Eastern Cape, and Sizwe Magadla, a young, fairly successful shop-owner. While the doctor's dictum is 'If you provide treatment that works, people will come and get it', Sizwe refuses even to test for the virus. Steinberg explores where Sizwe's fear and resistance come from and why so many people living in the same community, when tested positive, deny themselves the chance to survive.

The tentative answers Steinberg receives remain unsatisfactory until he decides to bring himself into it. Steinberg recounts with unflinching honesty his own experiences with testing for the virus and by doing so sheds light on Sizwe Magadla's decisions. The success of *Three-Letter Plague* lies in the respect Steinberg shows for the other man's radically different viewpoint. It does not offer ready-made solutions, but it helps one to understand the dynamics at work. It is a must-read for all who live in South Africa, a country with one of the highest HIV-infection rates in the world.

Karina Magdalena Szcurek. <http://www.itch.co.za/?article=40>. October 8 2008.

This book is likely to win a number of prizes. Jonny Steinberg uses the technique known as ‘new journalism’. His knowledge, research and style are admirable. Steinberg became part of the community of Lusikisiki, in the northern Transkei in rural South Africa. He meets a young, reasonably progressive, shop-owner, Sizwe, who cannot overcome the stigma and uncertainties of a possible HIV-positive diagnosis in order to get himself tested. Over time, Steinberg—a gay, Jewish city dweller—wins the trust of ‘Sizwe’ and others in the community. He uncovers the multifaceted reasons behind the fear of being tested, rooted in tradition, politics, race, morality and culture. In spite of the grim subject matter, I couldn’t put this book down.

Jan-Jan Joubert. *Beeld*. March 30 2008. <http://www.news24.com/Beeld/Vermaak/Boeke/0,,3-2109-2112 2296028,00.html>

Steinberg is one of the most incisive observers of South African society writing today. He has made a name for himself by turning the anecdotal, the criminal and the local into moral stories about South Africa. This book about the AIDS epidemic focuses on Sizwe Magadla who runs a small shop in the Eastern Cape. Steinberg questions what it is like for him to live in the midst of an epidemic.

There are two journeys here: the first is the author’s journey in the heart of South Africa’s AIDS epidemic and his own personal encounters with shame and stigma in the early days of the epidemic; the second is Magadla’s journey of growth into the world of healing presented by ARVs.

The book is not perfect: there are misspellings of some Nguni expressions; the main character’s name is a pseudonym which means that we cannot check any of Steinberg’s claims about him such as his consistent linking of Magadla with rural traditionalism. Although Steinberg does not pretend to disinterest, his self-awareness does not go far enough. One wishes he had taken on board Johannes Fabian’s concern about ethnographers who treat their subjects as if they belong to the ‘then and there’ of tradition, in contrast to the ‘here and now’ of the ethnographer’s modernity. Magadla’s refusal to get tested may be incomprehensible to Steinberg on ‘scientific’ grounds, but it makes sense as a political gesture. Aware of the stigma attached to the disease, he fears a positive result would strip him of his

wealth and deny his offspring the legacy he is trying to build them. This is not a man wallowing in traditional ignorance but a savvy businessman making calculations. Steinberg's book is illuminating but it raises more questions than it answers.

Jacob Dlamini. *Daily Dispatch*. March 28 2008:19.

This is a compelling read, its strength being its ability to make accessible and comprehensible to the lay reader the lived reality of the AIDS pandemic. Like a well written thriller, the plot is riveting. We are in a small impoverished rural slum, Lusikisiki, and we are taken into the complex, layered reality of Sizwe Magadla, a villager.

Steinberg has fine-tuned the genre of non-fiction, telling a gripping and unsettling tale of the obstacles to the AIDS campaign. The main character refuses to get tested, and his internal debate is used as a cipher to explain intricate themes of fear, masculinity and shame.

Ann Donald. *Jozi Weekly*. April 2 2008:9.

## **Mandela, Nelson**

*Playing the Enemy: Nelson Mandela and the Game that Made a Nation*. John Carlin. London: Atlantic Books (R365) or Johannesburg: Penguin, 2008. 274pp. R220.

This new biography of Nelson Mandela takes us on a roller-coaster ride through South Africa's recent history. John Carlin's writing flows with ease as he details the rise of the right-wing; the Zulu warriors killing township residents; and Chris Hani's assassination, which saw South Africa teetering on the brink of civil war. Carlin zips through the momentous decade after 1985, viewing it through the eyes of various South Africans.

Carlin was *The Independent's* correspondent in South Africa from 1989 to 1995. His book is to be made into a Warner Brothers' film, directed by Clint Eastwood and starring Morgan Freeman and Matt Damon.

Sue Grant-Marshall. <http://www.businessday.co.za/weekender/article.aspx?ID=BD4A864097>. October 18 2008.

John Carlin's book takes as its starting point the moment in June 1995 when Nelson Mandela hijacked the Rugby World Cup. It was clear that Mandela had decided that the most effective way to win over South Africa's white population and unite the nation was to back the Springboks in the World Cup, even though in black minds the Springboks stood for Afrikaner racism. I was there at the World Cup, but until I read *Playing the Enemy* I was not aware just how diligently Mandela set about wooing the Afrikaner. It is a fascinating story.

Justin Cartwright. <http://telegraph.co.uk/core/Content/displayPrintable.jhtml;jsessionid=V0TKPHRQSFR3ZQFIQ...> September 3 2008.

### **Mandela, Nelson**

*Mandela: A Critical Life*. Tom Lodge. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. 274pp. R240.

This authoritative biography of one of the iconic heroes of the anti-apartheid struggle will sit prominently on the shelves of scholars of South African twentieth-century history. Lodge emphasises the significance of Mandela's childhood and legal training for his adult political activities. Distinguishing himself from other biographers, Lodge states: 'One of my particular preoccupations is with Mandela's political actions as performance, self-consciously planned, scripted to meet public expectations, or calculated to shift popular sentiment. For Mandela, politics has always been primarily about enacting stories, about making narratives, primarily about morally exemplary conduct, and only secondarily about ideological vision, more about means rather than ends.' In accordance with the subtitle, 'A Critical Life', Lodge's is the first biography of Mandela to be written from an analytical academic perspective. It will be read as an essential biography of one of the ANC's most prominent leaders.

Sheridan Johns. *Journal of African Studies* 34 (1). 2008:228-230.

### **Mandela, Nelson**

*Nelson Mandela: The Authorised Comic Book*. The Nelson Mandela Foundation and Umlando Wezithombe (illustrator). Johannesburg: Jonathan

Ball and the Nelson Mandela Foundation, 2008. 193pp. R149.

This large-format hardback book tells the story—through words and colourful pictures—of the herd boy who grew up to become a lawyer, a freedom fighter, South Africa’s first democratically elected president and the beloved grandfather of a nation. This story for the young and young at heart is one to read with pride and enjoyment.

Sbongile Dimbaza. *The Herald: TGIF*. July 18 2008:5.

It’s difficult to believe a comic book can bring tears to your eyes, but reading the life story of Mandela is a humbling and distressing experience because you can’t help wishing that a man so great had more time to be happy. It’s dreadfully unfair that, on the surface at least, the best years of his life began after the age of 70. The comic book details Mandela’s time as a child, a young activist, the dark days of the treason trials and—the most distressing part of the book—his life in prison and the horrors he suffered on Robben Island. But it is reading about the process of negotiation that succeeded Mandela’s release from prison that makes one realise what a miracle it is that South Africa survived intact.

What makes *Nelson Mandela: The Authorised Comic Book* so special is the personal detail, such as why Mandela wears ‘Madiba shirts’ and how he was forever giving his security detail heart attacks by going for unannounced walks at 5 am. But what I love most about this book is that it makes the life of this great man accessible to the youth, who may not completely grasp just how much he sacrificed for South Africa.

Samantha Bartlett. *Cape Times*. July 18 2008:10.

## **Mandela, Nelson**

*Man of the People: A Photographic Tribute to Nelson Mandela*. Peter Magubane. Johannesburg: Pan Macmillan and Mutloatse Arts Heritage Trust, 2008. 204pp. R300.

For more than half a century, photographer Peter Magubane and Nelson Mandela’s paths crossed several times. In the 1950s, a young Magubane was



among the throngs of journalists and photographers who captured the historic Rivonia Trial in which Mandela was one of the accused. Magubane also photographed many other events that would shape the history of South Africa—among them the 1960 Sharpeville massacre; the Soweto uprising of 1976; Mandela's walk to freedom in 1990 and the historic general election of 1994. Throughout the struggle years, Magubane came to know Mandela well, first as a political leader and then as an icon. After Mandela's release in 1990, he became his official photographer. His chronicle of the life of Mandela is fascinating, moving and often surprising. It's a masterpiece, not only about Mandela but also about Magubane and their parallel lives. Magubane has already published 16 books, but this is by far one of his most outstanding works. It is a collector's item.

Doreen Zimbizi. *Sowetan*. July 22 2008:19.

### **Mandela, Nelson**

*Nelson Mandela: A Biography*. Peter Limb. Westport: Greenwood Press, 2008. 144pp. R420.

Limb, an African studies bibliographer and associate professor of history at Michigan State University has written a book on Mandela for the Greenwood biographical series. Books in the series are tailored for high school pupils and public libraries. Limb's book deserves wide readership. He fulfils his promise to present 'a well-rounded, balanced view of Mandela set squarely in his time and place'. By interweaving Mandela's story with South Africa's, Limb helps readers understand the wider history of apartheid.

Limb's writing style is ideal for a general audience. Quotations from Mandela and his contemporaries further enliven the account. Greenwood's biographies have strict page limits, so readers may want to learn more about certain issues. However, the notes and bibliography direct readers to other sources.

This biography is authoritative, up-to-date and highly readable. It is now the most recent and concise biography of Nelson Mandela written by a specialist.

Steven Gish. H-SAfrica@H-NET.MSU.EDU November 20 2008.

Peter Limb's short biography is ostensibly directed at high school students but it contains rewards for more specialised readers. Official archival sources have helped him supply insights into Mandela's father's career as well as the reasons for the Thembu regent's willingness to accept Mandela into his household. An interview with Govan Mbeki adds a fresh claim to the question of who helped Mandela write his speech at the Rivonia trial. The material on Mandela's subsequent political role is less original and there are slip-ups in chronology. In general, though, Limb's text is a useful introduction to Mandela's life and times.

Tom Lodge. *Journal of Southern African Studies*. 34 (4): December 2008:981-2.

## **Mandela, Nelson**

*Nelson Mandela: A Very Short Introduction*. Elleke Boehmer. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. 200pp. R97.

The greatest among many strengths of Elleke Boehmer's book is its examination of the multiple images, representations, personae of Mandela, his status as a site, and battleground, for symbolic struggles and his more recent iconic status. Some of these were crafted by Madiba (his clan name), some projected onto him by others. She does not try to match the detailed narrative of Madiba's life offered in previous biographies, though she does give an excellent overview of his career. Her main task is far more ambitious and interesting: it is, in a series of interlinked mini-essays, to trace the facets both of 'Mandela the story' and 'Mandela the symbol'—from his own changing but carefully crafted dress sense to his role in global celebrity culture.

The emphasis on careful self-fashioning does not imply seeing Mandela as some kind of fake showman. This is not a debunking portrait, but on balance a deeply admiring one—perhaps a harsher accounting with the Madiba legacy may be needed than Boehmer's book provides.

Her partial reliance on literary postcolonialism and its over-familiar canon is Boehmer's Achilles' heel. She strains to bring Mandela into theoretical relationship with Fanon, despite the lack of evidence that Mandela ever read him, but makes almost no mention of the Vietnamese, Chinese and other texts we know he was reading. This is part of a wider

blind spot in relation to the influence on Mandela and the ANC of orthodox Communist and Marxist-Leninist thought.

Stephen Howe. <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/nelson-mandela-by-elleke-boehmer-8...> July 21 2008.

Boehmer offers a richly layered analytical treatment, explaining why Mandela's story is important to us today and how it is that he has achieved such an iconic status worldwide. For a start, Mandela's political triumph coincided with the international consolidation of what Boehmer describes as 'the celebrity culture that marks the new millennium, with its focus on the individual as maker of their destiny'. Mandela lived a 'remarkably networked' life in a way that yielded a rich harvest of 'form giving images' that readily lent themselves to symbols and metaphor. This achievement was deliberate and self-conscious, as well as the more involuntary product of a rich array of intellectual and literary influences that Mandela encountered in his own 'quest for modernity'. Boehmer's book is exceptional, both in its methodology and its success in illuminating the cultural sources of Mandela's power.

Tom Lodge. *Journal of Southern African Studies*. 34 (4): December 2008:981-2.

## **Mandela, Nelson**

*Hunger for Freedom: The Story of Food in the Life of Nelson Mandela*. Anna Trapido. Johannesburg: Jacana, in association with the Nelson Mandela Foundation, 2008. 216pp. R300 (H) or R225 (pbk).

Anna Trapido, anthropologist, chef and author, decided to replicate the food-as-aide-memoir experiment—familiar to us from Marcel Proust—with Nelson Mandela. The resulting book is a moving gastro-political history of our land and testament to the emotionally charged landscape of one man's life—told one recipe at a time.

She interviewed a swathe of South Africans, including old men who were herd boys with him, his first girlfriend at 14, and Mandela himself,

*Judith Lütge Coullie*

using their food memories as an entry into the life of the celebrated nonagnarian.

Aspasia Karras. <http://thetimes.co.za/PrintArticle.aspx?ID=803947>. July 21 2008.

This book offers a wonderful way of looking at South Africa's twentieth century history, through food in the life of Nelson Mandela. It's not really about the food, though that is fun, but *Hunger for Freedom* is innovative, quirky and very, very palatable.

Margaret von Klemperer. *The Witness*. November 26 2008:9.

### **Maraney, Hilary**

*I Married My Mother*. Hilary Maraney. Cape Town: Dinky-Bloc, 2007. 192pp. R170.

In this memoir of a girl growing up during the 1950s in Cape Town, Maraney presents fresh angles on the troubled mother-daughter relationship theme. With surreal imagery and poetry, she explores the sting of betrayal, the legacy of living with a depressed mother and the disillusionment of a daughter. It is a powerful psychological treatise from a woman who looks back and shares the lessons she learned in a fascinating way.

'S.P.' *The Oprah Magazine* (South Africa). February 2008:78.

### **Mbambo, Buyi**

*In Touch*. Buyi Mbambo. Pretoria: Umgangatho Media & Communications, 2006. (No further information available.)

*In Touch* is a personal story of spiritual awakening and discovery. Buyi Mbambo writes of her early childhood with her remarkable grandmother at her farmstead in Highflats, Natal and her adolescence with her parents at Groutville. Her mother is called by the ancestors to be *isangoma* (a traditional healer).

Buyi gets her postgraduate degree in psychology and counselling, but all the while her clairvoyant dreams continue, and she receives advice from her late mother, her murdered brother and others. She learns to discern between destructive presences and her protecting spirits. When she succumbs to the call to be *isangoma* she is taught the healing ways of herbs and divination.

This is a slim volume which bears witness to the shaping of a remarkable spiritual path that straddles an open Christianity and the abiding presence of the ancestors. It is a moving, detailed, and colourful testimony to the complex (and sometimes alarming) path of the clairvoyant and traditional healer who lives this life in combination with her psychological profession and her deepening awareness of the grace of God and Christ. A loving, experiential, lively and honest narrative.

Peter Merrington. *Wordstock*. July 3 2008:3.

### **Mbeki, Thabo**

*Thabo Mbeki and the Battle for the Soul of the ANC*. William Mervin Gumede. London: Zed Books, 2001. 476pp. R196.

Gumede has a harsh analysis of the mistakes made by the ANC in key policy areas (arms, AIDS, Zimbabwe and economic policy). Much of the book is taken up with the personal power plays that brought Mbeki the prized succession to Mandela and then his ruthless consolidation of power. Mbeki's story is a Shakespearean tale of power struggles, paranoia, betrayals, secrets, lies and, above all, hubris.

Victoria Brittain. *Guardian*. February 9 2008: 7.

### **Mbeki, Thabo**

*Thabo Mbeki: The Dream Deferred*. Mark Gevisser. Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2007. 650pp. R225.

This is a story about home and exile. It is a story, too, of political intrigue, of a revolutionary movement and the dogged rise to power of a quiet, clever,

diligent but unpopular man who seemed to take too little joy in power but have much need for it. Gevisser's biography is a profound psycho-political examination of the man who [until he was 'recalled from office' in 2008] ruled South Africa since it attained democracy, first as prime minister under Nelson Mandela, then as president.

Unnamed reviewer. [Http://sabookworm.blogspot.com/2008/06/books-of-week-alan-paton-prize.html](http://sabookworm.blogspot.com/2008/06/books-of-week-alan-paton-prize.html). June 19 2008.

## **Mdlalose, Frank**

*My Life: The Autobiography of Dr F T Mdlalose, First Premier of KwaZulu-Natal*. Frank Mdlalose. Wierda Park: Action Publishing, 2006. 122pp. R130.

The delightful, short autobiography of Dr. Frank Mdlalose, the first Premier of KwaZulu-Natal, has a humility and gentleness that covers a tough commitment to justice, non-racism and service to the community mixed with a deep love for his family. He recounts his rural boyhood, his family life and ancestry, schooling and membership of the ANC Youth League at Fort Hare University, the indignities experienced as a black man in racist South Africa (compounded because he was a medical doctor), and the difficulties he encountered as premier. He tells also of the tragic loss of his two sons.

Mdlalose's practical 'ubuntu' (African humanism) is a value that he and his family derive from their traditions and strong Christian values. His autobiography is a pleasant read, with some interesting photographs.

Graham McIntosh. *The Witness*. Mhtml:file://E:\internet\0430%20The%20Witness%20looking%20back%20on%20life.mht. May 6 2008.

## **Moleté, Mokone**

*Postcards from Soweto*. Mokone Moleté. Cape Town: Jacana, 2007. 103pp. R110.

Mokone has assumed a youthful voice in telling his story about growing up in turbulent yet enjoyable Soweto. He includes a necessary dose of history but does not dwell on apartheid and its effects. He does not avoid it either, he simply focuses on subject-matter that makes his experiences so vivid. He

gives us a bird's eye view of the lifestyles and lingo of the time, and also of his strictly moral upbringing.

Jacob Mogano. [http://www.jhblive.co.za/live/publications\\_view.jsp?pub\\_id=211328&print=true](http://www.jhblive.co.za/live/publications_view.jsp?pub_id=211328&print=true)  
May 30 2008.

This autobiography is structured in short anecdotes—as its title implies—but the stories fail because the endings are so predictable or simply weak. The themes treated are parent-child relationships, the problems encountered by pupils and teachers at schools, the question of language and usage, alcohol abuse, sex as commodity, the beauty of women and the use of nicknames. In spite of the serious themes, the stories are humorous and one cannot help laughing at the absurd in the everyday. The use of the lingo of the township (with English translations in brackets) means that this could make a useful contribution to the study of varieties of English in South Africa. This book sorely lacks proper editing.

Marius Crous. *Die Burger*. March 31 2008: 7.\*

### **Mopeli-Paulus, A. S.**

*The World and the Cattle*. A. S. Mopeli-Paulus. Johannesburg: Penguin, 2008. 240pp. R120.

This autobiographical work of the poet and writer was completed in 1965 but has not been published in its entirety until now. The book's editor, whose name appears nowhere in the volume but is known to be Stephen Gray, has compiled the text from three overlapping, and in minor respects, variant typescripts.

*The World and the Cattle* begins with a brief and breathless account of Lesotho's history from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Mopeli-Paulus, a direct descendent of Moshoeshoe, was born in 1913. His account of his childhood is a little rambling but full of spry detail. At school he is embarrassed, as a Christian, at not being circumcised. With a friend he runs away from school but is finally arrested and returned to the Witzieshoek Reserve. Jumping forward, he trains as a teacher and is appalled at conditions in the Benoni

location: here the writing becomes more vibrant. At the outbreak of WWII, he enlists in the Cape Corps. His account of his experience of burial duty at the battle of El Alamein is vivid and thoughtful. There follows the most valuable section of the book in which he recounts his attempts to resist the government's attempts to limit cattle stock in the reserve, and his subsequent arrest.

One question remains unanswered and that is the extent of the role of the author's language advisor, Miriam Basner. The editor states that there should be 'no suspicion of any ghosting or team-working' for this text, but in my conversations with Mopeli-Paulus and Basner in the early 1990s both indicated that the work was jointly produced.

Plaudits to Penguin for bringing this autobiography into print at last.

Chris Dunton. *Sunday Independent*. June 29 2008:17.

### **Ngenelwa, Thembelani**

*The Day I Died: A True Story of Survival*. Thembelani Ngenelwa. Cape Town: Kwela Books, 2007. 127pp. R100. (Translated into Xhosa as *Ukuvuka Kwam Ekufeni*.)

*The Day I Died* is the autobiography of an ordinary man who narrowly escaped death at the hands of a criminal. It helps us to delve into the experience of victims of crimes.

Beginning with Ngenelwa's childhood with his deeply Christian family in a small rural town in the Eastern Cape, the narrative then moves on to the author's experience in 2003, when he was shot five times—for no apparent reason—and dumped on a railway line to be hit by the next train. He was rescued. After his recovery he began to appreciate the meaning of life and of God.

The success of the story lies in the victim's vivid exploration of his psychological as well as physical states: the fears, the nightmares, the agony, the hopelessness. Appended at the end of this uni-linear account, in easy to understand language, is an appendix on post-traumatic stress disorder.

Katsuji Nakamura. *The African Book Publishing Record* 34 (3) 2008:189.



This is the autobiography of Thembelani Ngenelwa, who grew up in Engcobo in the Eastern Cape and who looked after his father's cattle just like any rural boy. After finishing high school he went to university. Then in October 2003, while in Germiston, he was attacked, shot five times in the stomach and left for dead on the railway line. Somehow he managed to stagger to the road and eventually passersby called an ambulance. He tells the moving story of that night, his long road to recovery and how he dealt with the trauma. Don't be surprised—or ashamed—if it brings tears to your eyes.

Dumisani Ntshentshe. *Bona*. August 2008:16.

### **Nkabinde, Nkunzi Zandile**

*Black Bull, Ancestors and Me: My Life as a Lesbian Sangoma*. Nkunzi Zandile Nkabinde. Johannesburg: Jacana, 2008. 184pp. R120.

This touching autobiography of South Africa's famous lesbian *sangoma* (traditional healer) recounts its author's 32 years of living in Soweto, where she had to shrug off the prejudice of straight people and ostracism by other healers.

Her first sexual experience was with an older woman and she came out as a lesbian when she was still at school. Her mother accepted her choice from the outset, and she did not endure abuse because, she says, she had uncles who were boxers and policemen.

Nkabinde says that homosexuality is not new to Africa. Zulu king Shaka is reputed to have decreed that his conscripted armies engage in thigh sex (*ukuhlobonga*) while confined to bush barracks.

Nkabinde, who qualified as a journalist and now works as a tour guide, writes about her life in unassuming prose and her talents as a woman of letters are unmistakable.

Mlungisi Zondi. <http://www.businessday.co.za/weekender/article.aspx?ID=BD4A826630>. August 28 2008.

This is a fascinating and brave story of a Zulu woman who answered her ancestral calling to become a healer. She breezes, a little clumsily, through

her childhood, including the abuse by older men. At 20-something, she is admitted to a mental asylum after hearing voices. But the voices she hears are the ancestors, especially Nkunzi, who ‘invades’ her body, making her adopt a male ego. She challenges traditional *sangomas* (traditional healers) and stands up for the rights of black lesbians who are regularly targeted in hate crimes because it is not ‘African’ to be gay.

Elsbeth Mendes. *Cape Times*. December 24 2008:10.

Nkunzi Zandile Nkabinde’s story may have remained in the historical space of oral history but for the support of Gala (Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action). This book is a brave account of a young black woman’s transformative journey towards discovering her sexual and cultural identity. This book challenges us to think about how identities are formed and/or constructed. Nkabinde embraces her multiple identities even when they seem to be in conflict with one another. She exposes the intricacies of the world of *sangomas* (traditional healers); I battled to understand the complex relationships that reside in the spiritual and cultural realms. This story takes you on a strange trip, somewhere between ‘fiction’ and reality.

Zethu Matebeni. *Mail & Guardian: Friday*. November 28 2008:5.

## Osler, Antony

*Stoep Zen: A Zen Life in South Africa*. Antony Osler. Auckland Park: Jacana Media, 2008. 176 pp. R185.

*Stoep Zen* is one of those books that defies categorisation. Divided into four seasonal sections, *Stoep Zen* serves up a magical blend of short essays, haiku-style poems and atmospheric photographs mirroring life in a small community set down amid one of the world’s most distinctive landscapes. But this is no idyll of rural escape with a dash of philosophising. Over the past few decades Osler’s work as a human rights lawyer has seen him, like the rest of us South Africans, riding the waves of ‘one of the most riveting, frightening, political revolutions in history. Radical change is in our face every day. How do we dance with this?’

That question is what Osler’s life—and his book—illuminates.

Stephen Coan. *The Witness*. December 16 2008:8.

Antony Osler's book tackles what Zen might mean in South Africa. As we see in this book, Osler fits his roles as Karoo sheepfarmer, human rights and labour lawyer and a Zen monk perfectly. Osler's wonderful stories and evocative poetry about the Karoo and about the country at large contain the sly wit and human insight of a Herman Charles Bosman as well as the sympathetic wisdom of Zen. Read this book. It will gladden and lighten your heart.

Peter Fabricius. *The Star: Tonight*. January 8 2009:10.

### **Paarman, Donald**

*Lunatic Surfer or Destiny?: Autobiography of a Springbok ... Whaat!* Donald Paarman. St Francis Bay: The Author, 2008. 184pp. R180.

This is about the life and times of Donald Paarman, arguably the best young surfer in South Africa during the 1960s. The story chronicles Donald's upbringing in a close-knit Catholic family, his selection for the Springbok surfing teams of 1966, '68 and '70, and offers a fascinating glimpse of the surfing and hippie cultures. In his own inimitable way, Donald lays bare his descent into drugs, alcoholism and lunacy and his subsequent resurrection through surfing, therapy and abstinence. It is an inspiration and provides a timeless attraction for anyone interested in New Age lifestyles and those living them. The book is crammed with 60 odd images from his journey through life.

Paul Botha. <http://www.surfpixphoto.com/details.php?gid=134&pid=1234>. November 24 2008.

### **Poplak, Richard**

*Ja, No, Man: A Memoir of Pop Culture, Girls, Suburbia ... and Apartheid*. Richard Poplak. Johannesburg: Penguin, 2007. 224pp. R160.

From the moment I picked up *Ja, No, Man* I was hooked. We are taken through the author's childhood, growing up in suburban Johannesburg, with

his nanny Bushy (who ruled his life), old-style SABC television ... stock standard stuff in those days but, looking back on it now, all pretty abnormal. Poplak gives an honest account of how he experienced it all.

Henriette Els. *City Press: City Pulse*. February 24 2008:23.

## **Rovina, Nesta**

*Tree Barking: A Memoir*. Nesta Rovina. Berkeley, CA: Heyday Books, 2008. 196pp. R175.

Ex-South African Nesta Rovina explores her years as an occupational therapist in California. As a homecare worker she enters the lives and homes of people from all walks of life, now injured or ill, teaching them how to rehabilitate, bathe, and do all the things we take for granted when we're well. She paints a gritty picture of the raw underbelly of American life. In between, she shares her life from apartheid South Africa to moving to Israel, and then the USA.

Arja Salafranca. [http://www.tonight.co.za/general/print\\_article.php?fArticleId=4312026&fSectionId=351&SetId=251](http://www.tonight.co.za/general/print_article.php?fArticleId=4312026&fSectionId=351&SetId=251). March 20 2008.

## **Sampson, Anthony**

*The Anatomist: The Autobiography of Anthony Sampson*. Anthony Sampson. Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 304pp. R225 and London: Methuen, 416pp. R345.

Anthony Sampson was one of those courteous, principled Englishmen who grew out of the reticent soil of upper-middle-class life before the second world war. Sampson rose above a life of conventional repression. His *Anatomy of Britain* shaped the attitudes of an entire 60s generation. Subsequent books, on the ITT corporation, the arms companies and international oil firms were model investigative texts. Sampson finally crowned a career in which he developed influential anti-apartheid connections with his magisterial biography of Mandela.

Naturally, a writer needs to strip off a little if his posthumous autobiography is to be worth reading. Sampson loyally gets down to his

underpants without, one suspects, quite going for the full monty. We learn of his grandfather with Gypsy connections and see Sampson, as editor of *Drum* magazine as a young man, discovering a world of sex, colour, danger and laughter in South Africa. At the very end of an international career which certainly made a difference, it is Sampson's personal modesty which keeps breaking through.

David Leigh. *The Guardian*. December 27 2008. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2008/dec/27/review-anatomist-anthony-sampson/>.

## **Segal, Abe**

*Hey Big Boy: A Legacy of Laughs by an Ex No 1*. Abe Segal. New York: Paul, Beth & Montague, 2009. 357pp. R259.

Segal's story dates back to his emergence as a street-wise teenage prodigy in Johannesburg in the 1940s and how this son of poor Polish Jewish immigrants prospered with little by way of social graces to become one of the most colourful and popular of the world's rated tennis players. Segal had friends like Frederick Forsyth, Irwin Shaw, Humphrey Bogart, Lauren Bacall, Christine Keeler, Richard Burton, George Best, Peter Ustinov, Kirk Douglas, Sol Kerzner and Sean Connery (who has written the foreword). This book, assembled by Segal's partner Deborah Curtis-Setchell from the assorted autobiographical gems which Segal penned down the years, shows scant regard for syntax, editing and other refinements but there is no escaping Segal's 'voice' and personality in this riotous tale from a rambunctious big boy. It is a rattling good yarn, so pour yourself a stiff one and read it.

Rodney Hartman. *Weekend Argus*. October 12 2008:21.

Abe Segal was a poor boy with hardworking Jewish immigrant parents, growing up in the 1930s in a South African suburb where Jew baiting was a favourite pastime of many of the local children. He discovered a talent for smashing balls, at a time when tennis was still well and truly the preserve of the rich. He made it to London and then onto the international tennis circuit.

Segal's story had me captivated from the start. It is entertaining and thought-provoking. It also has charming illustrations by Segal, who is a very good artist. This book will remind you of the history of tennis, and the fact that possibility lurks around the corner for anyone who has the balls to make it on their own.

Jennifer Crocker. *Cape Times*. January 9 2009:14.

## **Sekoto, Gerard**

*Gerard Sekoto: 'I Am an African'*. N. Chabani Manganyi. Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 2004. 244pp. R250.

N. Chabani Manganyi, a psychologist, has written an intimate psychobiography of South African artist Gerard Sekoto. Sekoto holds a unique place in the history of 20<sup>th</sup> century South African art, even though he lived most of his adult life in exile. Manganyi interviewed Sekoto in Paris and London during the period 1984 to 1986. These formed the basis of the first biography, published in 1996. This new text is significantly rewritten, and draws on new archival material and more interviews.

The story is told chronologically; the focus is to see how the man and the artist developed within the context of the struggles of exile, the confinement to an asylum, the sustaining common law marriage to a much older woman, the successes as an artist and musician, the alcoholism, and the resuscitation of his reputation in old age. Manganyi's text reads more smoothly than this clinical approach would suggest, and it steers clear of psycho-babble.

This is not an art historical text. It is about the man, more than his art, but it brings understanding to his oeuvre. Sixteen colour plates of Sekoto's paintings and many photographs of him are included.

Janet L. Stanley. *The African Book Publishing Record* 33 (3). 2007:209-10.

## **Sewgolum, Papwa**

*Papwa Sewgolum: From Pariah to Legend*. Christopher Nicholson. Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2005. 256pp. R170.

Papaw Sewgolum was a brilliant South African golfer of the 1950s and 1960s. Of Indian ancestry, he suffered materially and psychologically due to apartheid and yet his dogged persistence and talent saw him defeat the rich, white and famous Gary Player.

Christopher Nicholson, a judge, has written a highly readable popular biography of Papwa. The story is gripping and moving—Papwa had no formal education and was illiterate. He lived in a tin shack and worked as a caddie to support his family. The contrast between the charming, barefoot black golfer with an unorthodox grip and the decadent, pampered lifestyle of the whites-only golf clubs is splendidly portrayed in the retelling of the now legendary incident when Papwa was forced to receive a tournament prize outside in the driving rain because blacks were barred from the clubhouse. Papwa won the Dutch Open thrice but, having been the victim of racism and forced removal, was an alcoholic and a pauper when he died in 1978.

The text is enlivened with some fine photographs but there is no index.

Peter Limb. *The African Book Publishing Record* 34 (1) 2008:13-14.

### **Shaw, Gerald**

*Believe in Miracles: South African from Malan to Mandela—and the Mbeki Era.* Gerald Shaw. [Kenilworth]: Ampersand Press, 2007. 148pp. R135.

This is a reporter's story, covering 'South Africa from Malan to Mandela [...] and the Mbeki era'. It doesn't tell us anything particularly new about the past six decades but what it does is piece together, in a skilful and perceptive way, some of the major events, and the personages behind them, that shaped our recent history. It is well researched and written in easy journalistic style, and it gives a perspective that makes it recommended reading.

Leon Marshall. *The Star: Tonight*. February 7 2008:10.

### **Silver, Joseph**

*The Fox and the Flies: The World of Joseph Silver, Racketeer and Psychopath.* Charles Van Onselen. London: Jonathan Cape, 2007. 646pp. R300.

Joseph Silver was a singularly unpleasant individual, comfortable betraying friends and family to save his own skin, living off the earnings of women sex workers supplemented by frequently bungled break-ins. Van Onselen paints a vivid picture of Silver as he criss-crossed the globe, as he went in and out of prison, as he changed his name, his birthplace, his religion, and anything else necessary to fool the particular authorities with whom he was faced. Piecing together the confusing and often sinister strands of Silver's life was plainly a gargantuan task, and Van Onselen's research is nothing short of magnificent. He not only manages to keep track of this shadowy underworld figure in myriad locations (including New York in the 1890s, Argentina in 1910, London in the mid-1880s, and southern Africa in 1905) but provides rich contexts for each of the many places Silver spent time.

The story is riveting, but Van Onselen's picture is a black-and-white moralistic one, without a hint of nuance. In the final chapter, Van Onselen maps out his 'evidence' for identifying Silver as Jack the Ripper. Leaving aside for the moment an assessment of the persuasiveness of the argument, it is worth pointing out how determinedly but silently the book's structure and movement lead inexorably to this inadequately substantiated conclusion. Van Onselen's picture of the sex trade, and of the white slave trade, is breathtakingly one-dimensional, portraying women as victims, without agency. Van Onselen's sustained level of research is awe-inspiring, but he has sacrificed his historian's scepticism to write a fast-paced narrative that frequently overreaches the mark.

Philippa Levine. *Journal of Southern African Studies*. 34 (1), 2008:217-219.

## **Spong, Bernard**

*Sticking Around*. Bernard Spong. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2006. 372pp. R85.

The Reverend Bernard Spong's autobiography is a work of exciting spiritual adventure penned in exquisite English and humorous captivating style. It is the story of a British missionary sent to evangelise people who 'were not developed enough for themselves'. Once in South Africa, he joined the fight against apartheid, and was captured by the power of African humanism to the extent of eventually changing his citizenship, some moral and theological



precepts, and even his white wife for an African one. The work would be improved by the addition of an index.

Daniel Noni Lantum. *The African Book Publishing Record* 33 (3). 2007:209-10.

## **Tambo, Oliver**

*Oliver Tambo: Beyond the Engeli Mountains*. Luli Callinicos. Cape Town: David Philip, 2005. 672pp. R288.

The volume is divided into four parts covering the African Congress leader Oliver Tambo's early life in Pondoland, in the Transkei (South Africa); his life at Fort Hare College; life in exile when he was instrumental in transforming the ANC from a small organisation controlled by an African elite to a grassroots movement; and then his experiences in the transition period as democratic government was being negotiated. He died in April 1993.

Mueni wa Muiu. *African Studies Review*. 50 (1):133-139.

This authoritative biography of one of the iconic heroes of the anti-apartheid struggle will sit prominently on the shelves of scholars of South African twentieth-century history. Callinicos, who first met her subject as a young activist in 1959, has written the first full biography of Tambo. Her magisterial volume, twelve years in the making, was written with the full co-operation of the Tambo family. She utilised family archives, tapes of Tambo's own recollections, and over 195 interviews, conducted from 1993 to 2004, with individuals who had worked with or known Tambo as well as a broad spectrum of secondary sources. Callinicos is consistent in advancing her arguments about Tambo, marshalling her evidence from widely divergent sources, but particularly from his own writings and the recollections of Tambo's associates and contemporaries. Her account of Tambo's hard won successes, often marked by apparent contradictions and inevitable compromises, is made even more credible by her presentation of opposing viewpoints as well as her inclusion of Tambo's own reservations in his correspondence with his wife, in draft letters and notebooks, and in the

margins of documents. This biography is unlikely soon, if ever, to have a rival for authoritativeness and comprehensiveness.

Sheridan Johns. *Journal of African Studies* 34 (1). 2008:228-230.

### **Tambo, Oliver**

*Oliver Tambo: His Life and Legacy*. Luli Callinicos. Parktown: STE Publishers, 2006. 32pp. R60.

This is a very concise biography of the former ANC leader, Oliver Tambo, who lived in exile for 30 years. Tambo was a deeply religious intellectual and his life was shaped by the values he held dear. His traditional rural roots remained important to him, but he also applied the expertise he acquired through education. This informative little book is fluently written in a straightforward style.

Unnamed reviewer. *Free State Libraries: Book Highlights*. January—March 2008:3.

### **Tidboald, David**

*People I Made Music With*. David Tidboald. Cape Town: Umuzi, 2008. 144pp. R150.

David Tidboald, born in 1926 in England, has recorded his long and very successful career as a conductor and classical pianist in his memoirs. He was resident conductor of the Cape Town Municipal Orchestra and helped form both the Capab Orchestra and the Natal Philharmonic. He also spent much of his life exploring the classical music scenes in London and Berlin. Tidboald rubbed shoulders with a huge number of internationally recognised musicians and these people are the main focus of his memoirs.

David Jenkin. <http://www.citizen.co.za/index/article.aspx?pDesc=79180>, 1,22 December 29 2008.

David Tidboald is well remembered in KwaZulu-Natal as the resident conductor for many years of the KZN Philharmonic Orchestra. Before that he held similar posts in Cape Town. What he refers to as his ‘candid memoirs’

is more about other people than himself. The writing is a reflection of his personality: quiet, with a well-developed sense of humour and with a deep experience of music. At only 125 pages, plus a dozen pages of photographs, the book is terse and sometimes frustrating as one would like more information on some of the subjects. On the other hand, these brief glimpses of famous people are a refreshing change from the long-winded gravitas of some books published in South Africa.

Michael Green. <http://artsmart.co.za/2008/10/people-i-made-music-with.html>. October 27 2008.

### **Todd, Judith Garfield**

*Through the Darkness: A Life in Zimbabwe.* Judith Garfield Todd. Cape Town: Zebra Press, 2007. 480pp. R200.

Judith Todd is the daughter of Sir Garfield Todd, Prime Minister in colonial Southern Rhodesia and later Senator in independent Zimbabwe. Born of a family well known for its liberal views, she took an active part in the resistance to Ian Smith's racist government, was detained and had to go into exile. Having returned in 1980, she became Director of the Zimbabwe Project Trust and in this and other capacities contributed to the welfare of her native country.

The reviewer read the book with mixed feelings. The contents of the book (the endless receptions, dinner parties and the accounts of the author's rewarding work with ex-combatants) contradict the 'darkness' of its title. The author is extremely critical of Robert Mugabe, but it appears that this is a sentiment which is contrary to earlier opinions; it has arisen since the Zimbabwean government's illegal stripping of Todd's citizenship. So the author, like other liberals in Zimbabwe and the West, initially heaped honours on Mugabe, while closing their eyes to repressions against Joshua Nkomo and his supporters. The liberal bias is very evident, but the book is recommended for libraries with interest in recent developments in Zimbabwe.

Vladimir Shubin. *The African Book Publishing Record* 34 (2) 2008:189.

## **Turok, Ben**

*Nothing but the Truth: Behind the ANC's Struggle Politics.* Ben Turok. Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2003. 314pp. R160.

*Nothing but the Truth* is not so much about Ben Turok's life as an [anti-apartheid] activist as it is about snapshots of key players in both the South African Communist Party (SACP) and the African National Congress (ANC). From his account, the SACP did all the thinking while the ANC took care of the implementation and presented the adopted decisions to the masses as theirs. Turok's account reveals the apartheid regime's ability to corrupt the liberation movement from within but has too many unanswered holes and gaps that raise some disturbing questions: What was Turok's exact role in the liberation struggle? Who financed his Soviet trip? How did he manage to escape with this life when most of the people around him ended up being murdered by the apartheid security forces?

Mueni wa Muiu. *African Studies Review*. 50 (1):133-139.

## **Vladislavic, Ivan**

*Portrait with Keys: Jo'burg and What-What.* Ivan Vladislavic. Roggebaai: Umuzi, 2006. 211pp. R125.

In the course of his perambulations through Johannesburg, the author makes us notice the small, seemingly insignificant details that reveal the pulse of the city. *Portrait with Keys* is an honest account of life in a city that vacillates between being the hub of an emerging African economy and a site of the searing poverty that still envelops a large proportion of the population. Each self-contained piece contains an unexpected twist that draws the reader back to the language itself—and from there you are taken on a journey during which you challenge long-held assumptions.

Several sections were originally written as commissioned pieces for other publications. The resultant book, however, is a carefully constructed collage that contributes to the unsettling nature of the book. It is a fine book. Highly recommended.

Peter Midgley. *The African Book Publishing Record* 34 (1) 2008:22.

## **White, Jake**

*In Black and White: The Jake White Story*. Jake White with Craig Ray. Cape Town: Zebra, 2007. 342pp. R208.

This book sold more than 25 000 copies in South Africa—the highest sales of any book in any genre in South African publishing history. The timing of the book's release—just a few weeks after White's Springboks won the World Cup—couldn't have been more perfect.

While I enjoyed reading it, I did feel a bit short-changed. It was well written by Craig Ray, a respected rugby journalist, but needed someone like Mark Keohane who knew of several behind the scenes incidents to really bring White's story to life.

One of the few juicy bits in the book concerns political interference in the selection process. When White refused to include Luke Watson (whose family are well connected politically), he was replaced as Bok coach despite winning the World Cup. Apart from this episode—and learning that White's name was once Jacob Westerduin—I didn't learn much new about the coach and his Bok team. However, *In Black and White* is still worth reading if only to find out how drama-filled the life of a Bok coach really is.

Simon Borchadt. *The Pink Tongue*. August 2008:19.

## **Wiggett, Harry**

*A Time to Speak: Memories of Mandela's Prison Priest*. Harry Wiggett. Cape Town: Pretext Publishers, 2007. 122pp. R90.

Wiggett was Anglican priest to Mandela and other prisoners on Robben Island and later Pollsmoor Prison. He recounts his experiences with the prisoners and warders, how he conveyed messages between inmates and civilians, and conducted marriages and other services. He covers his long relationship with the (often idiosyncratic) Anglican church, his drinking problem and subsequent ministry to alcoholics and former drug users that has continued into his formal retirement.

John Scott. *Cape Times*. March 20 2008:11.

### **Yali-Manisi, David Livingstone Phakamile**

Opland, Jeff. *The Dassie and the Hunter: A South African Meeting*. Durban: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2005. 389pp. R250.

Jeff Opland reconstructs the interactions from 1970 to 1999 between himself, an eminent scholar of Xhosa literature, and David Livingstone Phakamile Yali-Manisi (1926-1999), the distinguished Xhosa *imbongi* (poet). This is a generic mix: an autobiography covering Opland's own engagement with the poetic output of his subject as well as a biographical sketch of the trajectory of this *imbongi* and an anthology, with many translations (most collaboratively produced by Opland and Yali-Manisi) of Yali-Manisi's *izibongo*.

Yali-Manisi aligns his creative output with classic Xhosa literature and language, but realised that chiefs would always be a stumbling block to the spread of democracy and the move to modernity and as early as 1954 leaned away from conservative traditionalists and towards the radical Nelson Mandela, predicting what political analysts surely could not have, that is, that 'Nations name you Earth Tremor;/ the poets name you Gleaning Road:/ you set Africa blazing'.

The scholarship of Opland is impeccable, as been apparent in his other books. This book reminds us that African literature in African languages flourished, despite the Kampala 1962 Conference's death sentence.

Ntongela Masilela. *Research in African Literatures* 39 (2), 2008:159-161.

### **Multiple Subjects**

#### **Bopela, Thula and Daluxolo Luthuli**

*Umkhonto we Sizwe: Fighting for a Divided People*. Thula Bopela and Daluxolo Luthuli. Alberton: Galago, 2005. 272pp. R195.

This joint autobiography of two of the participants in the armed struggle of Umkhonto We Sizwe (the armed wing of the African National Congress)

recounts their training when they were young, their guerrilla tactics against the white regime in Rhodesia, and the hardships they endured.

Narrated by Bopela in the first person plural, we are told of their experiences (those they shared and those that occurred when they were separated) in training camps in the Ukraine and Tanzania, travels in Mozambique and, towards the end, of their work in democratic South Africa.

I recommend this engaging, informative, fast-paced and sensitive work.

Muchugu Kiiru. *The African Book Publishing Record* 34 (3) 2008:189.

Thula Bopela and Daluxolo Luthuli were both operatives in Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), the armed wing of the African National Congress. Both men left South Africa in the early 1960s for training at the Odessa Military Academy in the former Soviet Union. This account illuminates how some unqualified people became MK leaders and military leaders in the 'new' South Africa, and this account lays bare the stark generational differences between young and old in some liberation movements. Bopela later went into exile in the Netherlands; Luthuli, however, was arrested when he tried to return to South Africa. He spent twenty-one months on Robben Island on death row. The sentence was commuted in 1969 and he then joined the Inkatha Freedom Party and became a double agent. He became progressively disillusioned with the apartheid state, and made his peace with the liberation movements.

Mueni wa Muiu. *African Studies Review*. 50 (1):133-139.

### **The Delmas Four—Jabu Masina, Ting Ting Masango, Neo Potsane and Joseph Makhura**

*In a Different Time: The Inside Story of the Delmas Four*. Peter Harris. Cape Town: Umuzi, 2008. 320pp. R185.

The story of the Delmas Four, a group of Umkhonto We Sizwe operatives (the armed wing of the ANC) operating in the 1980s, and their subsequent capture and incarceration is absorbing and as exciting as a thriller. Harris

controls his plot like a master thriller writer and keeps you turning the pages as you hurtle towards an emotionally fraught climax.

Unnamed reviewer. <http://blogs.thetimes.co.za/bookcase/2008/12/13/top-ten-south-african-books-of-2008>. December 17 2008.

Memoirs are often a bit of a minefield for readers. They can and do drift too close to self-indulgence. They are often badly written and woefully edited to boot. This memoir, written by the lawyer of the four soldiers in the liberation army in South Africa, known as the Delmas Four, breaks the mould in every possible way.

Masina, Masango, Potsane and Makhura left South Africa after the Soweto Riots of 1976. They returned 10 years later as a specialist MK unit (the armed wing of the African National Congress). After a successful ten month underground campaign, they were arrested in 1987 and Harris tried to spare them from an almost mandatory death sentence, but tried to avoid cheapening their struggle by letting them legitimise a trial by a state they were trying to overthrow. The trial ran its course, the men were duly convicted, so Harris played his final gambit—he got the court to agree to let the families plead in mitigation for their sons' lives.

This page-turning account is written like a legal thriller. But it is not just the case of the Delmas Four which is so gripping, it is the way in which Harris places the trial in the context of the death rattles of the apartheid state. It is a compelling story in and of itself, it has breathed life into South African history and reminds us how bleak, how desperate the resistance was and just how great the miracle was that delivered South Africa from the abyss.

Kevin Ritchie. *Tonight*. October 23 2008. <http://www.tonight.co.za/general/printarticle.php?fArticleId=4675595&fSectionId=3...>

This story of the last political trial of the apartheid era is told with empathy by the lawyer of the Delmas Four. Yet I found myself writing 'hearsay' in the margins umpteen times. Harris interviewed his clients and believed them. I'm not saying they lied; I'm saying 'say so' does not make it so. As a lawyer, Harris should have brought the other side of the truth to the table too. With regard to the 'military actions' of the MK soldiers, I found myself



repeatedly writing the words ‘cowardly’, ‘inept’, ‘civilian targets’ and ‘murderous’. Read the book and judge for yourself. Harris keeps a thriller-like tension in this brilliantly written book which offers, perhaps unintentionally so, an education about the true nature of the ANC-MK’s prosecution of a ‘just war’.

Cornelius Thomas. *Saturday Dispatch*. September 20 2008:18.

### **South Africans at Boarding School**

*Cheesecutters and Gymslips: South Africans at Boarding School*. Robin Malan (compiler). Cape Town: Umuzi, 2008. 208pp. R140.

His is a fine, entertaining collection of stories about experiences in boarding schools by many South Africans across the demographic divide, many of them accomplished writers like Doris Lessing, Dambudzo Marechera, Bessie Head, Don Mattera, Imraan Coovadia, Don Mattera, Eski’a Mphahlele, Guy Butler and William Plomer. There are other famous names, such as Nelson Mandela’s, and some lesser known contributors. The accounts are all entertaining and well placed in a collection that yields great pleasure.

Maureen Isaacson. *The Sunday Independent*.

Thirty-seven southern African writers share their experiences of boarding school in this very engaging book. The contributors’ birth dates span the first decade of the twentieth century to 1980. The book has been expertly compiled by Robin Malan who has spent his whole career in teaching and theatre and making books, so he is well qualified to judge what makes for good reading. *Cheesecutters and Gymslips* provides a rich historiography of life in South Africa over a wide spectrum. One gets a real idea of the importance of the early influences on the lives of wonderful people like Mandela, Chris Barnard, Patrick Cullinan, E.K.M. Dido and Maphela Ramphela.

Paul Murray. <http://www.litnet.co.za/cgi%2Dbin/giga.cgi?cmd=cause>. September 19 2008.

## **South African Indian Women**

*Shakti: Stories of Indian Women*. Alleyn Diesel, comp. Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2007. 221pp. R180.

The compiler, Alleyn Diesel, tried to capture the fascinating aspects of the history of the Indians in the Edendale/Plessislaer townships of Pietermaritzburg, South Africa—one of the many black areas that was declared ‘white only’ by the apartheid government, resulting in the forced removal of the inhabitants.

The individual women’s stories are preceded by a short introduction which provides important details about when and how Indians arrived in South Africa, about their diverse origins and linguistic groups. There are stories of a child-bride, of the community’s response to the first menstruation, of an Indian woman being elevated to the position of Hindu priest and of an anti-apartheid activist and her husband being chosen by Nelson Mandela as ambassadors to Morocco.

The stories are largely factual. The narrators have little knowledge of how to frame their stories and they do not contain enough interesting or dramatic materials to keep the attention of any reader.

Cecil Abrahams. *The African Book Publishing Record* 34 (3) 2008:201-2.

## **South African Women Prisoners**

*Journey to Myself: Writings by Women from Prison in South Africa*. Julia Landau (ed.). Cape Town: Footprints Publishers, 2004. 80pp. R75.

All contributors are first-time writers, and all 13 pieces (a mix of poetry, short story and essay) were written while the authors were in prison. The book started in creative writing workshops and developed into a cohesive narration about women’s lives, experiences that brought them to prison, and their visions for the future. The book explores different ways women cope with challenges in life that are specific to women (such as childbirth, gender discrimination and so on). Easy reading, the book will interest those in gender studies as well as students of South African culture.

Maria Mikolchak. *The African Book Publishing Record* 33 (4). 2007:325.

## Young Refugees in South Africa

*I am an African: Stories of Young Refugees in South Africa*. Joanne Bloch and Sue Heese. Cape Town: New Africa Education, 2006. 72pp. R80.

*The Suitcase Stories: Refugee Children Reclaim their Identities*. Glynis Clacherty, ed. Cape Town: Double Storey, 2006. 184pp. R160.

*I am an African* and *The Suitcase Stories* mark a departure in the publication of young South Africans' stories in two respects: they contain written versions of oral accounts, and their subject matter, comprising the experiences of young refugees, is new. While the bulk of these books consists of transcripts, the editors have taken up an unusual amount of space with peri-textual material addressed to the reader: *The Suitcase Stories* focuses on the school-going narrators—what the 'psychosocial support through art therapy' project meant for its anonymous participants—and *I am an African* directs the reader's response, instructing teachers how to use the text to influence learners from Grades 10 to 12. The older narrators (in their late teens and twenties) in *I am an African* are identified by first names and photographs.

*The Suitcase Stories* are grouped according to the children's country of origin, and each section is prefaced with a map and information on historical circumstances that led to the refugees leaving. For the Suitcase project, the artwork was 'the focus of the storytelling, and this created emotional distance'. Two public exhibitions of their work were mounted. The centrality of the artwork is reflected in the design of the book which is eye-catching.

Each of the children chose a suitcase from a collection of second-hand cases, and these became complex metaphors for the journeys of the refugee, and for the outside that everyone sees and the hidden inside that can be kept secret.

The adult facilitators of the Suitcase project insist that it was therapeutic for the children. A subsidiary aim was to promote activism in support of refugees.

*I am an African* is geared towards educating high school pupils in order to dispel xenophobia. In addition to a map and information about each country of origin, the book devotes almost of third of its pages to teaching guidelines. However, the circumstances in which the narratives were collected and transcribed are not explained. We are not told how much they have been edited, nor are we told whether these are translated into English from other languages.

Anyone reading these two books will be shaken by the horror and pathos of the young narrators' experiences.

*The Suitcase Stories* was shortlisted for the Alan Paton Award for South African non-fiction in 2007. It also inspired a play *Every Year, Every Day, I am Walking* (2006).

Elwyn Jenkins. *English Academy Review* 25 (2) 2008:110-121.



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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 blurb 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.

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Fanon, Frantz 1986. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Markmann, Charles Lam (trans). London: Pluto Press.

**Interdisciplinary Journal for the Study of the  
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