

# “Stranger in a Strange Land”

## Introduction

### Alan Northover and Reinhardt Fourie

On 15 April 2016, the South African Society for General Literary Studies/ Suid-Afrikaanse Vereniging vir Algemene Literatuurwetenskap (SASGLS/SAVAL) hosted a colloquium at the University of South Africa on the topic “Stranger in a strange land”. The colloquium’s theme was taken from the King James version of the Bible and refers to Moses’ sojourn in a foreign country after being exiled from Egypt, marrying his host’s daughter: “And she bare *him* a son, and he called his name Gershom: for he said, I have been a stranger in a strange land” (Exodus 2: 22). The theme was proposed in 2015 against the backdrop of renewed outbreaks of xenophobic violence in South Africa and the mass migration of Syrian refugees to Europe as a result of ongoing civil war in their country. However, the theme was also meant to elicit papers on any other aspects of the figure of the stranger, alienation and alterity. The call for papers noted that the phrase “stranger in a strange land” was used as the title of a science fiction novel by Robert Heinlein (1961). As a theme (taken out of biblical context), the phrase covers not only physical displacement (both spatial and temporal) but also psychological, cultural, social and political alienation.

Three of the papers presented at the colloquium appear in this special issue of the *Journal of Literary Studies / Tydskrif vir Literatuurwetenskap*. Karen McCarthy’s analysis of John Banville’s *Shroud*, investigates “holocaust survivors who escaped to America, and [who] have come together because of what they share, which is that they are both strangers in a foreign land, made stranger still by the horrors that they have witnessed”. Minesh Dass focusses on the mysterious disappearance of the strange Muslim protagonist in Ishtiyak Shukri’s *The Silent Minaret* against the backdrop of the so-called “War on Terror”, focussing on rituals and routines that cannot be followed. Lara Buxbaum explores the connections between xenophobia and animality in three recent South African novels, critiquing the animalisation and dehumanisation of foreigners sojourning in South Africa, exposing the close connection between violence perpetrated both against humans and nonhuman animals. The article by Alan Northover was not presented at the colloquium, but engages with the theme of this special issue. Northover examines the uncanny, eerie, sinister and alienating effects that Margaret Atwood achieves in her *MaddAddam* trilogy, arguing that the strange

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familiarity of the imaginative worlds that she creates permits a critique of current systems of animal and human exploitation.

Three of the other papers read at the colloquium, all on the theme of the stranger, can be found in two other issues of the *Journal of Literary Studies / Tydskrif vir Literatuurwetenskap*. Rebecca Fasselt's "Where to locate the self?: Gendered hospitality, African immigration and white self-renewal in Nadine Gordimer's *The Pickup*" and Renate Lenz's "A stranger in the country of his birth: The white man's predicament in the new South Africa as portrayed in John Conyngham's *The Lostness of Alice*" can be found in the *Journal of Literary Studies* 32(2), June 2016. Mike Marais' "'A step towards silence': Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable* and the problem of following the stranger" was published in the *Journal of Literary Studies* 32(4), December 2016. Marais explores the strange protagonist's "interminable quest to find a self from whom he has been alienated by the very language in which he conducts his search." He argues that this quest is not completely pointless but that "Beckett's narrator's ceaseless attempt to make of language a home for the stranger that it has produced renders language itself unhomely."

The critical discussions inspired by these papers, which were inevitably also informed by the on-going Rhodes Must Fall and Fees Must Fall movements, have influenced the theme of SASGLS/SAVAL's next biennial conference, which will be hosted at the University of South Africa in August 2017. The call for papers on the theme "Things fall apart" appears elsewhere in this issue of *Journal of Literary Studies*.

**Richard Alan Northover**

University of South Africa  
northra@unisa.ac.za

**Reinhardt Fourie**

University of South Africa  
fourir@unisa.ac.za