

Reconsidering Literatures: Directions in South African Literary Studies; Introduction to the Festschrift for Andries W. Oliphant

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This issue of the *Journal of Literary Studies (JLS)/Tydskrif vir Literatuurwetenskap (TLW)* is dedicated to Andries Walter Oliphant, who retired at the end of 2019 as associate professor and head of Theory of Literature in the Department of Afrikaans and Theory of Literature at the University of South Africa. During a career spanning more than four decades, Oliphant has become well-known as literary and cultural critic and scholar, and as policy advisor to the South African government on matters of arts and culture, as well as on literary education curricula. He served as the chair of the Arts and Culture Trust from 1995 to 2007, and he has authored a number of influential scholarly articles, particularly on the notion of a national literature in South Africa. In addition to this, he is known for his time as editor of the literary and arts magazine, *Staffrider* (1978–1993), as founding editor of *Baobab: South African Journal of New Writing*, and for editing a number of poetry anthologies and texts, such as *The Finishing Touch: Stories from the 1991 Nadine Gordimer Short Story Award* (1992, COSAW Pub.); *Culture and Empowerment: Debates, Workshops, Art and Photography from the Zabalaza Festival* (1993, COSAW Pub.); *A Writing Life: Celebrating Nadine Gordimer* (1998, Viking); *At the Rendezvous of Victory and Other Stories* (1999, Kwela Books); *Democracy X: Marking the Present, Re-presenting the Past* (2005, Brill), with Peter Delius and Lalou Meltzer; *Freedom Park: A Place of Emancipation and Meaning* (2005, Jacana), with Mongane Wally Serote and Pattabi Ganapathi Raman; *Word, (Wo)man, World: Essays on Literature* (2005, Unisa Press), with Henriëtte Roos; *Landscapes of Life: An Anthology of Southern African and Other Poetry* (2007, Best



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Books), with Blanche Scheffler and Eva Bogiages; *A State of Outrage* (2009, Maskew Miller Longman); and *Woorde bly: Kritiese opstelle* (2010, Unisa Press), with Erika Lemmer. Oliphant is of course also a poet and prose author in his own right, with his work appearing in many publications and anthologies over the years. As a recipient of both the Thomas Pringle Award for Short Stories and the Book Journalist of the Year Award, the impact of his work as both author and critic within South Africa is undeniable.

Oliphant was the co-editor of *JLS* (with Rory Ryan) from 2004 until his retirement in 2019. In this capacity, he served for many years on the executive committee of the Literature Association of South Africa (LASA), and its predecessor, the Suid-Afrikaanse Vereniging vir Algemene Literatuurwetenskap (SAVAL)/South African Society for General Literary Studies (SASGLS). Through SAVAL, he was also active within the International Comparative Literature Association (ICLA) and served two terms on its executive committee. This special issue of the journal is intended to honour Oliphant's contribution to South African literary scholarship. It is fitting that it is in *JLS* that this Festschrift is published, given his role as the long-time co-editor of the journal, through which he guided it to becoming an internationally respected outlet for the study of literature and literary theory. Oliphant stepped down from his role as co-editor of *JLS* at the end of 2019 and retired as an academic in 2020. During his more than two decades of being involved with the journal, it has matured into a publication that has been able to stay true to its original aim to provide a forum for the theoretical investigation into the nature and study of literary texts of a variety of origins.

Oliphant joined Unisa's then Department of Theory of Literature in the mid-1990s. A short time after this, he joined *JLS* as one of its associate editors, and later became co-editor of the journal with Rory Ryan (University of Johannesburg). With the able editorial assistance of Ms Ilse Muller, who has worked as the journal's editorial manager since 1991, Oliphant and Ryan worked to ensure that the journal developed a rigorous reputation for not only the quality of the research that it published, but also for its careful editorial management and regular, timeous publication. By the early 2000s, the journal was being published by Unisa Press and appeared on the list of accredited journals of the South African Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET). In 2007, the journal, under Oliphant's guidance, entered into a co-publishing agreement with Unisa Press and Taylor & Francis, which allowed the journal to increase its international availability and impact dramatically. Since 2018, after more than a decade of maintaining a continuous publishing frequency of four issues per year, *JLS* has been included in the Arts & Humanities Citation Index (Web of Science), and began appearing in Scopus, the international abstract and citation database. The journal maintains these listings, as well as its DHET accreditation.

Fittingly, this special issue represents yet another milestone for the journal. From 2022 onwards, *JLS* is being published in association with Unisa Press as an entirely open-access publication. Not only will all articles published from this year onwards be freely

available online—without any kind of paywall or access restriction—but we are also in the process of digitising the journal’s back catalogue, which should be available in its entirety and in open-access form by the end of 2023. In addition to its inclusion in Web of Science, Scopus and the DHET lists, the journal now also appears in the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ).

If there is something that *JLS* has become a testament to over the last two decades, it is the ways in which literary studies and literary theory have come to be more broadly conceptualised than ever before. Over the course of its three-and-a-half-decade existence, the journal has managed to remain a relevant platform that can accommodate a wide range of perspectives on literature, both from South Africa and further afield. No single special issue of a journal can ever reflect this diversity in its entirety, of course, and so too is the case for this Festschrift. The range of topics explored in this special issue reflects the breadth of the scholarly debates for which *JLS* has been an anchor under Oliphant. In the first article of the issue, Marisa Keuris offers an overview of the use of Kaapse Afrikaans (Kaaps) in Afrikaans dramas from the foundational years of the language into the present. Sonja Loots returns in her article to a classic of South(ern) African literature: Thomas Mofolo’s *Chaka* (1925/1981). Loots considers the text as “transcultural” and as written by a similarly “transcultural” author. Craig Smith in his contribution revisits J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace* (1999), which has become one of the most famous South African novels of the last 25 years, and he reads the novel through an analytical prism of the recent #MeToo movement. The fourth article in the issue, by Lucy Valerie Graham, also takes a stance of reconsideration. While Keuris looks back at the development of Afrikaans drama, and Smith and Loots look back towards two classic texts of South African literature, central to Graham’s piece is not a classic text, per se, but rather a well-known mytho-cultural artefact of South African literature: the figure of Adamastor. Graham explores how K. Sello Duiker’s *Thirteen Cents* (2000) breaks with the ways in which the figure of Adamastor had been imagined before Duiker’s novel in South African artistic expressions. The issue closes with a book review by Mike Marais of *Eliot and Beckett’s Low Modernism: Humility and Humiliation* (Rick de Villiers, 2021, Edinburgh University Press) and two opinion pieces that were written especially for the special issue: an account of the foundation of SAVAL and *JLS*, by Ina Wolfaardt-Gräbe, and an essay titled “Doing Literature Now,” by Reingard Nethersole.

What all the contributions to this special issue have in common is that they add to how we think about South African Literature (with a capital L), which, as Oliphant writes, remains “an ensemble of literatures in the African languages and Afrikaans and English” that is in no way single or uniform (2003b, 253). Nigh on two decades ago, Oliphant called for our response to this diversity to be approaching literature using “a variety of methods which provide tools for dealing with entanglements across literatures, disciplines as well as across spatial and temporal boundaries” (2003b, 253).¹ Almost

¹ See also Oliphant (2003a, 2003b, 2004a, 2004b).

three decades since the advent of South Africa's democratic dispensation, and two decades after Oliphant's call, there has been no final reckoning with the myriad ways in which particular traditions, seminal texts, and images within the broadly conceived national South African literature (with a small l) have been considered. If anything, this issue of *JLS* highlights that there is still a process of reckoning with the past that remains incomplete—in literature itself, but also in literary scholarship—as the various contributions to this issue consider the following: literary histories and categorisation (Keuris); the complexity of classic older texts, and their continuing value into the present (Loots); the interpretational and unexpected prescience of early postapartheid texts that manage to offer insight into contemporary, transnational social movements (Smith); and the decolonisation of myths that serve both colonial and postcolonial perceptions of South Africa's entangled histories (Graham). What needs to be said, and remains a worrying point, is that the focus of literary studies in South African still seems to fall mostly on English and Afrikaans literatures, while scholarly interest does not concentrate on other indigenous literatures to the same degree.

A suggestion as to how this matter might, at least partially, be rectified, lies in the important essay by Nethersole with which this issue concludes. Nethersole's piece puts into perspective the many challenges faced by literary scholarship today—particularly in South Africa—and also indirectly echoes what Oliphant had already stated many years ago. It is safe to say that the boundaries between what is considered literary *theory*, on the one hand, and literary *studies*, on the other, have faded into relative insignificance, as some theoretical grounding now operates within almost all literary research. Nevertheless, literature departments at universities continue to exist mostly as language silos, seldom crossing the boundaries with departments that teach other literatures in other languages. Nethersole (2022, 2), who is a veteran of the field of comparative literature in South Africa, and a long-time member of LASA (and SAVAL/SASGLS), makes a clarion call for more comparative studies within the broad field of South African literature:

Given South Africa's uniqueness of multiple languages, differing traditions and distinct cultural and political experiences, I ask: Where lie the contact zones between the various language-literatures? What happens in the interplay between reaction, reflection and initiation of cultural and societal processes in the various storytelling communities during metropolitan European control (e.g. Olive Schreiner, Roy Campbell, but also Afrikaans writers always acutely aware of French, German and Dutch literary movements, not to mention isiXhosa writers and other indigenous language authors emerging from sites like the Lovedale Mission School) and afterwards in the long struggle for a national cultural heritage as evidenced by, among others, Sol Plaatje, Thomas Mofolo, or N. P. van Wyk Louw?

Andries Oliphant's careful stewardship of *JLS* over the course of almost two decades has ensured that this journal remains a premier outlet for visiting and revisiting these conversations around literature, literary theory, and comparative literature. On behalf of the executive committee and members of the Literature Association of South Africa,

and as Oliphant's peers in the academy, we express our thanks and appreciation to him for his steady leadership over his years at the helm of the journal.

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