

Africa's natural heritage and ecological vision in the work of Bart Wolffe

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I use postcolonial ecocriticism to show that, although Bart Wolffe laments environmental injustice in his writing, he embraces a contradictory ecological vision and fails to expose and tackle the entangled nature of oppression. Wolffe says almost nothing about injustices amongst humans in the postcolonial context within which his work was written. He fails to acknowledge that injustices amongst humans lead to injustice against nature. He also depicts an imperialist outlook that either sees Africa as a blank space ready for occupation or sees Africans as a blemish on a pristine and unspoiled landscape untouched by westernisation and industrialisation.

Keywords: postcolonial ecocriticism, interconnectedness, ecological vision, imperialist vision, exploitation

Introduction

This paper critically examines the representation of, and attitudes to, nature and wildlife in selected works of Bart Wolffe. Wolffe, a poet, playwright, novelist, short story writer and journalist, was born in Salisbury (now Harare), Zimbabwe in 1952. He left his home country to go into exile in England in 2003 as a result of President Robert Mugabe's increasingly authoritarian leadership and the curtailment of freedom of expression in Zimbabwe. The paper argues that, in his representation of wildlife and nature, Wolffe reveals a contradictory ecological vision and fails to expose and tackle the entangled nature of oppression.

A reading of Wolffe's work, especially his poetry, shows that he acknowledges the interconnectedness of all things and also celebrates difference and diversity. He laments our alienation from nature which we relegate to the periphery as we are lured by the trappings of capital and modernity and their promises of a comfortable life. He also laments the loss of connection to and appreciation of the rich wildlife heritage in Zimbabwe by new generations of (black) Zimbabweans who destroy and abuse other creatures on their head-

long journey towards 'progress'. This criticism of black Zimbabweans in particular, and Africans in general— that they ignore conservation issues – is blind to the socio-political and economic problems that afflict Africans and lead to environmental degradation.¹ In his criticism, Wolffe echoes conservation policy in Africa which, according to Byron Caminero-Santangelo and Garth Myers, 'has often been underpinned by ideas about a pristine nature that is threatened by indigenous environmental practice and in need of protection by those from the West with proper environmental sensibility' (7). Caminero-Santangelo and Myers go on to rightly observe that ignored or erased by such a narrative 'is both (long) local histories of environmental interaction and global (structural) causes for degradation, often with devastating effects for local peoples and ineffective preservation efforts in the long term' (9).

Wolffe is a lover of nature and outdoor life. In his work he mentions his explorations of the mountains, hills and forests of Zimbabwe and his experiences with nature (especially as a child). His works, especially those written while in exile, show that his longing and nostalgia for the lost paradisiacal world of his childhood has more to do with his disconnection or displacement from the Zimbabwean world of nature than with any other form of loss.

In my analysis of Wolffe's representation of nature and wildlife I use postcolonial ecocriticism, which Dana Mount defines as 'the study of the representation of nature and the environment in dialogue with postcolonialism' (2). This approach is relevant for this paper, not only because of its rejection of the tendency by first-wave Euro-American ecocriticism to see environmental consciousness as the preserve of a Euro-American mindset and to construct the global South and its literatures as 'an exotic new arrival on the scene of environmental consciousness' (2–3), but because of its ability to see forms of oppression as intertwined. Besides, postcolonial ecocriticism unearths the ecological aspects and concerns in African literature buried beneath the postcolonial theoretical jargon that has characterised the study of the literature over the years. It also avoids the parochialism of first-wave ecocriticism which focuses on nature and environmental conservation without taking cognisance of the social, economic and political contexts of the inhabitants of the areas in question.

Further, first-wave ecocriticism promotes amnesia through its 'tendency to erase histories of indigenous peoples, of colonial conquest, and of migrations that disrupted notions of wilderness and rooted dwelling' (Caminero-Santangelo and Myres 4). In postcolonial ecocriticism post colonialism and ecocriticism are not perceived as 'antagonistic, but [as] dialogic' (Mount 5), where questions of ecology and the environment are tackled in relation to, or together with, questions of poverty, underdevelopment, and exploitation (both human and environmental), among others (Iheka 2011; Huggan and Tiffin 2010). In other words, postcolonial ecocriticism is committed both ecologically and politically/socially as it also engages with the politics of decolonisation, especially within an African context. Postcolonial ecocriticism attempts to make ecocriticism, in the words of Caminero-Santangelo and Myres, 'more responsive to historical relationships of power,

to colonial history and its effects, and to cultural difference [thereby] emphasis[ing] both the inextricable intertwining of cultural, political, and natural history and “the role of mediation in representing the environment” (5). In my analysis of Wolffe’s work I pay attention both to the environmental consciousness and imperial vision in the works.

Wolffe sees nature as our heritage which has been given to us (possibly by God) to please and entertain us; heritage we must accept, respect and care for. By heritage Wolffe refers to all environmental aspects or elements of diversity and geodiversity inherited from past generations. The elements of biodiversity that are of concern for Wolffe are Zimbabwe’s/Africa’s flora and fauna, especially the latter. In the introduction to *Changing Skins*, one of his poetic works, Wolffe observes that ‘[w]e wear our environment like a mask. As fashion replaces nature, our faces achieve the rigidity of plastic moulded in the mills’ (CS1). The simile here compares the way we value nature to the way we value a mask as something for a special occasion and for its instrumental value. We recognise the importance of nature that clothes us – in all its variety and splendour – for its instrumental value and not in itself. Thus, for Wolffe, the view of modern man as man out and beyond nature – as a man of culture – is mistaken and lamentable. Given these sentiments, it is no surprise that in some of his nature poems, in general, and animal poems, in particular, Wolffe attempts to reconnect with nature, to embrace and accept our heritage.

Ecological vision in Wolffe’s work

Read from a first-wave ecocritical perspective the works, especially the poetry, show Wolffe as an ecologically conscious writer whose ecological vision seems contradictory. However, if we add a postcolonial dimension to the ecocritical reading, Wolffe emerges as a writer with not only a contradictory ecological vision, but also one whose incongruous vision is tinged with an imperial outlook of Africa. This is especially because he seems to privilege nature over the plight of Africans, who he mostly erases from the landscape, and to advocate the preservation of nature for the enjoyment of privileged Africans and tourists from the West.

In *Changing Skins*, for example, Wolffe focuses on nature and animals in Zimbabwe. In this collection he exposes ‘the wonders and wilderness of Africa, it[s] creatures and its colours, its thunderstorms, its drought, its blood songs and beauty’ (‘Changing Skins’ n. pag.). It is here where we see nature come to life as creatures, big and small, diurnal and nocturnal, walk, crawl, hop and fly, while plants spring up, sway in the wind, blossom and die. It is in *Changing Skins* where we hear the wind howl and roar through the vegetation and infrastructure, the rains pour down onto parched earth, filling the air with damp smells of wet soil characteristic of rainy seasons; while in a drought, we feel the sun strike the earth and the naked rocks with a vengeance. Some of the poems from this collection show that Wolffe sees life (human and nonhuman) and all things in nature as interconnected.

But this vision is ruptured by other poems that reveal a negative and deprecating attitude to nature and animals, characterising nature as a treasure trove given to us superior humans

to 'entertain and learn and keep us fascinated' (e-mail exchange). The collection is also problematic as an ecological work as it was hijacked by the tourism industry, apparently because it 'beckons the reader [to Africa] better than any travel brochure could' (Grundy qtd. by Wolffe, 'Changing Skins' n. pag.). What this really means is that the text manages to transform nature 'into saleable spectacle, and [...] immanent ecological experience into manipulated extraneous desire' (Sullivan 341). The tourism industry exploits what it sees as the collection's representation of Africa/Zimbabwe as 'remote, untouched, unspoilt and even primitive [...] markers of [Africa's] ecotourist desirability [as an] ecotourist destination' (Brockington, Duffy and Igoe 135). Besides, although Wolffe laments environmental injustice, he says almost nothing about injustices amongst humans in the postcolonial context within which his works were written. In ignoring the Africans who inhabit the landscape, and their problems, Wolffe seems oblivious of the interconnectedness of oppression, where injustices amongst humans lead to injustice against nature, and exposes an imperialist outlook that either sees Africa as a blank space ready for occupation and exploration or Africans as a blemish on the pristine and unspoiled landscape untouched by westernisation and industrialisation (135).

The poem 'Neighbouring universes' (CS 51) is a contemplative poem about our relationship with other animals, triggered by watching birds fly in the distance. As the title suggests the poet-protagonist sees the birds as belonging to a different but neighbouring universe/cosmos to that of humans. The neighbourliness here signals kinship. On seeing the birds flying in the distance the poet-protagonist observes:

They have their own cosmos,
 Those birds that wheel over there,
 Above the grey tower in the sun
 Which proves the difference, that I in poem
 Am not your tribe also (51).

The poem begins by affirming separation and difference but, as we shall see later, the poet-protagonist acknowledges the kinship between living things. For him the world of the birds, which he later identifies as crows, is not his world. This highlights the separateness of creatures; creatures which, although interrelated, are not necessarily the same. The line 'Their world is not mine' alludes to the persona's perception of the world of the birds as one of freedom which contrasts with his own (the human world) which he associates with confinement or bondage. His sense of entrapment in the cruel and oppressive human world provokes his admiration of what he perceives as the free world of the birds. But just as the speaker in the poem is separate from the birds, as a poet Wolffe also evokes difference between his subject position and the reader when he says: 'I in a poem/Am not your tribe also. This evokes the idea of writing as possession where the writer, possessed by his muse, is closer to the object of his imagination than he is to the human race. The word 'tribe' in the poem refers to humanity rather than a racial group. In writing a poem the poet seems to assume the figure of a shaman who psychologically/mentally leaves the

world of humans to enter into a spiritual and creative realm of the imagination. Further, Wolffe also seems to say that in writing he assumes the role of God as a creator, the very 'God-like aspect' of art and artists that in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's view brings them into conflict with the state in Africa (*Penpoints* 1998).

The crows' separateness from the poet-protagonist is further underscored when he imagines their flight as 'writing their black words across a blue page' while he writes his 'blue words on a cloud of white' that is, on a white paper. The 'black words' of the birds refer to the birds' colour, while the blue refers to the colour of the cloudless sky. The poet here imagines the birds' flight as writing their words across the sky; that is, inscribing their identity onto the cloudless blue sky. Furthermore, the fact that he writes about the birds underscores his separateness from them as he tells us:

If I were one of them,
Then I would not write such absences
Joined by observances in these eyelines here.

The word 'absences' seems to refer to the act of representation which does not present the thing represented physically, but merely makes reference to it as a mental image. Thus Wolffe is aware that his writing does not capture physical presence but mere images or absence, as the crows are not physically present in the poem.

However, despite his acknowledgement of his separateness from the crows, the poet suspects kinship with them, a kinship which he sees as filial: 'Perhaps we are brothers. // More like cousins.' The claim of kinship here shows that Wolffe could have been influenced by the science of evolutionary biology and ecology which sees life as constituting an intricate web 'whose interwoven strands lead from microbes to [humans]' (Carson 69).

Wolffe's views of the interconnectedness of life and all things in nature can also be read from the images on the covers of *Changing Skins*. The covers of *Changing Skins* were designed by Gregory Budd, but the artistic concept originated from the poet (Wolffe, E-mail exchange). Budd understood Wolffe's ideas of interconnectedness and interdependence in life and the need to acknowledge, respect, and tolerate differences in society and nature. He picked up on these ideas and came up with a complex image on the covers of the collection that speaks to these ideas, particularly the idea of interconnectedness. For example, on the front cover of *Changing Skins* the reader is confronted by the face of a fearsome, complex creature whose lower jaw conjoins with (fades into or springs from) a trunk of a sturdy tree. The creature appears to be a member of the feline family. The fact that the creature's face fades into or springs from a tree trunk is suggestive of the continuity or interconnectedness of life. The tree is also suggestive of the evolutionary tree of life (Roughgarden 2006) which shows that Wolffe may have been influenced somehow by evolutionary biology and palaeontology.

However, although Wolffe sees life as interconnected and interdependent, a fact that for him 'proves the beautiful complexity life has offered us to entertain and learn and keep us fascinated,' he is also of the view that 'variety and difference is the stuff of life we

should be celebrating' because monoculturalism or xenophobic tendencies only lead to 'wholesale destruction of forests, lands, peoples, individuals, so on' (E-mail exchange). For Wolffe, therefore, interconnectedness does not preclude separateness and difference amongst living things. In acknowledging difference/separateness Wolffe reveals what Yi-Fu Tuan describes as space-consciousness, that is 'the recognition that the more-than-human world is 'ultimately unknowable' [or] a recognition of human limitations [that] leads to "an imperative toward humility in relationships with both human and nonhuman nature"' (Louw 104).

Wolffe's awareness of the differences or separateness of creatures from one another, in spite of the interconnectedness and interdependence of things, is also clear in "Cool places" (*SC* 34). The poem is about the excitement of frogs and their continued singing at night after the rains when the earth is cool. For the poet this singing could be hiding something dark and sinister as the second stanza suggests:

His throat
Is far away
And a dark pool
Is in him.

Notions of 'far away' and 'a dark pool' seem to be projections of the poet-protagonist's own feelings, his sadness and sense of isolation from, and unbelonging to, Zimbabwean society.² The frog's 'throat' being 'far away' alludes to the poet-protagonist's own thoughts wandering away from his immediate social context to contemplate things that his society cannot offer him. The expression 'dark pool' on the other hand could refer to the frogs' 'sadness in spite of their singing,' sadness that the poet-protagonist shares as a result of his identity dilemmas and sense of alienation. The phrase also suggests something evil and sinister that we may not be privy to as the third and final stanza indicates:

Will we ever know
The midnight halls
Of these choristers
And their cool calls
Caught in the moonpond
After the rainsong?

Here Wolffe hints at the difference or separateness of other creatures. Although we are familiar with frogs and their behaviour, we belong to different worlds and may never know what the frogs sing about in the night. Here Wolffe shows humility by acknowledging the limitations of the human capacity to 'know' the world around us.

Further, as an ecologically-conscious poet Wolffe also laments the abuse and exploitation of nature by humans in his poetry. An example of a poem where Wolffe critiques

human abuse of other animals is ‘Pinning tags’ (CS 47). In this poem the poet reflects on the life cycle of a butterfly whose caterpillar changes into a cocoon to emerge later as an adult butterfly. The caterpillar itself devours plants, but the adult butterfly turns into a plaything for humans who pin it with tags and give it a label of their choosing, possibly in scientific studies:

Such is the mercy of Allah
 Who lets us formulate our butterfly
 Upon a pin
 With the label of our choosing.

The reference to the Muslim name Allah for God, like the mention of Buddha and Christ in the poem, shows how Wolffe was influenced by different religions in his thinking. One of the attributes of the Muslim God is mercifulness, which Wolffe evokes in the lines above.

However, Wolffe’s ecological vision is not as simple and straightforward as the above discussion may indicate. The truth is that it is riddled with inconsistency and incongruity. While the poems discussed above show Wolffe’s ecological vision as one that sees nature as interconnected and interdependent, a vision that protests against abuse and exploitation of nature, what he says elsewhere contradicts and ruptures this vision. For example, Wolffe’s language in some of his poems such as ‘Tortoise’ (CS 58) and ‘Crow’ (CS 50) betrays a negative attitude towards some animals, in particular. In ‘Tortoise’ where he shows his appreciation of life as a miracle, he describes the creature in a manner that makes us imagine it as ugly and unlikeable when he says:

Each one a little atlas
 His cross upon his back
 Short-sighted tortoise
 With his parrot’s beak.
 Nature’s total miracle
 And freak.

The atlas image refers to the chequered appearance of the tortoise shell that makes it appear as a series of maps, while the notion of carrying a cross refers to the tortoise shell as a problem, a heavy weight the creature is doomed to carry throughout his life. The idea of carrying a cross upon one’s back creates the image of the creature as a sinner. In Christian parlance, carrying one’s cross refers to carrying one’s sins and problems. The attribution of a ‘parrot’s beak’ to the tortoises ineffectually compares the shape of the tortoise’s beak to that of a parrot; ineffectual because it is not, in my view, an apt comparison. The tortoise’s mouth does not really resemble a parrot’s beak. Reference to the tortoise as short-sighted and a freak also depicts the creature negatively. In fact the conflation of the words “miracle” and “freak” in the poem shows ambiguity in the

manner in which the poet-protagonist perceives the tortoise which for him represents remarkableness and abnormality. However, it is important to note that, in this poem too, Wolffe seems to show influences of evolutionary biology as he makes reference to the early appearance of reptiles on earth when he depicts them as 'Mobile stones/Who over aeons/Have gathered no moss'.

In 'Crow' (CS 50) Wolffe uses apostrophe to express his admiration for the bird. He depicts the bird as happy and carefree as a drunken sailor at sea. The poet-protagonist's attention is drawn to the bird by its harsh cry which he refers to as 'bawdy eloquence' like that of 'A windswept sailor discovering/A song of rum and sea'. For the poet, the bird seems to 'Celebrate life from a cool coal eye'. The coal here refers to the black colour of the crow's eyes. This perceived freedom of the bird induces the persona to admit: 'God, I envy your day of life'. Here the words of Leonard Lutwack come to mind when he observes that '[b]irds are the envy of humankind because they appear to exist happily and effortlessly in a state of mixed animal and spiritual being that humans long to attain; they are perfectly adapted to the harsh conditions of life in nature and yet seem to enjoy a kind of freedom from necessity' (xi). The poet's imagined carefree and happy life of the crows triggers his admiration of their life.

The language the poet chooses to use to describe the bird, however, falsifies this admiration. The bird is credited with 'bawdy eloquence', is said to 'Squawk down on a discarded crust', is called a 'Revelling tramp of the black tuxedo/And a stained bib', all in reference to its scavenging lifestyle. It gushes 'rust from a raucous throat' and when it flies off the balcony it is said to 'hiccup off the edge/To tumble onto the air/High as a kite'. Later it is said to discover its 'own importance/and the swank of [its] bulk' and is finally referred to as a 'strutting overload' and a 'vain-glorious demonhood'. While one may say some of these expressions simply extend the drunken sailor metaphor in the poem, references to the bird as a tramp, 'strutting overload' and a 'vain-glorious demonhood' have nothing to do with that metaphor. These and other descriptions of the bird reveal Wolffe's acquired negative attitudes towards the socially constructed image of the crow, a bird he supposedly admires. This poem demonstrates the difficulty of keeping our attitudes in check when writing about socially condemned animals, as in his negative portrayal of the crow, Wolffe alludes to the alleged failure of the bird to report back to Noah after he had sent it to find out if the flood waters had finally dried out from the land.

Besides the contradictoriness of his ecological views, as I mentioned earlier, Wolffe also exposes an imperial vision of Africa in his writing. The poem that perhaps best reveals Wolffe's colonial framing of Africa – or his packaging of an African community 'as part of the landscape, as wild, primitive and pre-modern' (Brockington, Duffy and Igoe 141) is the one titled 'The village' (CS 76). In this poem, Wolffe depicts an African village as an object of aesthetic value/appreciation on the African landscape when he opens the poem with the words 'Like a beehive nestled in the limb of the hill/Squats the grass hut timeless as the dust' and concludes with 'Yes, the village breathes its sculpture/That shapes the face of Africa.' The timelessness of the village refers to its primitive and pre-modern nature that the author compares to dust. In the poem Wolffe romanticises the poverty and

squalor (symbolized by ‘dust’) endured by black people who lost their land following the land dispossession drive by the settler colonialists in Zimbabwe. This saw the black people packed into native reserves that became settings of massive environmental degradation due to overgrazing and overstocking. Regarding land dispossession in colonial Zimbabwe, Alexander Kanengoni observes that:

[b]etween the Rudd Concession of 1888 and the Lancaster House Agreement of 1979 lay a plethora of legal and statutory instruments that had one overriding intention, to consolidate the white man’s grip on the land. The black person was systematically marginalised, pushed further and further from the fertile lands in the centre of the country to the arid and barren soils along the borders. These acts included the Land Apportionment Act of 1931, the Native Land Husbandry Act of 1951 and the Land Tenure act of 1969 (48).

The acts ensured that the whites had the best lands while the blacks occupied the rocky and infertile areas Wolffe, unwittingly perhaps, refers to as ‘limb of the hill’ in the poem.

On reading the poem, the impression one gets is not of pain and dystopia but of an idyllic place characterised by vivacity and happiness. This is very clear when Wolffe tells us:

And Chipo, the youngest, is sweeping the floor
 With a brush of bushes, singing
 As day gilds the brown faces of huts and people.

The village has grown as berries on a hill
 And children are the ambient bees
 That fatten on white flowers;
 Sweet mouthfuls of sadza
 Touched with the nectar of mother’s relish.

The evocation of joy through the reference to singing here hides the poor and squalid conditions the people find themselves in, conditions that compel Chipo to sweep the floor with ‘a brush of bushes.’ Further, the evocation of sweetness in the extract obscures the insipid, unpalatable and meagre meals the people otherwise have to make do with in the squalid and inhospitable places to which they are condemned by racist colonial policies.

In this poem, Wolffe loses an opportunity to produce work that Rob Nixon would refer to as postcolonial pastoral. That is, ‘writing that refracts an idealised nature through memories of environmental and cultural degradation in the colonies’ (‘Environmentalism’ 239). In focusing on the beautiful and idyllic picture of the village, Wolffe fails to remember the pain of the black people who were uprooted from their ancestral lands that formed the core of their being and existence to craggy, sandy and infertile areas that held no ontological meaning to them. Among the Shona people of Zimbabwe and its neighbouring countries, land constitutes the core of their being, their identity and self-definition, as it informs

and defines their ecological relationships as well as their political and religious beliefs (see Taringa 2006 and Musiyiwa 2013). As such, their loss of ancestral land following the colonial encounter brought about identity dilemmas and a sense of alienation which instigated the guerilla war to get back the land from foreigners.

Furthermore, in some of his writings Wolffe characterises nature as a treasure trove given to us humans to 'entertain and learn and keep us fascinated' (E-mail exchange). In these works he also reveals an imperial ecological attitude where Africa is seen as a timeless, unchanging and an uninhabited wilderness where the privileged western tourist is called upon to engage in conspicuous consumptions of nature.

This is clear in *The African in me* (henceforth *The African*), a collection of autobiographical essays which is targeted at a western audience, especially would-be tourists to Africa who the author persuasively encourages to '[g]o and make contact with the very touchstones of Nature, the way it was and will remain, unchanging, while we care for the glory of Creation' (7). In *The African* Wolffe also constructs his audience by adopting a conversational narrative style where he directly addresses his readers to whom he gives advice ('There are things that you should firstly consider' [13]), suggestions ('Take a walk around a traditional African arts and crafts market' [25]), and warnings ('Beware the biggest lizards of them all' [21]). In this work Wolffe assures would-be African tourists that they will not regret their trip to, and experience in, Africa and encourages them to collect what they possibly can as memorabilia: feathers, leaves, studies of butterfly wings or beetles, 'snake skins found on your trekking,' among others (16). Portraying Africa as a treasure trove awaiting the exploitation of the acquisitive visitor he advises the would-be tourists: 'Africa is a treasure chest that awaits your visit and, from a photograph of the smallest creatures to the tallest peak of Kilimanjaro, from a stone to a view of the open plains, the choice is yours as to how your memories are made' (16). Here Wolffe, inadvertently perhaps, shadows a history of plunder that has seen the theft of African resources to the rich capitals of the western world, from the pre-colonial period through the years of colonialism, to the present. The view of Africa as 'a treasure chest' evokes the colonial (and neo-colonial) vision of Africa, exemplified by the ruthless greed in King Leopold's Congo (Hochschild 2006), which reduces Africa to a source of raw materials for the capitals of Europe.

Appealing to tourists as Wolffe does may not be in the interest of environmentalism or ecology. Jacklyn Cock characterises ecotourism as consumerist environmentalism which 'transforms nature into entertainment [and] is marked by the passive consumption of consumer goods and services relating to nature' (64). She goes on to say that '[m]uch of this "consumerist environmentalism" turns nature into a commodity to be bought and sold. Nature becomes a site of intense consumerism' (65). Like Cock, Steven Best is of the view that:

[d]espite its immense advantages, ecotourism is problematic on moral and political levels because it does not break with commodification logic and the instrumentalist mindset that sees [animals/nature] in terms of extrinsic rather than intrinsic value, and alone it is an inadequate reform measure that fails to engage the root causes of interlocking systems of domination, exploitation, and oppression

(“The Killing Fields” n. pag.).

The extent to which ecotourism in Africa benefits the poor and powerless in society is subject to debate, given that much of it, like heritage sites (Ndoro 2001, Fontein 2006), ‘is aimed at the wealthy, and encounters with nature are packaged as an exotic experience.’ Consequently, some of the most beautiful parts of Africa where the tourist industry has assumed control are now inaccessible to the vast majority of Africans because of the prohibitive prices of visiting and staying at such places (Cock 62, see also Sullivan 336).

In representing Africa/Zimbabwe’s wildlife as timeless, ubiquitous, and unchanging, Wolffe not only reveals a colonialist vision, but also a mythical view of Africa that runs counter to the reality on the ground as ecological destruction triggered by a number of factors, social and economic, threatens the extinction of a number of species. This mythical view of Africa ignores the human inhabitants of the exoticised African landscape and their struggles to survive. In this view of Africa, living Africans are an inconvenience from which a tourist fulfilling his/her fantasy of a genuine African adventure should be shielded (Nixon, *Slow Violence* 178).

The idea of continued ubiquity of wildlife in Africa in general, and in Zimbabwe in particular, comes out forcefully in Wolffe’s memoir *Flotsam* where Zimbabwe is depicted as an Eden teeming with wildlife. In the memoir Wolffe wistfully writes:

Over the waters of the lakes and rivers of Africa, the sun sets in a red and gold glory through the haze and dust and all is a soft focus of sound and distance, the mingling of the voices of the night, a lion’s cough-cough out of sight, the piercing cry of a hyena, the small night creature voices echoing the stars above that form a carpet of silver in the night sky. A place and a time to dream. (25, italics in original).

And later he exclaims: ‘*Ah, this is Africa! The dancing of young Thompson’s gazelles, impala or Springbok, depending where you are... Life unsprung, unbound and free, full of vigour and beauty*’ (25, italics in original).

It is in *The African*, however, where Wolffe advises his audience to go to Africa/Zimbabwe and experience pristine nature and profuse wildlife that has remained and will always remain unchanging (7). Wolffe echoes ecotourist sentiments here by depicting nature in Africa/Zimbabwe as ‘*undisturbed or uncontaminated*’ and using ‘ideas of remote, untouched, unspoilt and [...] even primitive [nature in Africa] as markers of ecotourist desirability’ (Brockington, Duffy and Igoe 135, italics in original). In his depiction of Africa as teeming with wildlife, almost devoid of human inhabitants, Wolffe enthuses:

[f]rom Cape to Cairo, the abundance of bird and beast, of scenery and art, is fantastic. Perhaps more importantly, if you are a born Westerner it is as exotic as aborigine boomerangs or didgeridoos to a New Yorker or Eskimo igloos to a Berber warrior of the Tunisian desert. Your visit to Africa or South America is an opportunity to collect memories that will last the test of time (*The African* 13).

This in spite of the fact that countless species are disappearing every year – and some of them due to the activities of tourists who come to Africa to exploit what they believe is abundant wildlife. Steven Best tells us that one of the countries hard hit by extinction of

species is South Africa which is also the 'biggest wildlife trader on the continent' ('The Killing Fields' n. pag.). After advertising the exotic aspects of Africa, in spite of her bad leaders such as Robert Mugabe (according to his victims and their sympathisers), Wolffe assures and appeals to his audience:

[y]et Africa is there, waiting for those who can visit and travel. From the plains of Masai Mara to the tallest mountaintop of Kilimanjaro, from the desert sands of Namibia to the pyramids of Egypt, from the Indian Ocean's lullaby to the jungles of the Congo, Africa is a feast in every sense. Go and make contact with the very touchstones of Nature, *the way it was and will remain, unchanging*, while we care for the glory of Creation. Travel with those who know, not just the well-tarred roads, but also the secret ways and dust paths of the true wilderness. The African experience is a less-travelled road that awaits you and welcomes you to reach out and touch the untamed (7, my emphasis).

He goes on:

Africa is not just for the landscape camera nor [sic] the 'Big Five', as they are called. A good lens will capture so much secrecy and so much treasure that will dazzle and bejewel your photo albums for years to come. There is such richness, such a plethora of form and colour, such a vast variety of trees and birds and beasts as to believe this was Eden once (4--5).

It is clear here that, to use Brockington, Duffy and Igoe's term, an 'ecotourism bubble' shields Wolffe from 'the broader historical, social and ecological implications of [the] activities' of the tourists he is inviting to the supposedly pristine landscape of Africa/Zimbabwe (145). As Brockington, Duffy and Igoe observe:

[t]he ecological footprints of ecotourists who fly to different parts of the world on a regular basis [...] is usually several orders of magnitude more significant than the footprints of the local people who live in the places that ecotourists visit. Because of their proximity to putative pristine nature, however, these local people are often ironically seen as a threat to nature, and ecotourists as its saviours. (145)

Besides, animal photography somehow exposes the human effort to 'capture and to reproduce 'wild' animals' (Ryan 205) or is a manifestation of the human 'desire to possess and control nature' (209) by freezing the complex lives of these beings, reducing them to an image on paper, and displaying them to 'audiences eager for glimpses of exotic wildness and knowledge of natural history' (206). Wolffe, therefore, encourages modes of possession and control of animals and nature.

While his poetry in *Changing skins* may appear to show a concern for wildlife and nature, the appeal to tourists in *The African* betrays a tendency to see nature as a shrine for conspicuous consumption for the affluent western visitor. In fact, Wolffe is not entirely against the abuse of animals for human pleasure, rather he is against poaching (an evil associated with Africans [Carruthers 90]) as the following advice demonstrates:

[t]here are things that you should firstly consider, however. If the souvenir of your choice is an animal by-product such as a skin or a skull, what are the legalities of importing such an object into your country, for example? It might not only be a legal breach, but if it is a result of *poaching* or *the killing of rare wildlife*, it is a moral imperative for you to think twice about it (*The African* 13, my emphasis).

The implication here is that it is all right to kill animals that do not belong to the category

of rare wildlife through means other than poaching, such as sport hunting. This view not only reveals an instrumental attitude to animals or nature, but also encourages exploitation and abuse of animals.

Besides wildlife, Wolffe also sees African culture as timeless and unchanging. As a strategy to woo visitors to Africa, Wolffe depicts the continent as static and unchanging; forever rural. To this effect he writes:

[p]erhaps the modern industrial revolution and the production line have given us the clashing discords of modern society. Not so, the traditional ways of the mother continent, Africa. Everything turns as slowly as the seasons, where modern man has not corrupted the land, where the traditions hold as strongly as a rounded gourd, a beer pot passed in a circle between elders discussing the meaning of life beneath the 'Indaba Tree' while taking time out to philosophise and ponder rather than trying to catch up with the latest world events and news (*The African* 10).

Here Wolffe echoes the commodification and marketing of cultures in sub-Saharan Africa through ethnotourism as observed by Brockington, Duffy and Igoe. For these scholars, cultures in sub-Saharan Africa are 'marketed to appeal to international tourists, to such an extent that people are often portrayed as just another attraction alongside wildlife and landscapes' (141--142). The scholars cite the example of an overland tour from Addis Ababa in Ethiopia to Nairobi in Kenya called Tribes and Wildlife on the Rift which is promoted using language that, not only homogenises and packages cultures 'in ways that appeal to external tests,' but also freezes in time African cultures, landscape and history:

We will travel into one of the most unchanged tribal regions in Africa and meet peoples who [sic] lifestyles have changed very little in the last two hundred years. At Konzo we will explore the Konzo tribal culture and villages before heading deep into tribal southern Ethiopia towards the Omo Valley. (Dragoman qtd. by Brockington, Duffy and Igoe 142).

It does not require expertise on the affairs of Africa to notice Wolffe's deliberate distortion of the reality of today's Africa. It is also sometimes hard to believe that such writing comes from someone who spent most of his life in Africa. However, as is clear from Brockington, Duffy and Igoe's observations referred to above, Wolffe's freezing of African landscape, history and culture, is aimed at packaging and presenting African cultures as an object of desire for consumption by the affluent western ethno tourist.

Wolffe's colonialist/imperial vision is also clear in his representation of Africa as paradise or Eden. Commenting on his exile and the loss of his good life in Africa he says: '[t]he voices of the birds and the distance of vehicles in my former African paradise spoke of space and horizon, a gentler way, once upon a time. Yesterday. I could breathe freely then in my African paradise. But this fairy tale ended badly' (*The African* 5). Notice the suggestion of ownership here by the use of the first person possessive pronoun 'my' which is the poet's means of inscribing his 'self' on the Zimbabwean landscape. Later, he blames Mugabe's misrule for spoiling 'what was once a paradise on earth' (6) through his orchestration of violence against his political rivals and against white farmers leading to the destruction of the country's economy, and through his intolerance of dissenting views and persecution of critics and journalists, among other things (39--41). Consequently, a

country that was once the “bread basket” of the south’ of Africa has now been reduced to ‘the begging bowl of the region’ (*Bastard of the colony* 81).

We would do well to remember that, even before the economic crisis that began in Zimbabwe in the late 1990s, black writers such as Musaemura Zimunya and Chenjerai Hove, to mention just two, had been complaining about the failed promises of independence and the abject poverty of the peasants who had suffered during the struggle for independence. Wolffe’s words above, however, show that before the economic situation worsened, Zimbabwe was for him (and for other equally-privileged whites and black middle class people) a paradise on earth. This is perhaps what Caminero-Santangelo and Myres mean when they say ‘environmental representation is always shaped by social history’ (6). As a privileged white man in a Zimbabwean society riddled by structural economic inequalities, Wolffe had ‘white privilege’ to shield him from the grinding poverty and suffering of the poor black majority, and he chose ‘pristine’ nature as a subject for his writing.

The picture of Africa as an Eden or paradise full of wild creatures that Wolffe paints in *The African* and other writings, and his deployment of an imperial environmental discourse which erases Africans from the landscape, presents a heavily romanticised view of the continent. This belies the suffering of the people (some of which suffering is caused by conflicts between conservation and the people’s means of survival) and the plight of many species in Africa which are at the brink of extinction partly because of consumerist environmentalism.

In erasing Africans from the African landscape, and in ignoring their social and economic challenges that may have impacts on the environment, Wolffe fails to see and tackle the interlocking nature of forms of oppression. ‘[T]here is no social justice without ecological justice’ (Huggan and Tiffin 35). Conversely, there is no ecological justice without social justice. In accusing black Zimbabweans of ignoring nature (justified though the accusation might be) he, as I mentioned earlier, fails to see the root of modern Zimbabweans’ alienation from nature. He falls easily into the category of many white conservationists who hastily castigate Africans as poachers and people who are uninterested in the welfare of animals or nature. These fail to appreciate the survival challenges facing many Africans, with some of these challenges tracing their roots to European presence in Africa. This condemnation of Africans also ignores the privileged position of many whites in Africa. As the minority whites enjoy ‘the highest standard of living in Africa, on par with many western nations, the black majority [are] marginalised and impoverished in every area such as income, housing, and schools’ (Best, “The Killing Fields” n. pag.). Thus, when it comes to conservation ‘to those [...] fortunate enough to eat regularly and keep warm in winter, [animals] are a source of entertainment, [but to] the desperate, they may be a source of food (Cock 56). These are issues that are obscured by first-wave ecocriticism’s (intentional?) blindness to race, class and (post)-colonial inequalities.

As (an adopted) son of a country doctor (a gynaecologist), Wolffe was privileged enough to explore the Zimbabwean countryside, catch snakes, tame monitor lizards and sleep in caves as a child. Not so the poor black child. Wolffe could afford to feed his tame African

monitors out of his hand, a chicken wing, roast chicken, or a boiled egg (*The African* 19, *Bastard* 19), but to his poor black counterparts these are delicacies not to be thrown to a monitor lizard, however friendly. This, however, is not to say that black children, and black people in general, do not love and respond deeply to nature and to their environment.

In all fairness in *The African* and elsewhere (for example in the poem ‘No Name’ in the *Stones of Somewhere* [18--19] which prophesies vengeance and the downfall of Mugabe while detailing his evil ways) Wolffe does lament the misrule, injustice and suffering of black people in Zimbabwe. Nevertheless, one still gets the feeling that this protest against Mugabe’s tyranny is in so far as it interferes with tourism and the poet’s own enjoyment of the African wild. He writes in *The African*:

[a]nd only when the current regime is gone shall the glories of Victoria Falls, the towering mountains of the East – Chimanimani, where the celebration of the arts took place in a yearly festival, the river boat rides on the mighty Zambezi and the tourists round the sunsets on Lake Kariba, only when the sanity returns shall the lucrative tourist trade revive and the glories be shared (41).

In failing to make connections between forms of oppression, suffering and abuse, Wolffe fails to see the interconnectedness of human, animal and nature exploitation. In his essay ‘The killing fields of South Africa: Eco-wars, species apartheid, and total liberation’ Steven Best argues persuasively for the need for animal rightists, environmental advocates and human rights advocates to work hand-in-hand in engaging forms of oppression. For him, environmental advocates or human rights advocates who are single-issue oriented and resist ‘[working] in alliances with other social movements, and [are] pro-capitalist in their political views undercut and can never achieve their goals and objectives’ (n. pag.). For Best, ‘[h]uman and animal liberation movements are inseparable, such that none can be free until all are free.’ Best goes on to observe that ‘[h]uman, animal, and earth exploitation are tightly interconnected, such that no one form of exploitation can be abolished without uprooting the others.’ By way of example of the connection between human exploitation and nature, or environmental exploitation, Best mentions that ‘in conditions where people are desperately poor they are more likely to adopt instrumental views of nature, poach animals, and chop down trees in order to survive.’ He goes on to tell us that ‘[r]acism, sexism, and speciesism share a fundamental logic of oppression and are constituted out of similar and overlapping social, institutional, and technological modes of control.’ They are ‘ideologies of objectification, devaluation, and exclusion. Each belief system is grounded in the **conceptual structure** of a dualist logic, an **institutional structure** that mobilises laws and social relations for domination, and a **technological structure** that mobilises a battery of things (such as chains and cages) to advance exploitative goals’ (n. pag., italics in original). It is these progressive views from Best – and those who think like him, such as Rob Nixon and Dan Brockington, to mention but two – that we do not see in Wolffe’s work as discussed above.

Conclusion

This analysis of Bart Wolffe's work has shown that, while the writer's ecological vision recognises the interconnectedness of all things in the world and decries our alienation from (and destruction of) nature in general, and animals in particular, it also displays a deprecating attitude towards certain animals and an instrumental attitude to nature. It is nature, then, that he characterises as a resource or a treasure trove given to us humans to 'entertain and learn and keep us fascinated' (E-mail exchange). Wolffe's ecological vision and consciousness (which is entwined with historical and political contexts and personal experiences) is therefore inconsistent and contradictory. Further, his ecological vision is also limited, not only by his anthropocentric views and his reduction of nature to a resource and spectacle, but also by his imperialist outlook on Africa and Zimbabwe – an outlook that leads to the erasure of Africans from the landscape and to the portrayal and packaging of the wildlife and cultures of Africa as exotic, timeless, and unchanging. This portrayal of Africa in general, and of Zimbabwe in particular, runs counter to the reality on the ground where ecological destruction triggered by a number of factors, social and economic, threatens the extinction of a number of species. Besides, in displaying a mythical view of Africa, a view that ignores the human inhabitants of the exoticised African landscape and their struggles to survive, Wolffe fails not only to grasp the inseparability and interconnectedness of human, animal, and earth exploitation, but also to engage with the entangled nature of oppression. Nonetheless, given that our ecological sensibility (or our consciousness, understanding and construction of animals and nature) is mediated by historical, cultural, and socio-economic contexts, and personal experiences, it is clear that Wolffe's representation of nature and the African/Zimbabwean landscape is informed by his existential positionality as a privileged white person in post-colonial Zimbabwe.

Notes

1. This criticism is sometimes expressed by statements such as "African adults are beyond repair, they don't care about conservation, we must focus on the black children" (Anonymous informant qtd. by Cock 56).
2. Wolffe's illegitimate birth, adoption, and the dysfunctional nature of his adoptive family led to identity dilemmas that continue to plague him. See *Bastard of the Colony* (2006).

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