

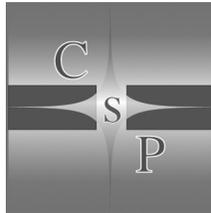
Toxic Belonging?  
Identity and Ecology in Southern Africa



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Edited by

Dan Wylie



Cambridge Scholars Publishing

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# PREFACE

## **A note on the Literature and Ecology Colloquium**

The Literature and Ecology Colloquium was founded at Rhodes University, Grahamstown, South Africa in 2004, in an effort to improve the standing of what was then an extremely marginal strand of literary scholarship in the country: ecologically-orientated criticism. South African academics had scarcely begun to envisage what had already become well-established in the USA and Canada, to a lesser extent Australia and the UK—a burgeoning sub-discipline with a common if highly variable focus on human-nature relations as expressed in literature, and being taught within literature departments. To my knowledge, only Julia Martin of the University of the Western Cape (a contributor to this volume) was actively teaching what she termed “environmental literacy” through literature in a South African English department. Others, including myself, were beginning to touch on ecological issues in postgraduate courses, but there was little or no discussion between us.

It was clear that there was both a wave to be caught and, much more importantly, a crying need for South African literary studies to engage at least in some quarters with what is undeniably the crisis of our times—the ecological climacteric. In some ways the neglect of the field was surprising, since Southern African literature is as saturated with the presence of the “natural” settings and subjects, as any in the world, and perhaps more than many. The land was always, and remains, a pervasive presence in our literatures and politics together, and what might be termed the aesthetics of ownership has in fact been the subject of both many creative works and scholarship. (Two pioneering volumes that spring to mind, though both predate the local advent of “ecocriticism” as a term, were the collected AUETSA conference papers of 1992, edited by Nigel Bell and Meg Cowper-Lewis as *Literature, Nature and the Land: Ethics and Aesthetics of the Environment*; and *Text, Theory, Space: Land, literature and history in South Africa and Australia*, edited by Kate Darien-Smith, Liz Gunner and Sarah Nuttall (1996).) Nevertheless, it is clear that “ecocriticism”, in whatever guise, is rumbling tortoise-like way behind the hare of environmental history in South Africa, let alone scientific ecology and environmental education; take, for instance, the volumes *Ecology and Empire: Environmental history of settler societies*,

edited by Tom Griffiths and Libby Robin (1997), and *South Africa's Environmental History: Cases and comparisons*, edited by Stephen Dovers, Ruth Edgecombe and Bill Guest (2002)—to mention just a couple.

Notions of “wilderness”, postulated more or less consciously, have played a major role in defining settlement patterns, racial categorisations, and the production and distribution of our literary artefacts. Hence animals, too, have established a powerful presence in the literature, but have similarly been neglected in our criticism. Once one starts to look for it, of course, Nature is everywhere in the national oeuvre, from the earliest travelogues through our fiction and poetry to the dross of tourist brochures, to such an extent that it may be said to have been *the* formative matrix for virtually everything that has happened on the face of the land, as well as for subtler human expressions of identity, from earliest times to the post-apartheid era. Indeed, Pat Louw, a stalwart supporter of the Literature and Ecology Colloquium and another contributor here, proposed at that first Colloquium that a project analogous to Roderick Nash's *Wilderness and the American Mind* (1967) would be both possible and valid. Though personally I am sceptical about the existence of a discernible “African mind”, or even a “South African mind”, such a project would be intensely interesting, and indeed would probably end up illuminating precisely the complex multicultural dynamics and divisions and amalgamations that make such a generalisation problematic.

The 2004 Colloquium was a tentative and somewhat scattered affair—papers came from environmental activists and educators, literary scholars and independent researchers, and ranged from studies of how to use drama to spread science literacy to concepts of ecology in classical Islamic texts. Nevertheless, there was sufficient weight and excitement amongst a body of like-minded folk to run a second colloquium. The 2005 gathering was much more focussed, being entitled “Animal Presences, Animal Geographies”. As a result it proved more vigorous in debate and cross-fertilisation, and showed clearly the passion for animals that suffuses a large part of our society (some of this has spilled over into the present volume). In the wake of Nobel Prize-winner J. M. Coetzee's two books, *The Lives of Animals* (2005) and *Disgrace* (2005), this interest has exploded, to the extent that Wendy Woodward, a colleague of Julia Martin's at UWC, has recently proposed setting up a regional Animals Studies Group. A selection of papers from the “Animal Presences” Colloquium appeared as a special issue of the Durban-based journal *Current Writing* (Vol 18/1, 2006).

The present volume offers a similar set of papers selected from those presented at the third Colloquium, also held in Grahamstown in October 2006. The idea thereafter felt robust enough to spread its wings and fly the nest, and in October 2007 the fourth Colloquium was held at Mtunzini, Kwazulu-Natal, hosted and organised by Pat Louw and her colleagues in the English Department at the University of Zululand, with the theme of “Forests”. Over this same period, a gathering interest in the field was becoming evident in other quarters, notably when the editors of the *Journal of Literary Studies/Tydskrif vir Literatuurwetenskap*, housed at the University of South Africa, decided to devote two special issues to ecocriticism. Pleasingly, the first issue (Vol 23/3, Sept 2007), which had appeared at the time of writing this preface, reveals the extent to which local literary scholars and philosophers are beginning seriously to theorise an ecologically aware criticism for a southern African context.

Much still needs to be worked on. Participants at the colloquiums remain small in number, and it’s not easy to persuade students to take ecocritical courses seriously. None of the Literature and Ecology Colloquiums, despite the title, has yet attracted strong attention from ecologists or related scientists, so that in my view the interdisciplinary vision of the enterprise to some degree remains unfulfilled. Conversely, much needs to be done in the wake of Ivan Rabinowitz’s scalding call, made in an eloquent paper in *Literature, Nature and the Land*, to transcend what he called the “epistemic pathologies” by which many academic literati make a virtue of their narrownesses, thereby pre-empting by some years the similar plea made by Glen Love in *Practical Ecocriticism* (2003), viz. for literary critics to learn the science properly.

An emphasis on the interdisciplinary does, of course, run the risk of papers running in directions too divergent to really “speak to one another”, and the present collection tempts that fate. On the other hand, the diversity of approaches has its strengths and surprises, and one of the most gratifying aspects of this colloquium—which we have tried to capture by presenting participants’ thoughts on the experience of the three days of the gathering itself, interleaved with the chapters—was how we each responded to the different perspectives and methodologies presented. One brief conceptual rider needs to be added here: the Colloquium used the word “ecology” rather than “environment”, encouraging a focus on processes of symbiosis and/or competition within ecosystems, as defined by scientific ecology; but the idea of “environment” as the surrounds (built as well as “natural”) within which one resides also plays a major role in these chapters. As will be evident, too, few participants used the term “ecocriticism”, while in effect practising some or other form of it. It’s a

problematic term insofar as it appears to promise some sort of disciplinary cohesion which scarcely exists. Furthermore, as Helen Tiffin has noted in her collection *Five Emus to the King of Siam* (a volume which can be read very fruitfully alongside this one), it has an “American neocolonialist potential to dominate” this “determinedly interdisciplinary” field.<sup>1</sup>

A further aspect of the Colloquium we have tried to foster is the participation of junior academics and even students. This runs the risk of an even greater unevenness in quality of papers than that which affects most projects of this kind, but I think the postgraduate students represented in this volume acquitted themselves splendidly. At this time in our ravaged and polluted era, more than ever, we will need the commitment and energy of our younger generations. It is hoped that the Literature and Ecology Colloquium will continue to flourish and become more central to an intellectual environmental activism which tries to make a real difference to people’s treatment of the damaged, but still astonishingly beautiful, world around us.

Many people have helped with the Colloquium over the years, and I thank them all; and especially Rhodes University, which helped fund and house the event in its formative stages. Thanks also to Katie Farrington for help with formatting and editing.

Dan Wylie  
Grahamstown  
January 2008

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<sup>1</sup> Helen Tiffin, ed. 2007. *Five Emus to the King of Siam: Environment and Empire*. Rodopi: New York. xxvi.



# INTRODUCTION

DAN WYLIE

South African poet Douglas Livingstone wrote, in one of his scientific papers, that we humans are “the ultimate polluter[s of] our own nest, threatening our living planet towards destruction”.<sup>1</sup> He glumly jibed:

Only one Lifeform is misbehaving  
—Pity we cannot ban it:  
Rife Humanity needs no saving,  
Only the wretched Planet.<sup>2</sup>

—thus echoing Arthur Schopenhauer’s famous gripe that humanity is “a grotesque mistake”. In a modern evolutionary perspective, just whose “mistake” it is must remain debateable; and many humanists have objected to the misanthropic note struck in this and other so-called ecocentric thinking ranging from Greenpeace activism to deep ecology. Livingstone doesn’t always go quite so far, but in the wake of Al Gore’s eco-documentary *An Inconvenient Truth*, George Monbiot’s book *Heat*, and the reports from Nicholas Stern and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, few would deny the truth in his observation that unless we slow or even reverse the trajectory of damage, “we deserve to go, allowing the planet to recover from our hubris, gather its resources to prepare for a more symbiotic and less quarrelsome species”.<sup>3</sup> Nietzsche said something similar, as philosopher Iain Thomson put it: “Nietzsche’s pursuit of a naturalistic ethics of life [...] brought him to the conclusion that if what we most value is the continuing survival of life itself, then humanity not only will but *should* be superceded.”<sup>4</sup> In short, there is every indication, in its capacity to inhabit, alter, deplete and pollute virtually every environment on earth, particularly in what Livingstone called its

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in Stevens, *Symbiosis or Death*, 38.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>3</sup> Cited in Brown, *To Speak of this Land*, 126.

<sup>4</sup> Cited by Lincoln Michell in Chapter Two, below. Such citations repeated in this Introduction are fully referenced in the chapters concerned.

“industrial sinfulness”,<sup>5</sup> that humanity is the most toxic species in evolutionary history—but conversely much meaning is now given to our lives by our very effort to heal and reverse that history.

This is as obvious in South Africa as anywhere: Patrick Bond, one of our most trenchant critics of neoliberalist capitalism, characterises parts of this country as “one of the world’s most dangerous environments in which to live and work”.<sup>6</sup> Livingstone regarded his own bioregion—the littoral zone south of Durban on which he spent much of his scientific life monitoring pollution levels, and writing poems about it—as a microcosm of the country, and South Africa in turn as “the world’s laboratory: it represents the globe’s nations and preoccupations in the microcosm. If it fails [...] there is no future for humanity at large except the ugly spread of racial and religious wars, the final triumph of evil in pursuit of the devils of materialism, power and mindless destructivity”.<sup>7</sup> This seems less overblown when one observes in South Africa today the rampant “development” of resources-greedy golf-courses and tawdry holiday homes by the tens of thousands, bulldozed equally through coastal dunes and fragile legislation; pollution levels comparable to the worst in Eastern Europe and China; present and looming crises in energy and water supply; a burgeoning population of unsupported poor with the highest AIDS incidence in the world; increasing CO<sub>2</sub> emissions; unchecked plundering of abalone and other marine resources—all abetted by an appalling pervasiveness of both violent and white-collar crime and by deep-seated corruption and incompetence at the highest levels. It is almost impossible to enter this arena, then, without closing in on the moral or ethical dimensions—notions of “evil”—adumbrated by Livingstone.

Livingstone thus also, importantly, recognises that ecological “healing” is not just a matter of doing away with humanity (though the planet, Nature, might well do it for us, as James Lovelock has argued in his *Gaia’s Revenge*), or of saving putatively “pristine wilderness” (though such protected wilderness areas are on the increase in South Africa). It is also a matter of treating *cultural* misconceptions, blindnesses, distorted and inappropriate behaviours—“the republics of ignorance and apathy”, as Livingstone scathingly called them.<sup>8</sup> Few cultural dimensions claim so much space and emotional energy in post-apartheid South Africa as race, and the regional articulations of literature, racial attitudes, land-use, and

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<sup>5</sup> Cited in Brown, *To Speak of this Land*, 110.

<sup>6</sup> Bond, *Unsustainable South Africa*, 45.

<sup>7</sup> Cited in Brown, *To Speak of this Land*, 138.

<sup>8</sup> “Starting Out”; Livingstone, *A Ruthless Infidelity*, 261.

treatment of the natural world have yet to be fully explored. As one government official recently summarised the question:

Is it true that our environmental agenda is a luxury of the rich and an inconvenience the poor cannot afford? At the dawn of democracy [in South Africa] in 1994, the [African National Congress] issued a statement in which it said: “Environmental issues must spread beyond wildlife management and include the townships and rural areas.” Thirteen years on, has the country in general, and the ANC in particular, translated this message into practice?<sup>9</sup>

The cautious answer to this is: only patchily.

The complex cross-hatchings of historically-entrenched racial or ethnic identities with religious or spiritual dispositions further inflect the ways in which different peoples and individuals have inscribed and described their senses of belonging in a country which contains as many varied biomes as it does cultural and linguistic aggregations. This plays out in intricate and mingled clashes and fertilisations between age-old indigenous spiritual systems, both “Bushman/San” and “Bantu/Nguni”, and imported, imperially-aligned religions, Christianity of course pre-eminent. All these religious world-views are being recharged with ecological sensibilities as they grapple both with environmental degradation and increasing secularisation. In some circles, reverence for “Nature” itself takes on a spiritual inflection, as people grope for ways of endowing their place within modernity, this era “dominated by technology, standardization, the decay of community, mass society and vulgarization”<sup>10</sup> so beautifully analysed by Charles Taylor in *Sources of the Self*, with a new and restabilised sense of identity.

In a region scarified by centuries of pre-colonial migration, colonial invasion, internecine conflicts across every conceivable ethnic, gender, political and geographical frontier, massive industry-fuelled migrancy, apartheid-era removals and dislocations, and accelerated blurring of almost all formerly accepted categorisations through globalisation, the notion of *belonging* becomes ever more fraught—and ever more important. Autochthonous groups struggle to redefine their identities in a post-apartheid era ostensibly (but not in reality seamlessly) conducive to their cause: Khoisan associations attempting to restore ancient dignities, or various Nguni groups asserting their right to “kingdom” status. But such historically local associations find themselves running up against sundry

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<sup>9</sup> Mava Scott, “The politics of redistribution”, *Mail & Guardian*, November 6 to 22 2007, 29.

<sup>10</sup> Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 456.

countervailing nationalist, party-political and globalising rhetorical formations and allegiances, and a newfound attractive mobility amongst a growing affluent class. On the other hand, many Afrikaners undergo a continuing crisis of, in their view, looming marginalisation by both black power-structures and the rampant advance of the English language; and politically disempowered English-speaking whites grapple with ways of redefining themselves as “white Africans”, in the politically-correct label of the moment.

Douglas Livingstone, like many such whites, attached such a sense of himself to his identity within—and identification with—the natural world:

My involvement with this continent as a white African is to me a profound and passionate and (I hope) compassionate one. If I could I would heal the very earth on which we stand, the waters I sail on, swim in, work with, look over, drink from; and of course, myself, my fellow humans and the flora and fauna.<sup>11</sup>

It is this kind of intersection of identities, attitudes and environments with which the present volume is concerned, focussing on the southern African region. The varied chapters in this book in exploratory rather than summative or comprehensive ways explore localised inflections on the age-old, very human, even existential questions: How do we find ourselves here? What is our place in the scheme of the world? How should we relate ethically to the natural and the non-human? Are we, after all, a mistake, an evolutionary dead-end? Is our very sense of belonging, let alone the ways in which we establish it physically, somehow “toxic” to the environments within which we inevitably live?

These questions have no simple answer, and as Duncan Brown has written in an important recent study of identity in South African literatures, “the subject matter seems to militate against any kind of unitary response”.<sup>12</sup> The chapters of this book embody some of the very different possible approaches: literary, philosophical, historical, anthropological, sociological. Despite their variety, these contributions intertwine threads in fascinating ways which suggest numerous paths for future investigation.

*Toxic Belonging?* is divided into five parts, each of which isolates a particular aspect of ecology and identity. As Susan Clayton and Susan Opotow have noted in introducing their collection of essays, *Identity and*

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<sup>11</sup> Cited in Brown, *To Speak of this Land*, 115.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

*the Natural Environment* (2003), the terms *identity*, *nature* and even *environment* are subject to any number of culturally-nuanced definitions. However, as with the varied chapters in Clayton and Opotow's book, the writers represented in *Toxic Belonging?* might also be said, despite their differences, to share a concern with human toxicity in the world, and to suggest that pro-environmental action is (only) likely to be possible when "individuals see nature as an entity with moral standing", when "social environments (both physical and conceptual) are designed to nurture a feeling of connectedness to nature", and when "social contexts support proenvironmental identities and encourage a shared concern for the environment that crosses and blurs existing group boundaries".<sup>13</sup>

Part One—"Fields of Philosophy"—comprises three somewhat general essays which effectively introduce a number of major strands in the volume. Lawrence Wright's quite beautiful opening chapter deftly melds a meditation on Arthur Schopenhauer's value to a modern ecological sensibility, with South African novelist J. M. Coetzee's now almost inescapable fictionalised philosophising, particularly on the "animal question" in *The Lives of Animals* and *Disgrace*. Philosophical reinvestigation of the role of nature in our world and our imaginations has been recharged as the ecological climacteric becomes daily global news. Environmental ethics is now a minor industry, in which field two other recent collections of essays worth mentioning are David Macaulay's *Minding Nature: The Philosophers of Ecology* (1996), and Bruce Foltz and Robert Frodeman's *Rethinking Nature: Essays in Environmental Philosophy* (2004). Yet even the latter, concentrating as it does on Continental philosophy, fails to include a single mention of Schopenhauer, making Wright's intervention here all the more startling and important. Wright's purpose is to strike a ringing warning note about the limits on our endemic utopianism. After approaching Schopenhauer's stance on the possibilities of knowing the noumenal world at all through comparing Rilke's poem "The Panther" with Ted Hughes' neo-Schopenhauerian poem "The Jaguar", Wright concludes that "Humans, cumulatively and on the whole, make no more sustained moral progress than do eland or chameleons". Few individuals are capable of the compassion and renunciation demanded by the mystics or even the ethicists: "Gains by individuals and groups in one generation are often sunk by their successors and compatriots" (Umberto Eco has argued similarly in a recent collection of essays—that presently we're going backwards). In this view, it's likely that our evolutionary heritage will consistently overwhelm the thin tinsel

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<sup>13</sup> Clayton and Opotow, *Identity and the Natural Environment*, 20.

of our imaginative utopias; our ecological prospects are dim at best. Nevertheless, compassion is, in a crucial sense, who we are, something more than just a “Polyanna” response to despair. Without it, indeed, we really are doomed to remain—and perish as—a toxic presence in the world.

In Chapter Two, University of Zululand philosopher Lincoln Michell takes a somewhat more sanguine view, arguing for the validity of at least striving for an “ethical perfectionism” in environmental terms. He outlines two distinct routes an eco-phenomenology might take: one a “naturalist”, the other a “transcendental” form of ethical realism (as an ethics that takes moral values to be actually present in the world). These are two routes—roughly “materialist” and “spiritual”—observable as being in continuous tension in many of these chapters. Each involves a theory of perfectionism, or an account of moral flourishing: an eco-centric and a humanist theory respectively. Guided mainly by Heidegger refracted through the work of American philosopher Iain Thomson, Michell presents the latter of the two routes as the preferred theoretical option. However, both routes of eco-phenomenology pose the threat of “eco-fascism”: the former by virtue of its quest for a “post-human” ethic, the latter by virtue of the affinity between environmentalism and Nazism, particularly as expressed by Heidegger, who declared his allegiance to the latter. These dangers notwithstanding, Michell still draws valuable insights from Heidegger’s thought, unwilling in any of these cases to throw out the baby with the bathwater. Michell finally offers a more-than-usually subtle exploration of the dialogical philosophy of the late Jewish thinker, Martin Buber—the unhappily over-popularised “I-Thou” relationship—as a foundation for an environmental ethic.

In Chapter Three Tracy Morison, a postgraduate student in the department of Psychology at Rhodes University, delivers a wide-ranging delineation of an aspect of this ethic touched on by both Wright and Michell: a quietly impassioned appeal for greater sensitivity to animal subjectivity. While some listeners during Morison’s presentation at the Colloquium expressed discomfort at certain of her broader and more derivative brush-strokes, it was striking how often presenters referred back to the grounding she had effectively laid out. Her paper is nothing other than an extrapolation of a beautiful statement by Buber, quoted by Michell: “The creatures stir across from us, but they are unable to come to us, and the You we say to them sticks to the threshold of language.” The first part of Morison’s chapter covers well-worn ground in defining the “Western” self in its relationship to nature and animals, echoing Wendell Berry’s—and many others’) view that Western techno-industrial society

has initiated a “human disaster” which leaves us “divided against ourselves” and so reduced in “our largeness, our mystery”.<sup>14</sup> While Morison arguably sets up a straw man here, the latter half of her essay pinpoints a fascinatingly slippery relationship which resurfaces throughout this volume: that between (often romanticised) views of indigenous peoples (notably the San/Bushmen) who are regarded as ecologically attuned and therefore presenting an implicit critique of Western norms; and strands *within* Western thinking and imagination which achieve a similar function. Hence Morison lays ecologically-attuned San folktales alongside poems by American Mary Oliver, whom philosopher David Abram also cites as embodying “an intelligence that speaks to us not in words, but in a language of motion and metamorphosis, of grace and reciprocity”.<sup>15</sup> Above all, Morison suggests, it is “empathic imagining” which must become again paramount; she, like Michell, invokes Buber’s “I-Thou” relationship, one that might allow us to remember our animalness, so that, as Mary Oliver puts it in a poem entitled “The Sea”, “my/ body remembers that life and cries for/ the lost parts of itself”.<sup>16</sup> She echoes, in effect, Schopenhauer, who tried to invent (as Laurence Wright puts it), “a metaphysic that not only entails a rapprochement between modern western philosophy (up to Schopenhauer) and eastern tradition, but also holds out the possibility of conciliating the so-called animist thought-ways of Africa, something to which those who live here in Africa should be more alert than they currently are”.

Wright’s and Morison’s essays nevertheless work, in some ways, as critiques of one another, the former embodying a Douglas Livingstone-like “ecological despair”, the latter an opposing kind of interspecies idealism; they are as important for the questions they raise, or beg, as they are for what they state. The relationships they propose are infinitely complex and variable, and I will offer here only an interesting rider, from a South African philosopher of science with reference to complexity theory:

The pivotal insight offered by complexity theory is that diversity as such is not a problem to be solved, but rather the central *resource* of complex systems. The identity of a system does not arise despite difference, but *because of* difference. [...] Since one cannot deal with a complex system *in its complexity*, it can be understood only from a particular, selected

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<sup>14</sup> Wendell Berry; cited in Hatley, “The uncanny goodness of being edible to bears”, 13.

<sup>15</sup> Abram, “Reciprocity”, 90.

<sup>16</sup> Cited by Abram, *ibid.*, 91.

*perspective*. Philosophically speaking, this brings in the element of choice, [...] so considerations of norms and ethics necessarily form part of the framework we use to generate understanding.<sup>17</sup>

These observations apply equally to political and ecological dimensions and their interwoven cross-influences, as virtually all the following chapters make evident. Indeed, if this volume has a single most prominent sub-theme, it is that of the possibilities for, and limitations to, compassion for the non-human.

Part Two—“History and autochthony”—extends another persistent tension running through many of the chapters: that between indigeneity and settlerdom. This aspect of belonging provides the impetus behind a vast amount of South African historiography: indeed, it would not be too much to say that this tension *is* South African history. It has been less well-explored in its relationship to natural environments, however, despite the strong emergence of local environmental history, and indeed of more scientifically-orientated studies of Southern Africa’s vulnerability to ecological meltdown (James Clarke’s *Coming Back to Earth: South Africa’s changing environment* (2002) and Leonie Joubert’s *Scorched* (2007) spring to mind).

Two papers presented at the Colloquium, but not included here, also treated the indigeneity/settlerdom tension by refracting it through particular places. Johannesburg archaeologist Sven Ouzman, in a vigorous and colourful power-point presentation, examined the meanings literally painted on the landscape, in the first instance by “Bushman” or “San” rock artists, then—on top of them—a graffito by settler and poet Thomas Pringle as sketched by road-builder Thomas Baines in 1849. With this multilayered archaeological site as (all but literally) his touchstone, Ouzman took on the “toxic” part of the Colloquium’s rubric. He noted the derivation of the word from Greek *toxikon*, originally the poison used to tip a hunter’s arrows, and extended it to a meditation on the toxicity of the subjective gaze—including our very own. One of a number of stimulating quotations drew the parallel between Pringle’s invasive graffito and the academic intrusion: “But has my *mise-en-scène* thus mortified the quartz, drained it of any material vitality, its very shimmer dulled by being subjected to an archaeological epistemology where its role, within this too harmonious scene we call history, is never to be itself but always, always

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<sup>17</sup> Paul Cilliers, “Grappling with complexity”, *Quest* 4(1) 2007, 28; original emphases.

to represent something else?”<sup>18</sup> But of course we have nothing *but* our “own” view—even when, and maybe most deeply when, we are imagining the “Other”. Ouzman quoted Donna Haraway: “The moral is simple: only partial perspective promises objective vision. To see from below is neither easily learned nor unproblematic. But *how* to see from below is a problem requiring at least as much skill with bodies and language, with the mediations of vision, as the ‘highest’ techno-scientific visualisations.”<sup>19</sup>

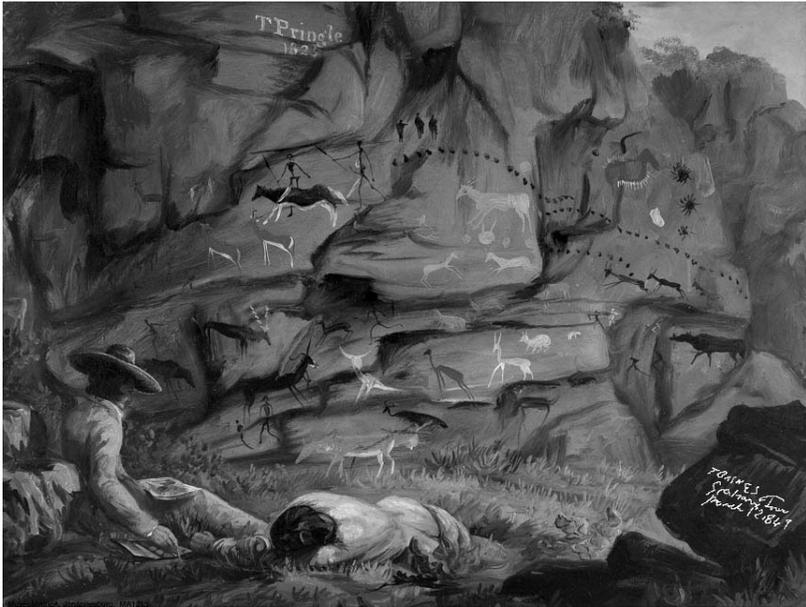


Fig. Intro-1. ‘Bushman’s Krantz Baviaans River Animals painted on the rock by the Bushman [sic]. Much visited by the Poet Pringle’. Sketch made on January 26th 1849, Oil 19 3/4 inches x 24 3/4 inches, signed ‘T. Baines Grahamstown March 12 1849’. © MuseumAfrica collection: AM 1215

This is as true of views of landscapes as of the people who inhabited them: in his poems, Pringle attempted a sympathy with the “Bushman”, but in today’s perspective appears inadvertently patronising, even racist.

<sup>18</sup> Ouzman citing Bill Brown. 2003. *A Sense of Things*, 54.

<sup>19</sup> Ouzman citing Donna Haraway. 1991. *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: the reinvention of nature*, 190-91.

His depictions of landscape were no less pre-structured by his cultural framing equipment. Another of Ouzman's citations:

A landscape is a cultural image: a pictorial way of representing, structuring or symbolizing surroundings. This is not to say that landscapes are immaterial. They may be represented in a variety of materials and on many surfaces – in paint on canvas, in writing on paper, in earth, stone, water and vegetation on the ground. A landscape park is more palpable but no more real, not less imaginary, than a landscape painting or poem. Indeed the meanings of verbal, visual and built landscapes have a complex interwoven history.<sup>20</sup>

This thought—the inescapability of the subjective—was picked up by several of the participants at the Colloquium, and worked its way hauntingly into their revisions for this book.

A second unpublished presentation, by Paul Walters and Jeremy Fogg (of the Rhodes University Department of English and the National English Literary Museum) treated a not unrelated “settler imposition” on the landscape: the re-interment of the remains of Olive Schreiner on the ironstone crown of Buffelskop, a mountain near Cradock in the Eastern Cape. Nothing, perhaps, underlines our desire to belong as poignantly or irreversibly as deciding on where to be buried. Schreiner, considered by most to be South Africa's founding novelist, was far from blind to the tensions inherent in this (attempted) appropriation of indigeneity, as expressed through her character Waldo in *Story of an African Farm*, her pioneering 1883 novel. Here Waldo, like Baines in Ouzman's example, also confronts the remnants of indigenous Bushman presences:

It was one of them, one of those old wild Bushmen, that painted those pictures there. He did not know why he painted but he wanted to make something, so he made these. [...] To us they are only strange things, that make us laugh; but to him they were very beautiful. [...] Now the Boers have shot them all, so that we never see a yellow face peeping out among the stones. [...] And the wild bucks have gone, and those days, and we are here [...] <sup>21</sup>

The guilt-tinged sense of having obliterated an entire culture haunts a great deal of settler culture, well into its most recent post-apartheid manifestations. Indeed, the figure of the “Bushman” is arguably a keynote

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<sup>20</sup> Ouzman citing Denis Cosgrove and Stephen Daniels, 1988. *The Iconography of Landscape*, xii.

<sup>21</sup> Schreiner, *Story of an African Farm*, 21-2.

in South African literature, the cultural effects of which remain to be fully unpacked. Even my touchstone for this introduction, Douglas Livingstone, examined the question of attempted identification with, despite inevitable distance from, the precolonial Bushmen. In “Eland about Station 17”, Livingstone depicts himself finding a cave whose “stone sides are crammed: blazed /with swarms of symbiotic man about/ the business of getting on with the earth”. By contrast:

There is much I cannot forgive my race.  
Parched cryptic ones, you have been hunted and herded  
to the westward wastes [...] The least  
I can do is to keep this cave hid for you,  
mounting no sign and exacting no due,  
having called, stroked and dreamed into eland.<sup>22</sup>

This respectfulness is a far cry from the exploitation of another cave by Julia Martin who, as we will see in a moment, pushes our responses to autochthony even further back in her lyrical treatment of Stone Age remains at Wonderwerk. We are reminded here, and in the paper Byron Caminero-Santangelo (of the University of Kansas) presented on the Zakes Mda novel, *Heart of Redness* (2000),<sup>23</sup> that other indigenous ethnic groups have also had their senses of belonging derided, denied, or irrecoverably altered by the invasion of settler-borne modernity. Mda here treats the Xhosa country of the Eastern Cape in both precolonial and present-day narrative strands, with a strong emphasis on the natural environment. Mda argues that the early Xhosa, before the disaster of the 1856 Cattle Killing, practiced an effective ecological management system, some lineaments of which struggle to resurface from beneath the weight and fragmentation of settler land-use and even allegedly eco-friendly, but at bottom still imperialistic, current commercial schemes.

To return to this volume, then: in Chapter Four Dan Wylie extends the perspective broached by Tracy Morison, and examines more closely how the figure of the “San/Bushmen” persists as an icon of ecological belonging into the present. The poets who have derived “versions” of “poems” from the /Xam Bushman testimonies famously collected by Wilhelm Bleek and Lucy Lloyd in the 1870s in Cape Town, provide a particularly interesting case. The modern poets examined here, particularly Alan James, stand as the latest in a venerable series of white

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<sup>22</sup> Livingstone, *A Ruthless Fidelity*, 295-6.

<sup>23</sup> A version of this paper is being published elsewhere, and hence is not included here.

authors who have attempted to “write themselves into belonging” through this material. The testimonies encountered here are, however, far from being evidence for some pure, let alone idyllic, ecologically acceptable lifestyle, much as we would like to see the Bushman world as such (as Laurens van der Post famously did). Rather, Wylie argues, these Bushman witness one facet of a Southern African society embroiled in the sundry displacements of modernity, displacements which the modern poets themselves feel, *mutatis mutandis*: it is to a large extent this very sense of common dislocation from identity (an ecological identity in particular) which makes the 12 000 pages of the Bleek-Lloyd material irresistible. So extensive is this material (Wylie examines only the treatment of one informant, //Kabbo) that the ideas broached here offer multiple opportunities for further work.

In Chapter Five Alan Kirkaldy of Rhodes’s History Department examines environmental responses to a landscape at the other end of the country from //Kabbo’s Northern Cape, but one that is congruent with Bleek’s project both in time (late nineteenth century) and nationality (German). Kirkaldy provides a densely evidenced and unusually nuanced examination of one set of German missionaries’ reactions to the “wild” landscapes of Venda, in the north-eastern region of present-day South Africa (in which Kirkaldy himself lived and taught for some years). Echoing Ouzman, Kirkaldy cites Barbara Bender, “Each individual holds many landscapes in tension”, and “Landscapes are [...] polysemic, and not so much artefact as in a process of construction and reconstruction.” All individual responses notwithstanding, Kirkaldy shows, broadly speaking, that “what remained constant in missionary thinking, writing and images in Vendaland during the late nineteenth century was a sense of the land and its people as being inextricably bound. For them, the ‘heathen Bawenda [Vhavenda]’ blended into, or were created by, the landscape which nurtured, succoured and concealed them”.

Related senses and depictions of *placement*—or displacement—underpin other chapters of this volume, ranging from these discomfitures of Venda’s Berlin missionaries, through those of today’s peri-urban youth as researched by Katie Farrington, to the more personal reflections on place and identity self-consciously examined by Pat Louw and Julia Martin. Again and again this sense is culturally—and, dare one say it—racially inflected in ways perhaps unique to this country: no matter what one’s origins or affiliations, to express one’s *place* in the landscape is almost inevitably, given the history, to engage ethically with the provenance, lineaments and consequences of apartheid, as well as its forerunners and its inheritors.

Part Three—"Literary places"—focusses particularly on literary works, and recombines the twinned notions of landscape and the animal. In Chapter Six Michael Springer, at the time a postgraduate student in Rhodes University's English Department, explores dimensions of belonging in what must be one of the most richly-written, prescient, and undeservedly neglected novels of ecological awareness in South Africa, Menàn du Plessis' *A State of Fear* (1983). A number of recent novels evince a sensibility which can be unambiguously labelled "ecological", in the sense of being informed by a science-based awareness of environmental crisis, alien plant invasions, or global warming: one thinks here of Mda's *Heart of Redness* and *The Whale Caller* (2005), Annelie Botes' *Mountain of Lost Dreams* (2005), or Jane Rosenthal's futuristic *Souvenir* (2004). But none is as wide-ranging, or uses ecological terminologies as finely and densely, as *A State of Fear*. Not only does the Cape Town-set novel include characters' expositions on pollution, botanical changes, and nuclear waste from Koeberg power station; it shows how intricately enmeshed these ecological questions are with political questions of identity and belonging, from white academics to the impoverished, rioting township-dwellers of the turbulent 1980s. And as Springer shows, the disturbances in mental states, having political, epistemological and environmental foundations, is etched in every alarming turn in du Plessis' narrative strategies. The novel reads, in effect, astonishingly as a fictionalised embodiment of the ideas, limitations and necessities outlined by Laurence Wright in Chapter One. Du Plessis seems, possibly quite unconsciously, to have heeded Schopenhauer's cautions, but, as Springer concludes, the novel ultimately intimates that our most adequate, even heroic, "response to the dilemma perhaps lies in our generation of fictions and mythologies, that belonging is a narration continuously renewed".

Wendy Woodward has probably published more widely than anyone on animal presences in South African literature; here she extends work she presented at the 2005 Colloquium, where she examined the more "popular" animal-related memoirs of three women naturalists.<sup>24</sup> In Chapter Seven, Woodward examines the flip side of that article's "feminist" aspects: the "masculinities" embedded in three male authors' work on human-animal relationships. Working through transpersonal psychology, Deep Ecology, and Australian philosopher Val Plumwood's increasingly influential brand of ecofeminism, Woodward explores

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<sup>24</sup> Woodward, "Lions, Leopards and Liminal Spaces: Representations of Biosociality in the writings of Katy Payne, Linda Tucker and Gillian van Houten", *Current Writing* 18(1), 2006: 28-41.

constructions of the self within postcolonial natural relations. Ian McCallum's book *Ecological Intelligence*, while sounding superficially reminiscent in some respects of other mantra-laden "New Age" handbooks to better living, in fact goes well beyond more commercial guides of that kind; it reveals a well-read, poetic, and psychologically acute mind at work, and a solid knowledge of both scientific theory and natural systems on the ground (McCallum is at once poet, practicing psychiatrist, and wilderness guide). He speaks to many strands of thought explored in *Toxic Belonging?* when he quotes the great biologist E. O. Wilson:

If the sacred narrative cannot be in the form of a religious cosmology, it will be taken from the material history of the universe and from the human species. That trend is in no way debasing. The true evolutionary epic, retold as poetry, is as intrinsically ennobling as any religious epic.<sup>25</sup>

By contrast, Lyall Watson, most famous for his book *Supernature* (1974), feels far more like pop-psychology, and Woodward is rightly more suspicious of his latest book, *Elephantoms*, than she is of *Ecological Intelligence*. Between them lies the more pragmatist, but nevertheless thoughtful, account of relations with lions written by Gareth Patterson, heir to George Adamson of Kenya. There is an allied spiritual element to Patterson's relations to his big cats, as encapsulated in the titles of some of his own books: *With my Soul amongst the Lions* (1995) and (even more tackily) *To Walk with Lions: The Seven Steps to True Spiritual Fulfilment* (2001). In the latter, Patterson characterises one male lion, "Darky" as "almost a mystical lion. At times I thought that immortals exist, and that Darky was one of them".<sup>26</sup> This is not to disparage Patterson's remarkable relationship with animals who would customarily regard humans as prey. Even as Patterson seems to exemplify the Buberian relationship, part of that "morally evolving" consciousness<sup>27</sup> outlined by Tracy Morison, he also, slightly disturbingly, helps "methodically cut away the numerous tendrils of the innumerable beings wishing to take a bite out of our own bodies".<sup>28</sup> Wilderness and wildness seem to recede just a little further. Still, in Woodward's argument, in "what amounts to a postcolonial critique, he locates lions within the historical horror of hunting as a

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<sup>25</sup> E O Wilson; cited in McCallum, *Ecological Intelligence*, 170.

<sup>26</sup> Extract at [www.garethpatterson.com/Walk/walk.htm](http://www.garethpatterson.com/Walk/walk.htm) (accessed 13 December 2007).

<sup>27</sup> Gareth Patterson, interview at:

[www.garethpatterson.com/homeimages/Gareth.pdf](http://www.garethpatterson.com/homeimages/Gareth.pdf) (accessed 13 December 2007).

<sup>28</sup> Hatley, "The uncanny goodness of being edible to bears", 14.

cultural phenomenon.” On the other hand, Woodward presents the indigenous, “animist” spirituality and animal awareness of one of South Africa’s most protean characters, Credo Mutwa. Mutwa has recently reiterated some of the more trenchant, if simplistic, critiques of Western “separatist” attitudes:

A very dangerous attitude that ought to be erased from our minds and those of our children is that human beings can build a glittering technological future without animals, and without trees: a future in which food will be synthesised (only heaven knows what from), in which there will be no disease and no death. This Utopian attitude encourages human beings to ravage the earth in the hope that our descendants, who will inherit our denuded world, will somehow, using the might of the electron and waving the magic wand of technology, create a new paradise.<sup>29</sup>

While Mutwa has been variously characterised as a latter-day guru-shaman and as an exploitative charlatan, his attempt to revalorise indigenous eco-friendly spiritualities, Woodward argues, “is not a romantic, backward-looking one”. Indeed, it is almost eco-feminist since he, like Patterson and unlike Watson, asserts “that the earth is our mother, that the contemporary abuse of women in South Africa stems from men’s hatred of nature since ‘a woman is the first representative of nature [...] that a man sees within kicking distance’.” In sum, Woodward foregrounds issues of spiritual compassion, gender and ecological belonging which underpin several other chapters: the alternately clashing and cross-fertilising effects of indigenous, established Western religious, and modern materialist spiritualities, call for yet further investigation. Her citation of Stephen J Holmes is worth repeating here for its relevance to several other chapters:

What identification should not be taken to mean [...] is *identity*—that I literally am that tree over there, for example. What is being emphasised is the tremendously *common* experience that through the process of identification my *sense* of self (my experiential self) can expand to include the tree even though I and the tree remain physically “separate”.

Part Four of *Toxic Belonging?*—“Place and personhood”—contains three explorations of specific groups’ experience of natural elements within their identity-concepts. The first two are by Australians (the Australian-South African comparative perspective is being promoted and fruitfully explored in a number of areas). In Chapter Eight, Catie Gressier from the

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<sup>29</sup> Mutwa, *Isilwane: The animal*, 12.

University of Western Australia presents some initial findings of her doctoral researches into identity-construction amongst white Batswana living in Botswana's Okavango Delta—one of the subcontinent's richest and most unique wildlife reserves and tourist attractions. If any group in Africa can claim the title "white African", these people can. This is ongoing work capable of historical refinements similar to those employed by Alan Kirkaldy *vis-à-vis* the Berlin missionaries; perhaps nothing in this volume more strikingly reveals the distance in attitude white inhabitants have traversed over the last century and a half, than a comparison between these two communities. The white Batswana, Gressier shows, constitute a community utterly imbricated, though quite un sentimentally, in an ambience about as pristinely "wild" as we are likely to find today, inescapably in love with it, dependent on it, preserving it even as they necessarily exploit it. To a deep degree, the place *is* their identity, and a wholly realistic one. To repeat just one of the several interviewees, whose colourful argot Gressier often delightfully captures:

You can't just go into the delta. You'll get lost, seriously, badly. That's a fact. There's too many channels, it's dangerous. [...] The delta is not just one big open space of water, it is little channels that you go through. You [mess] up, you're doomed, you're lost. Goodbye.

Chapter Nine hopes to constitute the first foray into another South African-Australian comparative study, this one focussing not so much on non-indigenous people, as on the non-indigenous animals, plants and other species the people brought with them. In both countries, the threat to biodiversity of "invasive aliens" is massive, almost irreversible. Jane Mulcock and David Trigger (the latter, who unfortunately was unable to attend the Colloquium, being a well-established Australian scholar in this area) present a fascinating anthropological take on the meanings of "natural", "native" and "autochthony", particularly in their articulation with various nationalist discourses. They cite Stephen Jay Gould—"How easy the fallacious transition between a biological argument and a political campaign"—and note, "Subtle linguistic assumptions and conceptual slippages such as those that are commonly found in discourses about nativeness, naturalness and belonging can have significant implications." Their revelation of complexities in these usages might well have served as a starting-point for this entire volume. They have come a long way from Alfred Crosby's pioneering *Ecological Imperialism* (1986). Mulcock and Trigger amplify South African and Australian examples with others from the United Kingdom—baboons and boars, dingoes and squirrels. As with Woodward's chapter, this is to extend definitions of "literature" into wider

rhetorics of public and political discourse—a salutary venture, and one amplified by a bibliography that should be of substantial benefit to non-anthropologists pursuing these strains of thought in other literary areas.

With Katie Farrington’s study of youth at a particular school in Grahamstown, Chapter Ten brings us back to the home of the Colloquium. This sociological study, conducted from Rhodes University’s Environmental Education Department, points up issues of indigeneity from the opposite angle. These are Xhosa youngsters living in the complex aftermath of apartheid, their attitudes towards the natural and towards the toxicity of both material and mental pollutants profoundly affected by impoverishment, shattered family structures, and the ever-present scourge of HIV/AIDS. The deployment of relevant sociological literature on definitions of “place” and “space” provides refinements of these concepts less developed though nascent in other papers. Farrington then employs various interviewing techniques with revelatory activities such as mapping and photography; the results, with their delineation of the intersections between local political realities, globalisation, ways of seeing and learning, and senses of placement and displacement, vividly bring down to local earth many of the dimensions theorised in earlier chapters. Though Farrington’s peri-urban locale and methodology seemed initially removed from the “nature” of belonging treated by most other contributors, it was remarkable how many presenters in conversations and question-time during the Colloquium bounced their own notions of identity and belonging off hers.

With Part Five—“Streets, hills, caves”—we close with two rather more personalised meditations on the meaning of identity and belonging in South Africa. Pat Louw draws on some of the burgeoning literature of aesthetics of place—especially that of Arnold Berleant, and it’s worth mentioning Berleant and Allen Carlson’s volume, *The Aesthetics of Natural Environments* (2004) in this context. However, the work published thus far is entirely American or European in orientation, and little of its kind exists in the southern African context (J. M. Coetzee’s pioneering thoughts in *White Writing* (1994) are ripe for extension and updating). Louw’s chapter goes some way, then, towards exploring the complexities of how place and human community—in this case, as in so many others, structured by personal political convictions about apartheid—articulate to result in a sense of belonging or otherwise. One might well apply here a statement by anthropologist Robert Thornton, cited by Catie Gressier: “The aesthetic beauty of the landscape is thus a political resource”. In Louw’s case (unlike most of the Berlin

missionaries, for example), it was precisely the senses of *difference* in the (to her) strange landscapes of hilly, impoverished, “black” Msinga which excited a sense of worthy emplacement; whereas the ostensibly familiar “white” suburban avenues of Mtunzini in fact alienated her in crucial ways. Via forays into the concept of the sublime, as it might (or might not) manifest in South Africa, and stories by Tolstoy, Doris Lessing, and Nadine Gordimer, Louw offers intriguing perspectives on what remains to her in some ways a challenging paradox. There are implications here for constructions of “evolving indigenities” which would reward more research and pondering. It’s appropriately summed up by Kate Gramisch, perhaps, whom Louw cites: in various ways, almost all of us suffer variations on

a trajectory of dislocation, in which the white female protagonist enters hitherto unknown territory, dominated by an Other race, culture, ethnicity and gender. The experience of dislocation functions in both texts as a form of political re-education, in which the protagonist is forced to confront the Other and to question her own identity.

South Africa simply does not have a genealogy of “nature writers” and philosophers of the kind and stature that the USA possesses in the line of Thoreau, John Muir, and Aldo Leopold through to essayists like Annie Dillard, David Quammen and Barry Lopez. In all the extracts collected by Helen Moffett in her anthology, *Lovely Beyond any Singing: Landscapes in South African Writing* (2006), one encounters none we might call a dedicated “nature writer”. All the more welcome, then, is an essayist of the quality of Julia Martin, whose offering “Wonderwerk” (Chapter Twelve), is the latest in a series of philosophically thoughtful, historically rich, highly personalised and almost unclassifiable pieces—“narrative-essay-poems”, perhaps—a set of which have been published as *Writing Home* (2002). In “Wonderwerk”, Martin takes us back virtually to the dawn of humanity, to one of that conglomeration of South African cave dwellings—Sterkfontein is the best-known—where some of the earliest of all human senses of belonging have left their scant remains. Continuous human habitation for more than a million years: it’s mind-numbing. Perhaps one statement from this narrative can stand for our entire enterprise in this overworked age: “Now if no more virgin territories are left then digging deep into the dust may yet yield precious objects of information or knowledge for discovery.”

There will always be mysteries—and always hopes, however quixotic, that our deployment of our knowledge might bring about beneficent change, if not paradise. There is a poignant moment at the beginning of