INTRODUCTION

F. FIONA MOOLLA

This book emerged out of a conviction that environment and animals are vital to an all-encompassing flourishing – where the word ‘vital’ suggests more than just ‘important’ but, retrieving its deeper etymological root, where environment and animals are ‘vita’ – they are life itself. This book emerged out of a conviction, and not much else: there has been no funding or major conferences behind it. These facts about the coming into existence of the volume have had paradoxical consequences. On the one hand, the individual members of the community that has been established through the volume, for the most part, have never physically met except through the conversations conducted in cyberspace beneath the tree of knowledge of our project site. The conviction that has inspired the volume has therefore not imposed a massive carbon cost on the environment it is moved to respect but, instead, has relied on ‘clean’ technologies. One might say that it has translated theory into praxis. However, the ‘clean’ technology that has allowed the digital cultural communion of the contributors could not have emerged without just over three centuries of dirty industrialisation, and its concomitant global social, cultural and economic cost to people, animals and environment.

This book has been motivated by the instinct that recognition of the life of animals and the significance of the natural world are not foreign to continental Africa, but are deeply constitutive of the cultures that together create a strategically essentialised Africa in the postcolonial period. This intuition could not be verified because the scholarship, with the regional exception of South Africa and its strong focus on
literary culture, for the most part does not exist. Mention must be made here, however, of the publication of the papers presented at a conference titled ‘Literature, Nature and the Land: Ethics and Aesthetics of the Environment’, which was convened at the University of Zululand, South Africa, in 1992. The conference proceedings include papers on several African writers, including Ayi Kwei Armah, Kofi Awoonor, Wole Soyinka, Es’kia Mphahlele and Mazisi Kunene, among others.

Cheryll Glotfelty, in the introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader* (Glotfelty and Fromm 1996), identifies 1993 as the year in which ecocriticism emerged as a clearly defined critical school in the Anglo-American academy. The Zululand ecocritical conference of the Association of English Teachers of South Africa (mentioned above), which indexes significant interest and scholarship in the area of culture and environmental studies, therefore pre-dates the crystallisation of Anglo-American ecocriticism. Furthermore, Chengyi Coral Wu’s chapter in this volume makes a strong case for the existence of an African environmental criticism in the 1980s, which emerged around a number of key essays. In the past few years, a body of Nigerian ecocriticism has emerged, catalysed largely around eco-activism in the Niger Delta, again with a predominantly literary focus. But, for the most part, African ecocriticism has, to this point, largely existed as a subset of postcolonial ecocriticism, which, itself, has only fairly recently come into existence as an area of research. This is surprising given the fact that the environment, certainly to a greater extent than animals, has been on the radar for a number of years now. In 2010 the 36th annual conference of the African Literature Association had an ecocritical focus. The conference was titled ‘Eco-Imagination: African and Diasporan Literatures and Sustainability’, which is also the title of the conference proceedings published in 2014, and edited by Irène d’Almeida, Lucie Viakinnou-Brinson and Thelma Pinto. Similarly, environment was a significant focus of a number of panels at the 2014 African Literature Association conference, which celebrated the 40th anniversary of the association. In 2015 the conference of the Association of English Teachers of South Africa returned to its 1992 ecocritical land focus with the theme ‘Environment, Race and Land Use’, this time within the borders of South African cultural expression. To date, however, for the most part,
questions of African environment and animals have been considered in monographs and edited volumes in a general postcolonial context, together with criticism of other world literatures, the most significant of which are surveyed below.

Probably the best-known eco- and zoocritical book is Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin’s *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* (2010), which draws on a number of works by African writers treated broadly thematically, rather than individually. The intersection of the art and activism of Ogoniland’s Ken Saro-Wiwa, who was executed in 1995 at the behest of dictator Sani Abacha, is generally considered in the context of postcolonial resistance to predatory oil exploitation. The fiction of Nadine Gordimer and J. M. Coetzee is analysed in a section that unpacks the politics of the pastoral, and Coetzee features again, together with Zakes Mda, in the zoocritical section of that book.

Published in the same year as the book by Huggan and Tiffin is Laura Wright’s ‘Wilderness into civilized shapes’: *Reading the Postcolonial Environment* (2010), which considers Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s *Petals of Blood* and Mda’s *Heart of Redness* for cultural representations of relations with the natural world, which simultaneously invent precolonial tradition. There is also a chapter on animal–human relations in the novel *Disgrace*, by J. M. Coetzee, a writer who, unlike many African writers and those of the African diaspora, often seems to transcend national and continental location and definition. Wright also considers less canonical writers, like Flora Nwapa and Sindiwe Magona in particular, with a focus on women’s connections with the land from which they have been displaced.

A third book published in 2010, which considers environment and animals from the perspective of the global South, is Bonnie Roos and Alex Hunt’s *Postcolonial Green: Environmental Politics and World Narratives* (2010). This edited volume foregrounds Africa in chapters by Sheng-Yen Yu, Jonathan Bishop Highfield (who has also written a chapter in the present volume) and Neel Ahuja, which consider apocalypticism in Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians*, foodways, as presented in Bessie Head’s novels, and international primate-conservation discourses, respectively.
Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment, edited by Elizabeth De Loughrey and George B. Handley (2011), features a chapter by Allison Carruth dedicated entirely to animals in Coetzee’s recent novels, a full chapter by Byron Caminero-Santangelo on Mda’s The Heart of Redness and part of a chapter on marine-mammal communication by Jonathan Steinwand, which looks at Mda’s The Whale Caller, among other international writers. Rob Nixon’s chapter, ‘Stranger in the eco-village’, foregrounds African ecotourism, but will be considered in more detail in the context of Nixon’s own book, to be surveyed next.

In Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor, Nixon (2011) examines a range of African fiction and non-fiction in the broader context of world literatures. Nixon briefly alludes to Tsitsi Dangarembga’s Nervous Conditions (1988), which dramatises in ecological terms the transition to a divided modernity of its protagonist, Tambu. Nixon contrasts the symbolism of the aesthetic pleasures of the garden at the mission with the mealie fields of the homestead. The heroine of Dangarembga’s Bildungsroman, he concludes, ‘will belong forever to two earths: this second soil of luxurious self-expression but always just beneath it her childhood soil, fraught with survival’s urgent chores’ (Nixon 2011: 28). But that division is even more complex than Nixon suggests. If the non-modern Zimbabwean land is identified with back-breaking (female) labour, it is also identified in the novel with the individual and social pleasures of childhood trips to the Nyamarira River, Tambu’s ‘flowing, tumbling, musical playground’ (Dangarembga 1988: 59), whose privacy is intruded upon by roads built for trucks, markers of global capitalist penetration of the Zimbabwean land.

In the present volume, the chapter by Syned Mthatiwa on the work of Chenjerai Hove and Musaemura Zimunya reflects some of the insights and tensions of Dangarembga’s novel of development – in this case, through the genre of Zimbabwean written verse. In the work of both these poets, Mthatiwa identifies a pastoral, precolonial element, represented by the Nyamarira in Dangarembga’s novel, and the rigours of survival in a cosmological context where the environment is a significant and challenging actor in the drama of human existence.

There are two chapters in Slow Violence that consider the social and ecological consequences of the global dependence on fossil fuels.
In one of these, the effects on continental African are highlighted. Nixon exposes, through the life work of Ken Saro-Wiwa, the brutal consequences of politics and aesthetics, which transcend literary debate and, through the autobiography of Wangari Maathai, reveals the complexities of the intersection of gender and ecocritical activism. In ‘Stranger in the eco-village’, referred to above, Nixon also explores the African tourism industry through a literary journalistic essay by Njabulo Ndebele, and wildlife conservation in a short story by Nadine Gordimer. In the current volume, Reinier J. M. Vriend takes questions of nature and tourism further by exploring the role of nature and African charismatic megafauna in the photographic images employed in internet advertising of the highly paradoxical enterprise of African voluntourism.

The most recent addition to the growing number of books on post-colonial ecocriticism is Roman Bartosch’s (2013) strongly theoretical point of entry into the field, Environmentality: Ecocriticism and the Event of Postcolonial Fiction. This monograph focuses on works like Amitav Ghosh’s The Hungry Tide and, in an African context, the novels of J. M. Coetzee and Mda, which have become fairly canonical in the context of ecocriticism from formerly colonised parts of the world. Bartosch’s angle on these novels highlights the ways in which nature and animals in the cultural production of the global South unsettle, through their rifts and tensions, the universality of Western social constructions of nature and environmental responses. Bartosch highlights the potential of literature, in this book represented only by the novel, to ‘address problems and aporias of environmental ethics in a globalised world’ (Bartosch 2013: 14).

To date, there have been six special issues of journals that consider cultural representations of environment and animals, predominantly in a South African context. The first of these is a 2006 issue of Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa, with the title ‘Animal presences, animal geographies’. This special issue adopts an interdisciplinary approach to the area, with analyses of non-fiction, novels, poetry, maps and documentary film. In 2007 Alternation: Interdisciplinary Journal for the Study of the Arts and Humanities in Southern Africa published a special issue that looked at wilderness and forests, mainly
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in a South African context but with excursions into Malawian poetry by Syned Mthatiwa (whose essay on the environmentalism of two Zimbabwean poets is anthologised in the present volume) and the Nigerian novel, represented in a comparative piece on Chinua Achebe and Ben Okri. More recently, a 2013 issue of Alternation focused on ‘Coastlines and littoral zones in South African ecocritical writing’. This issue features analyses of a wide range of southern African fictional and non-fictional oceanic texts, with one exception, which explores the Niger Delta poetry of Tanure Ojaide.

A 2010 issue of Safundi: The Journal of South African and American Studies is devoted entirely to animal studies and ecocriticism, with articles that cross the boundaries of disciplines, media, genre and modes, including a concluding essay by Jennifer Wenzel, which critically reflects on the voices brought into conversation in the issue.

A 2014 issue of Scrutiny 2: Issues in English Studies in Southern Africa features a themed section with articles on poetry and novels, again in a South African context. South Africa is also the focus of a 2014 special issue of the Journal of Literary Studies edited by Wendy Woodward and Erika Lemmer, titled ‘Figuring the Animal in Post-apartheid South Africa’. This draws on the papers presented at the third human-animal studies colloquium held at the Centre for Humanities Research at the University of the Western Cape in 2013. (The focus of the third colloquium reflects the South African focus of the first colloquium held in 2011, while the topic of the second colloquium in 2012 was ‘Animal vulnerabilities’.)

A number of seminal essays on African ecocriticism deserve mention here, some of which will be explored and evaluated further in the chapter in this book by Chengyi Coral Wu. These are William Slaymaker’s ‘Ecoing the other(s)’ and Byron Caminero-Santangelo’s ‘Different shades of green’ in African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory, edited by Tejumola Olaniyan and Ato Quayson (2007). Slaymaker and Caminero-Santangelo present controversially contrary views on the rootedness of a literary environmental ethos and/or its burgeoning in Africa. In ‘Shifting the center’, an earlier essay in Environmental Criticism for the Twenty-first Century, edited by Stephanie LeMenager, Teresa Shewry and Ken Hiltner (2011),
Caminero-Santangelo makes a case for the origins of an African literary environmental consciousness that significantly pre-dates the 2005 award of the Nobel Peace Prize to Wangari Maathai, co-founder of the Green Belt Movement. Here Caminero-Santangelo considers East African ecocritical precursors to Maathai in Okot p’Bitek’s Song of Lawino (1966) and Song of Ocol (1967), and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s A Grain of Wheat (1967).

Dan Wylie’s 2011 essay, ‘Literature and ecology in southern Africa’, anthologised in SA Lit: Beyond 2000, is part of a volume that highlights the transition from the ‘post-apartheid’ to a literature that is significantly transnational. For Wylie, the transnational moment seems to be one especially productive of what he terms ‘infiltration’ – an approach to interpretation attuned to the multiple exchanges between ‘places, levels and cultures’, which simultaneously ‘captur[es] … both material and symbolic interconnectivities’ (Wylie 2011: 354). This is a mode of reading that Wylie hopes might finally allow criticism to jettison the ‘lingering binarisms of imperialism and apartheid’ (Wylie 2011: 368). This hope, paradoxically, is belied by most of the essays in the present volume, where a prevailing environmental concern seems precisely to require a retrieval, in the broader African context, of the impact of colonial ecological mutations of lifeways, which, in the current historical moment, are drawn into globally complex, but perhaps fundamentally unequal, flows and networks.

To date, there have been only two edited volumes dedicated solely to African ecocriticism and one to South African debates on environmentalism. The sophisticated, epistemologically self-reflexive approach of Environment at the Margins: Literary and Environmental Studies in Africa, edited by Caminero-Santangelo and Garth Myers (2011), is succinctly captured in James Graham’s review in a 2013 issue of Postcolonial Text.

[The] contention made by Environment at the Margins is that [it] is not merely within iconic literary works or a given historical moment or movement that ‘an African ecocriticism’ (6) is to be discovered. Instead, the assembled essays range from critiques of colonial accounts of African peoples, landscapes and
animals … to the writing of post-colonial anthropology and ecology as fiction … The rationale here is to bring ‘literary and environmental studies of Africa into robust interdisciplinary dialogue’ (15), so that an ‘African ecocriticism’ might emerge performatively through such an encounter, rather than be prescribed as an addendum to a generic, first world-issued ‘postcolonial ecocriticism’ (10). (Graham 2013: 1)

The most recent anthology, *Eco-critical Literature: Regreening African Landscapes*, edited by Ogaga Okuyade (2013), who has written a chapter in the present volume, is a collection of criticism of African novels, non-fiction prose, poetry and film, some of which are relatively new to a continental African and international audience. The figure of the destructive human that emerges in Anglo-American environmentalism is interrogated in *Toxic Belonging? Identity and Ecology in Southern Africa*, edited by Dan Wylie (2008). The essays in that volume place South African literature and narrative non-fiction under an interdisciplinary lens. Interestingly, in the chapters that consider indigenous environmentalism in the present volume, the figure of the parasitic human does not appear to emerge.

There are only two monographs on environment and animals that focus on African literature. Caminero-Santangelo’s (2014) book by the same name as the essay in Olaniyan and Quayson’s anthology has recently been published. *Different Shades of Green: African Literature, Environmental Justice, and Political Ecology* again underscores the idea that emerges in postcolonial ecocriticism more generally that environment cannot be defended without engaging colonialism, capitalism and imperialism.

Although ecocritical scholarship appears to be a research area that is just opening up, the natural world and animals have been active agents in African cultural forms for as long as these forms have existed. This is because environment and animals fundamentally constitute the worldviews and lifeways that have created these cultural ‘texts’. African cosmologies, their paideia, or social education, their art and their entertainment could not exist without nature and animals. And these stories inform the print literatures that developed in the 20th century. Consider, as one example, the Yoruba creation myth that has Obatala descending from the heavens on a gold chain with a white hen, a black cat, some sand in a snail shell and a palm nut. Or consider the anti-consumerist ethical instruction behind the cautionary Ibo tale of the greed of the tortoise who tricked the birds out of a feast in the sky, which, when incorporated into the late Chinua Achebe’s Things Fall Apart, creates a different, perhaps anti-consumerist, allegorical dynamic in a literary and capitalist-colonial context.

Similarly, the proverbs that constitute the philosophy of Africa cannot be conceived without the natural world and animals. It is no surprise, then, that nature and animals are not a deliberate and critically studied dimension of African cultural forms, as the themes of anti- and postcolonial resistance, individual alienation or the representation of women have been. Nature and animals are so fundamentally constitutive of African culture that they form an invisible backdrop that has required the frequent and prolonged droughts of the 20th century in the Sahara, the environmental ravages caused by oil and gas extraction in the Niger Delta, the threatened destruction of the rain forests of West Africa as a consequence of the extinction of forest mammals, and so on, as the focusing lens through which nature and animals are now seen. The lifeways of African cultures, through the active presence of nature and animals in their mythical understandings of the world, have maintained a healthy environmental democracy that has been broadly sustained over centuries. Thus, African cultures, and non-modern cultures more generally, articulate, using a different repertoire, the conviction voiced by Bruno Latour in Politics of Nature (2004) that contemporary post-Cartesian globalised societies must recognise that nature is not science but a social construct, and that a new collective needs to

Interestingly, the African trans-species and trans-animate collectivities discussed in a number of chapters in this volume do not, however, appear to heed Latour’s injunction of radical indeterminacy. The distribution of speech among human and non-human African actors does not feel it needs to learn to ‘be skeptical of all spokespersons’ (Latour 2004: 232, emphasis in the original). The current ecocritical agenda and, potentially but not necessarily, environmental response are being set by a global culture with which Africa has had a fraught relationship, and one that has fundamentally transformed African land, landscape and social relations among human and non-human actors over the last hundred years or so, but often in the space of just a few decades.

The catch-22 of African environmentalism, and how it is refracted in criticism of African cultural forms, is that, although the global environmental crisis is not a product of African lifeways, African lifeways have to acknowledge the crisis in their unavoidable engagement (or perhaps entry) into global culture. This idea is articulated by postcolonial historian Dipesh Chakrabarty, who uses a conceptual vocabulary that is startlingly simple but startlingly powerful. In ‘The climate of history’, an essay that appeared in Critical Inquiry in 2009, Chakrabarty proposes four theses. The first thesis is that the anthropocene era collapses the distinction between a subjective human history and an objective natural history. Chakrabarty identifies the beginning of the anthropocene era, or the age in which human activity has a global impact, with the Industrial Revolution of the last quarter of the 18th century, rather than with the ‘invention’ of agriculture, as is sometimes proposed by climate theorists. He adds that the impact of human activity speeds up in the second half of the 20th century. Chakrabarty suggests that the assumption held in common by historians up until the mid 20th century was that nature transformed, but so slowly that it was essentially just a ‘timeless’ backdrop for human activity, and therefore nature was not a subject for historiography at all. (In Chakrabarty’s remarks we see a different version of nature as background from the one discussed in...
the context of African ecocriticism above.) Although nature has not been consciously foregrounded in African cultural forms because it is such an obvious actor that it is not even to be remarked upon, nature in the discourses of modernity faded into a utilitarian background as a consequence of social disembedding and the subject-object divide consequent to Cartesianism. European, and later American, romanticism challenged to a certain extent this disconnection, but in a framework established by the Enlightenment, against which it recoils. In recent decades, this conception changes where nature is re-identified and reconceptualised. In this new context, human beings, increasingly in scientific discourse, are revealed to be a geophysical force, in tandem with a renewed foregrounding of the environment. Jacob Mapara addresses precisely the rising prominence of environment from about the mid 20th century in the Anglo-American world in a chapter in this book, which uses Shona indigenous religion as a counterpoint.

Chakrabarty’s second thesis is that the anthropocene necessitates a qualification of ‘Humanist Histories of Modernity/Globalization’ (Chakrabarty 2009: 207), since it compels a re-evaluation of the idea of a non-contextualised, universal freedom as an absolute virtue because ‘the mansion of modern freedoms stands on an ever-expanding base of fossil-fuel use’ (Chakrabarty 2009: 208). Chakrabarty goes on to ask the rhetorical questions, ‘Is the Anthropocene a critique of the narratives of freedom? Is the geological agency of humans the price we pay for the pursuit of freedom?’ (Chakrabarty 2009: 210).

The third thesis proposes that a postcolonial capitalist critique needs to engage the ‘Species History’ of humans, which is forced into existence by the anthropocene. The fourth thesis suggests that the articulation of individual and species histories created by modernity tests the limits of historical understanding.

In his essay ‘Postcolonial studies and the challenge of climate change’, Chakrabarty (2012) proposes a third figure of the human that must be acknowledged in contemporary environmental debates, which joins the figures of the human as individual disembedded subject and the human in terms of its species history. This third figure is the universalist rights-bearing subject, assumed by postcolonial-postmodern
views but, in this case, endowed with what Chakrabarty terms the ‘anthropological’ differences of class, gender, and so on. The corollary of Chakrabarty’s analysis fatalistically complicates the idea of a simple acknowledgment proposed by Latour of nature and animals in the collective democracy of humans, referred to above, since Chakrabarty ventures that man as a geophysical force lacks an ontological agency – and, hence, how can one call to the collective a non-ontological agency?

In some ways, Julia Martin’s (1993) paper with the intriguing title ‘New, with added ecology? Hippos, forests and environmental literacy’, delivered at the 1992 Zululand conference referred to in the literature survey above, makes the same points that Chakrabarty has made more recently. Martin’s analysis, sharpened as it was by apartheid iniquities, presents Chakrabarty’s articulation of different scales of human history in rather more human terms, identifying the ways in which nature is more than just an ‘eternal backdrop to human activity’ (Martin 1993: 79). She suggests that her own eco-activism is

motivated by the sense human beings may have reached an unprecedented moment in history, when ozone and rain forests are possibly crucial to the survival of our species. But living in South Africa makes it impossible to ignore the links between environmental crisis and the poverty and disempowerment of the majority. Future governments will be faced with the seemingly impossible task of addressing both the people’s ultimately unsatisfiable desire for First World models of modernity, and the impact of development on an already degraded environment. (Martin 1993: 79)

In Martin’s analysis here, one may identify Chakrabarty’s human history in its Enlightenment-universalist, and anthropological and species forms.

Chakrabarty’s (2012) essay on postcolonialism and climate change concludes with the observation that, “Today, it is precisely the “survival of the species” on a “world-wide scale” that is largely in question. All progressive political thought, including postcolonial criticism,
will have to register this profound change in the human condition’ (Chakrabarty 2012: 15). Quite startlingly, Chakrabarty proposes on a global scale what James Maina Wachira’s research into the animal praise poetry of the Samburu, presented in a chapter in this book, suggests on a very local scale, namely that the Samburu express in their praise songs to animals the desire to survive as a community. Global survival of the species seems paradoxically to collapse here into pretty much the same dynamic as the local survival of a community whose cultural expressions may all too easily be dismissed as idealised indigeneity.

It is precisely the need to widen the debate on environment and animals highlighted above that encouraged the formation of the African natures-cultures project, which reaches fulfilment in this volume. The project follows up on an intuition of an essential transdisciplinarity of approach, which may lead to a crossing of what Boaventura de Sousa Santos has referred to in ‘Beyond abyssal thinking: From global lines to ecologies of knowledges’ as the ‘epistemological abyss’ (De Sousa Santos 2007: 51) that separates contemporary global epistemologies from indigenous and non-modern epistemologies. The project was driven by a sense that the geographic scope of scholarship in an African context must be wider than its nodal points in South African and Niger Delta literatures, and that the genres engaged must be more representative. In the essay ‘Shifting the center’, referred to above, Caminero-Santangelo calls for the need to bring the tensions in African nature writing into debate by ‘putting texts and authors in dialogue’ (Caminero-Santangelo 2011: 161). It is fascinating that two of the texts he considers are Okot p’Bitek’s Song of Lawino and Song of Ocol, which straddle the complicated divide between oral and print cultures, and share in the conceptual constructions of both. (One recalls here the production history of p’Bitek’s text, where his oral-songstress mother asked him to sing his verse as if, in fact, it were a song.) Whereas Caminero-Santangelo argues for the need to bring literatures in English into dialogue, this volume attempts to bring genres into debate. For this reason, the ambit of this volume has been pushed beyond print literature circulated internationally, which has tended to produce only one, perhaps the globally dominant, social creation of nature.
Some of the areas that provided a productive point of departure for the project have included the following questions: are Africans ‘in nature’? Is there a nature, or an African nature or African natures? Are there evolutionary roots for biophilia? Are we genetically programmed for the pastoral? Is there an African pastoral mythology? Is there a pastoral (or anti-pastoral) of the African tropics and of the desert? Are there aquatic pasturals/anti-pasturals that encompass the Indian and Atlantic oceans, the Great Lakes and great rivers? Is there wilderness in Africa? Is Africa the wilderness? Is there wilderness?

Environmentalism seems almost inevitably to mesh with spirituality and religion. In an African context, which may or may not reflect a global paradigm, one might ask whether the trajectory is one from the worship of gods, to God, to man and now to nature. Do African animisms reflect an inherent agency in nature that tends to prevent environmental collapse? By contrast, does the anthropocentrism of African animism, which many scholars compare unfavourably with nature-friendly indigenous American spiritualities, lead to an oppositional stance to environment? Does the stewardship model framed by African monotheisms represent the seeds of destruction? Does the idea of mother earth in many African ethnically based religions, which morphs into the idea of Mother Africa, especially in Négritude poetry, translate into African ecofeminism? Given the large-scale colonial land expropriation that took place throughout Africa, should land be given back to the people or back to the land? Does the experience of African urbanisation collapse the country–city dichotomy that emerges in the North Atlantic context? ‘Techno-ecotopia’: is there an African science and technology, and are they the answer? Where are the African cyborgs? How much should Africa consume? Do African community or ethnic cultures represent bioregionalism? Where these communities have been displaced, should a process of reinhabitation follow? How do host environments cope with the mass displacements witnessed as a consequence of climate change and conflict? How successful have African environmental movements, like Green Belt and Niger Delta activism, been?

These are some of the questions that could have also been addressed in the volume, and the essays that follow introduce a number of other
fascinating ideas. It is quite revealing that a very strong voice in this volume belongs to research into oral cultural forms. This provides a welcome balance to the dominance of the analysis of print cultural forms in most of the previous scholarship on the topic. Two of the chapters in this volume represent pioneering research into new areas, namely Mickias Musiyiwa’s essay on Zimbabwean popular songs and James Wachira’s essay on Samburu animal praise poetry. To date, the only work done on environment and animals in African oratures has been broad, vague and generalised surveys that either suggest, positively, that indigenous African cultures are generally nature-centric, or that support the general view from outside Africa that African animisms have a combative attitude to nature.

Of the essays on literature in the volume, analyses of novels predominate, as opposed to poetry and non-fiction narrative; the genres of short stories and drama are not represented at all. Another highly original study is that of Dutch scholar Reinier J. M. Vriend, who analyses the use of website photographic images of African landscape and animals in the context of the phenomenon of ‘voluntourism’, which, itself, is a growing area of study.

The essays in this volume reveal interesting overlaps and dissonances when various expressive media are brought into conversation – for example, oral traditions, and print and digital cultures. But, as is generally the case, too sharp a focus on the various media and genres within media results in a blurring of the lines, suggesting a network of Wittgensteinian ‘family relationships’, rather than crisp definitions. For example, the oral-culture songs studied by Musiyiwa often rely on technology – in this case, the radio – for dissemination, so they could just as easily have been considered as an example of a techno-culture, especially as radio programmes frequently also exist as internet podcasts. Similarly, the Sunjata oral epic, studied by Jonathan Bishop Highfield, morphs quite unproblematically into film, so this research also straddles boundaries. The animal narrators in the two novels considered by Woodward are beings influenced by oral cultures. Therefore, this analysis could be considered from the points of view of both orature and literature. Within the boundaries of the various media, individual forms studied here, for example Dicey’s Borderline, the travel narrative
analysed by Mathilda Slabbert, cross generic borders, displaying features of both fiction and non-fiction.

**Chapter outline**

Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, in *Sources of the Self* (1989), suggests that in non-modern understandings of the world the boundary between the human subject and nature is porous. In Chapter 1, “Here is some baobab leaf!”: *Sunjata*, foodways and biopiracy’, the idea of the porous border is contemplated literally by Jonathan Bishop Highfield. The author considers that most intimate of communion with nature, which occurs when we ingest it. Highfield’s study brings foodways studies into dialogue with ecocriticism in the context of the best-known African oral epic, *Sunjata*. This chapter foregrounds the baobab, that highly iconic African tree, whose profound symbolic and material value has gone entirely unnoticed in earlier studies of the West African epic. Highfield ‘reads’ the oral epic both for traces of the knowledge of the more than 2 000 indigenous food sources that were replaced by imported crops and for a 21st century repossession of local foodways.

Highfield highlights the way that, throughout the epic, the baobab operates at real and symbolic registers. This tree may store up to 10 000 litres of fresh water, its fruit is edible and its highly nutritious leaves may be dried and stored for months. The tree itself in the epic is also a symbol of power and the index of identity and home that summons the epic hero back from exile. Baobab leaves capture the talismanic power that allows the crippled prince, Sunjata, to rise from his ignominy, and the fruit is linked to Mande leadership. But, far from relegating the epic and the lifeways it symbolically captures to an archaic past, Highfield traces the ways in which the philosophical, cultural and social apprehensions of the epic have transitioned into the contemporary genre of film, among other media.

The focus in Chapter 2 is also on orature, but this time the study concerns contemporary popular Zimbabwean songs that bear a complicated relationship with the Shona mythologies on which they draw. Mickias Musiyiwa signals this complexity through the ambivalence
of the title of his essay, ‘Shona as a land-based nature-culture: A study of the (re)construction of Shona land mythology in popular songs’.

For Musiyiwa, contemporary popular Zimbabwean songs both capture and transform Shona land mythology in what could be considered a kind of reinvention of tradition, to use the concept given currency by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger. Musiyiwa highlights the contradiction that although the land expropriations of the Mugabe government had massive international coverage, very little is widely known about the ways in which Shona culture shapes both land apprehension and imagination. An understanding of this might help to explain why land invasions took place despite significant local criticism of the policy. Contemporary songs incorporate other genres of expression, like folk tales and legends, and centrally articulate the idea of Shona absolute dependence upon land. Through its association with the ancestors, land becomes embodied and inspired, and Shona agricultural interactions with the land become ritualised. Musiyiwa refers to this as a form of ‘ritually directed ecology’ or ‘religiously controlled ecological management’. Musiyiwa stresses, as M. A. Mohamed Salih has highlighted in Environmental Politics and Liberation in Contemporary Africa (1999), nearly two decades ago, that in a postcolonial context, environment is always a political concern. In Zimbabwe, the land mythology allowed disparate nationalist, guerrilla and peasant groups ‘to harmonise their grievances and loyally articulate them’.

In Chapter 3, ‘The environment as significant other: The green nature of Shona indigenous religion’, Jacob Mapara also underscores the idea of a religious encompassing of questions of environment in a Zimbabwean context. This essay traces a history of the concept of ‘green religion’ in the North Atlantic, understanding the term to suggest human respect for nature expressed through the tenets of religious faith. This understanding is different, however, from the trend that has seen nature replacing God as an ontic source. The latter idea is variously challenged in an Anglo-American context by situating nature within a network, bush or mesh in the work of Donna Haraway (1991), among others, or linking nature to the idea of the inherent open orientation of art, as Mick Smith does in Against Ecological Sovereignty (2011).
For Mapara, the concept of reverence for nature may be new, but the approaches described in Shona cultural apprehensions are old. For this author, the bonds with nature are more deeply constitutive among African indigenous religions than they are in the monotheistic traditions. Shona religious understanding is captured in the cultural forms of proverbs, folk tales and songs. Through an analysis of some of these, Mapara traces the outline of a land ethic that has existed ‘invisibly’ since time immemorial, but which, given transformations in conceptualisation of land as a result of the colonial and capitalist integration of Rhodesia, and later Zimbabwe, into the global economy, now needs to be articulated. Mapara’s comprehension of the links between human, animal and natural existence runs so deep that the Shona orientation towards encouraging life is extended from nature, unusually in an ecocritical context, to human life. Shona worldviews that shape human relations, such as the encouragement of marriage and the censure of abortion, are read as a fundamental part of a life ethic that encompasses all of nature. So, unusually in an environmental context, humans do not emerge as destructive of and parasitic upon nature, but instead are seen as an essential part of an ethic that values all life. Mapara reconceptualises a global ecocritical framework from an African perspective, fundamentally transforming the ‘eco’ of the others.

James Maina Wachira’s research into the animal praise songs of the Samburu of Wamba County, Kenya, in Chapter 4, ‘Animal oral praise poetry and the Samburu desire to survive’, is another fascinating study of African oral forms – this time of a contemporary, coeval community whose customary, sustainable, environmentally respectful lifeways coexist with the wilderness sanctuaries of the modern Kenyan national state. Wachira’s study is new and necessary. To date, apart from general overviews of African indigenous cultures alluded to above, there has been no scholarship that specifically considers this relationship with the natural world and animals in African oratures.

Wachira has collected and transcribed the animal praise poetry of the Samburu. Whereas praise poetry conventionally pays tribute to exceptional human beings, Samburu animal praise poetry combines respect for and awe of significant animal actors in the environment
that allow the Samburu to survive. Wachira’s findings are full of surprises. The animals that inhabit the land of Wamba County are not the companion species we have become familiar with in North Atlantic human-animal studies, but are instead seen as the allies of human beings in protecting and conserving a rugged environment, which both humans and animals regard as home. Wachira’s research also underlines the idea that the relationship between humans and the natural world is not one where the line collapses entirely into the naturecultures of contemporary posthumanism. His research suggests the idea mentioned above of a porous border between nature (including animals) and human culture.

The findings of Wachira’s study remind us that Africans are not in nature, as ecotourist tableaux frequently present them to be. Without exception, the mythologies of African cultures suggest a ‘golden age’ where the intimate proximity of the natural world and animals and gods made human life easy. As a result of human misdemeanour, this closeness to other forms of existence is lost, setting up a boundary between humans and animals, and humans and gods, which at key charged moments may be breached. The Samburu also recollect through ancestral memory a time when humans and animals lived together, until animals abandoned human society in despair of and disappointment at human conduct. This connection is revived by singing the animal praises.

Chapter 5, by Reinier J. M. Vriend, ‘The paradoxes of voluntourism: Strategic visual tropes of the natural on South African voluntourism websites’ analyses the use of photographic images of nature and animals that appear on South African voluntourism websites. Paradox is the dominant mode uncovered by Vriend in voluntourism web-based advertising. Voluntourism is a subset of tourism, in which doing good is commodified. Voluntourists, predominantly from the global North, attempt to alleviate the poverty of the global South, channelled through the structures established by an international tourism industry, which, since the 1970s, has increasingly relied on a globalised understanding of nature outside of cultural specificities. Thus, although voluntourism activities are largely urban, natural rural landscapes and wildlife are used to promote the industry. Marketing voluntourism means poverty,
social inequalities and social ills are unique selling points, which must be both visible and invisible. For voluntourism to grow and be more profitable, the poverty on which it feeds must grow. Foregrounding urban poverty, however, contradicts the South African tourism ‘brand’. Agencies therefore use images of a globalised nature to render invisible the irreconcilable contradictions upon which this industry is based. In this context, therefore, the images of the natural world are the anodyne of an age of historically unprecedented national and global inequalities, which become ethically justifiable.

Chengyi Coral Wu’s essay, ‘Towards an ecocriticism in Africa: Literary aesthetics in African environmental literature’ (Chapter 6), establishes the framework for the subsequent essays on literature, which include analyses of novels, travel narrative and page poetry. Wu’s chapter underscores the idea implicitly emphasised in earlier essays in this book that African ecocriticism cannot be established upon conceptions of nature that present themselves as universal. African ecocríticisms furthermore reveal that relationships with land are always social and political. Wu’s survey of the literature suggests that the African novels that wrote themselves onto the international literary scene in the 1950s and 1960s disclose an environmental sensibility and presciently foreshadow future environmental degradation. Wu makes the case that not only does African environmental literature pre-date formalised Anglo-American ecocriticism, but also that African eco-aesthetics forces a recognition of alternative tropes and themes to the dominant Anglo-American literary constructions of nature.

In Chapter 7, ‘Critical intersections: Ecocriticism, globalised cities and African narrative, with a focus on K. Sello Duiker’s Thirteen Cents’, Anthony Vital deconstructs in the era of global warming the division between the country and the city, which ecocriticism, especially in its romantic and pastoral modes, implicitly assumes. For Vital, ecocriticism is most significantly a discursive practice that recognises that the African city is in nature, and linked to both the country and to other cities through complex networks of exchange. This recognition should not, in the universality of its approach, lose the cultural specificities of particular African cities in relation to other African and international cities.
In *Thirteen Cents*, K. Sello Duiker’s novel set in Cape Town, the African city at the tip of the continent, Vital does not find any solutions to the nature-culture problems set in motion by global modernity. He does find, though, a range of productive tensions that highlight the potential of the novel to teach through the ways in which it textualises society and nature. Vital argues that, given the distortions of neoliberal individualism, the protagonist of *Thirteen Cents* develops a distinctive ‘misreading’ of the city-in-nature. The child protagonist therefore retreats from his subjection to exploitation and abuse as a consequence of a network of relationships of power to Table Mountain, where he can experience an ancestral nature in the form of non-modern culture. The apocalyptic strain in the novel is transcendent in closure where the boy in his solitude imagines nature as his only ally, destroying the corrupt city with a giant wave from the ocean. The boy’s figuring of his experience, Vital argues, can be read productively alongside natural and social-scientific work on Cape Town in its environment.

With Mathilda Slabbert’s essay, ‘Navigating Gariep country: Writing nature-culture in *Borderline* by William Dicey’ (Chapter 8), we shift genre from fiction to narrative non-fiction. William Dicey’s Orange River investigative travel narrative, *Borderline*, dramatises its title in a number of ways. The Orange River is a fluid border that separates national territories, but is also a water body that, symbolically, through its flow, connects Africa with the Atlantic Ocean and with water masses further afield. The narrative also represents a borderline genre, straddling travelogue, novel, autobiography and investigative journalism, melding socio-environmental and aesthetic concerns with advocacy. Unlike in many of the earlier essays, Slabbert interprets the idea of nature-culture not through myth, but through history. She suggests that *Borderline* connects ‘socio-environmental concerns with transnational and imperial histories to stimulate an awareness of Africa’s extensively interwoven history of nature and culture’.

In ‘Negotiating identity in a vanishing geography: Home, environment and displacement in Helon Habila’s *Oil on Water*’, which forms Chapter 9, Ogaga Okuyade alerts readers to a hidden cost of oil exploitation in the Niger Delta, which emerges through a consideration of details of the plot and vivid imagery of Habila’s third novel. The
narrative of *Oil on Water* dramatises the unique displacement of the riverine communities of the Niger Delta. Their displacement as a consequence of oil extraction is from homes that are literally disappearing since they are being submerged. The well-developed literature of exile, in the context of exodus from places that also constitute the culture and identity of people, acquires here an additional resonance, given that, in the Niger Delta, the places called home actually vanish with the flight of the people.

Wendy Woodward, in Chapter 10, considers two francophone African novels in ‘Human masks? Animal narrators in Patrice Nganang’s *Dog Days: An Animal Chronicle* and Alain Mabanckou’s *Memoirs of a Porcupine*’. Woodward picks up here on an African dimension of a recent international trend towards the use of animal narrators in novels. For Woodward, the animal protagonists in these novels are wholly urban, political and linguistic beings who, nevertheless, allow the ‘real animal to take precedence’. Through the dynamics of animal narration, the boundaries between the human and the non-human, the modern and the traditional, and fantasy and reality are collapsed. In this respect, these novels are in advance of African literary theory where animal lives remain occluded. Whereas Anthony Vital argues that an African ecocriticism should highlight the distinctiveness of the insertion of African cultural worlds into global culture, the trend Woodward identifies in these novels is towards a non-essentialised Africa that is fully absorbed into global culture. These novels do not validate themselves through local custom, but instead ‘subvert the high seriousness of African mythology’. Entering into an exchange across genres, these novels present a contrasting view to the perspective offered in the oratures studied in earlier chapters, where animal subjectivity and agency were acknowledged and deemed essential to human survival through the mythologies that these novels are presented as satirically criticising.

In Chapter 11, Sule Emmanuel Egya presents an overview of ecritical trends in the verse of Christopher Okigbo, Wole Soyinka, Niyi Osundare, Tanure Ojaide and Onookome Okome in his essay ‘Nature, animism and humanity in anglophone Nigerian poetry’. Egya’s analysis of the work of these poets suggests an African inflection of the idea of
bioregionalism or place through the concept of animism. The animist view of the inspired natural world and animals creates a spiritual link between the poets and the land, captured in the pervasive tone of yearning in the poetry to be bound to nature through place. The personal longing for organic connection is simultaneously political, in that these poets, ‘mindful of the fact that the flora and fauna have a life of their own, … deploy them to make political statements about the condition of their nation’. Egya also animistically refracts Edward Said’s concept of ‘filiation’, or forms of association based on patriarchy and biological descent, to suggest an alternative animist filiation, in which the poets desire, through their art, to be the disciples of the gods of nature and the gods in nature.

Syned Mthatiwa’s essay, ‘Animals, nostalgia and Zimbabwe’s rural landscape in the poetry of Chenjerai Hove and Musaemura Zimunya’ (Chapter 12), is a complex interpretation of the work of two Zimbabwean writers, which simultaneously engages ideas in a number of other chapters in this book. Mthatiwa draws on Dan Wylie’s conception of a ‘culturescape’ to express the relationship of these writers to landscape and animals, which is constituted through a Shona mythological comprehension of the world.

Mthatiwa’s analysis is subtle in its observation that the work of these poets may not necessarily embody the ethos of the Shona peasantry, but that the poetry is one lens through which this world may be glimpsed. The environmental ethic of both these poets is inflected through a personal development that has followed a trajectory from the countryside to the city, and a conflicted induction into colonial modernity and education. Personal development, ironically, has entailed a loss of the childhood pastoral mode, while colonial and postcolonial modernity has involved a ‘spoil[ing]’ by exploiting the relationships among human beings, animals and the land. Mthatiwa impresses upon the reader the fact that although the poetry is realistic in its description of the conflicts and hardships of rural existence, the pastoral remains the dominant mode through which nature is constituted in this cultural form. Again, this chapter underscores the way in which an African eco-criticism is necessarily social, historical and political.
What makes this volume especially revealing – and challenging – is the variety of views on the relationship between human beings, animals and the natural world, all of which emerge out of continental Africa and all of which demand engagement. The volume is also distinctive because of the ways in which the authors have taken up one another’s ideas in conversations that run through the chapters. No attempt has been made to force a consensus, nor have significant approaches been excluded to present a particular, politically interested ecocritical perspective of continental Africa. Authors, genres and cultures have been brought into an exchange on environmental futures, which have not occluded environmental pasts and which are unanimous in the call for respect for the environmental present … to ensure a shared future.

References


Natures of Africa

