

Guy Butler's Political Ecology: History, Appropriation, Alienation, Belonging

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Summary

This article explores various aspects of Guy Butler's "ecowriting" and "ecocriticism". The first section considers his evocation of the relationship (or the rift) between natural history and human history. The second section addresses the problematic processes of "naming and taming" – subduing, controlling and claiming ownership of the land – and the ways in which these inform and are informed by conquest and colonisation. The third section weighs Butler's shifting responses to the (in)hospitable African climate and landscape. In the fourth section, the ecological imperative driving much of Butler's work is shown to complement his efforts to overcome racial and cultural divides in South Africa.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel verken verskillende aspekte van Guy Butler se "ekogeskrifte" en "ekokritiek". In die eerste deel word sy evokasie van die verhouding (of skeuring) tussen die natuurgeskiedenis en die menslike geskiedenis onder die loep geneem. In die tweede deel word die problematiese prosesse van "naamgewing en temming" – die onderwerping, beheer en toeëiening van grond – en die wyses waarop dit deur oorwinning en kolonisasie veroorsaak word en dit ook veroorsaak – van naderby bekyk. In die derde deel word Butler se verskuiwende response op die (on)herbergsame klimaat en landskap van Afrika in oënskou geneem. In die vierde deel word daar getoon hoe die ekologiese imperatief wat die stukrag agter die meeste van Butler se werk vorm, sy pogings aanvul om rasse- en kulturele verdelings in Suid-Afrika te bowe te kom.

1 "The Breach between Man and Nature"

Guy Butler was a substantial public figure in South Africa over the second half of the twentieth century, as a performer of chameleon literary roles (professor, poet, playwright, autobiographer), as a cultural politician and as an opponent of apartheid legislation. Nevertheless, his is not a familiar name to the majority of South Africans, and where he is known, Butler remains a problematic figure. On the one hand, he has been criticised for expressing dated or even "colonial" ideas, or for lacking radical political conviction (see, for instance, Kirkwood 1976; and Williams 1989); on the other hand, he is often seen as a "grand old man" in South African literature

rather than as a writer for a new generation of readers.¹ These views do not take into account those facets of Butler's writing that were (and still are) subversive, intellectually compelling and of enduring literary value. Moreover, they ignore two fundamental aspects of Butler's career that are of particular relevance in post-apartheid South Africa: his work as a historian, and his work as an ecologist.

Butler is typically associated with the history of English and "the English" in South Africa, specifically the historical record of the 1820 Settlers and the Eastern Cape frontier. This association is in some respects unfortunate, as his approach to history was a catholic one, incorporating both Africa and Europe, both ancient and modern, and giving priority to "history with a small 'h': not 'generalities about economics or class or race' – for this is History, 'made or experienced by Man' – but 'named individuals', 'men, women and children ... living in particular times' and particular places (Butler 1991: 243). It may seem strange that I am giving such weight to Butler-as-historian in an article on Butler-as-ecologist. Reverence for the natural world (what might be called Butler's "environmentalism") is, after all, a definitive and not a secondary characteristic of his work. Yet, as J.M. Coetzee comments in *White Writing*, "Butler treats the relation of the poet to his landscape historically" (1988: 169). Reciprocally, human history and natural history form the axes against which Butler's activities and interests as a historian may be plotted.

In his poem "On Seeing a Rock Drawing in 1941", these axes intersect; the rock art might be thousands of years old, but the anonymous artist's work merely overlays patterns carved out by natural processes long before the drawing itself was made:

the surface of the stone
 ... bears the sensuous ripple marks
 left by a falling wave, the wind's caress
 on some indelible, undated day

1. This is not only due to critiques such as those offered by Michael Chapman (1984) and, post-apartheid, Tony Morphet (1994); it is equally due to the fact that many of Butler's admirers – in particular, amongst members of the Rhodes University and Grahamstown communities he came to define – indulge in a form of hagiography that does not sufficiently acknowledge the grounds on which he has been censured, thus risking the further diminution of his status as a writer and intellectual. There have nevertheless been some critical assessments from the "pro-Butler" camp, such as Laurence Wright's obituary (2001), which balances academic appraisal with personal affirmation, and the eulogy given at Butler's funeral by Malvern van Wyk Smith (2001), which combines evaluation with celebratory tribute.

in a definite, numberless year,
in staggering cataracts of years.

(Butler 1999: 9)²

As a child growing up in the Karoo, Butler encountered cave paintings and stone tools, manifestations of occupation by the earliest humans, but mountains and fossils offered evidence of a palaeontological past – a natural history stretching back beyond “human” conceptions of time.³ As a young man, in his frequent disillusionment with modernity he had recourse to a form of atavism or primitivism that led him, in turn, to a familiar dilemma: the natural world of “growth, sap, sunlight, soil and birdsong” at times resists the human world of “guns and banknotes” (Butler 1983: 226), but at other times, the cruelty of the butcherbird can be seen to symbolise the bloody foundations of animal interactions within the human species (p. 233). These examples are from *Bursting World*, the second volume of Butler’s autobiographical trilogy, which provides a record of his participation in the Second World War – a period during which the balance or tension between nature and human activity was foremost in his thoughts. During military training, the sight of two lizards was both encouraging (because they were “signs of spring and reminders of the age of the earth and the cycles of evolution”) and disturbing (because there is “something terrifying in the eye of any cold-blooded animal”, hinting at “calamities that came and may come again”) (p. 127). When Butler’s younger brother Jeff was seriously wounded by an exploding shell, the two were reunited in a hospital tent and, lost for words, became aware of “the human quiet” that is “so different from the quiet of rocks and stones and trees” – so full of emotion, for better and for worse (p. 236).⁴ While night-time battles raged in the sky and on land, “the bare trees and stars remain[ed] calm, immovable, almost contemptuous” (p. 285).

This quality is also evident in “Karoo Town, 1939”, a *locus classicus* in Butler’s interpretation of the unemphatic but undeniable dominance of natural history over human history. Hennie van der Mescht presents “Karoo

2. Here and subsequently, Butler’s poetry is quoted from his *Collected Poems* (1999).

3. I have written on this elsewhere; see Thurman (2006).

4. Butler was preoccupied with the spiritual significance of silence – a preoccupation that had its roots in his father’s Quakerism. Typically, Quaker meetings are not formally structured, and large portions of each meeting are taken up by silent meditation and reflection. At the Quaker meetings that Butler attended as a child, “it was exceptional for any word to be uttered”, for it was understood that “[God] spoke with an inward, soundless voice. The stillness, the communal ridding of minds of worldly noises, made it possible for the inner ear to hear Him” (Butler 2000: 7).

Town, 1939" as a depiction of "a way of life that is inseparably associated with Nature" (1980: 20), referring to lines such as "here climate integrates the landsman with his soil/ and life moves on to the dictates of the season". Yet this association is disrupted when "Europe asserts/ her infallible remote control" and "demands decisions" from the farming community. The conflict in the metropolitan centre (between "the gods of London and Berlin") spreads to the provincial periphery ("a village lost in the plain"). In response to the "imperative demands" of the recruiters' trumpets, the town forgets "wool and lucerne bales"; "crystallising loyalties, hardening hates", the war severs the connection between people and landscape. "But", the poem concludes, human affairs "cannot shake the rockstill shadows of the hills/ Obeying remote instructions from the sun alone".

This is what Coetzee refers to as "the breach between man and nature" – a rift, like that "between man and man", which cannot be bridged by language (1988: 170). He offers Butler's "Near Hout Bay" as an example; the poem, he argues, deals with "the alienness of the landscape" in terms of "the alienness of the sounds of nature". Although I concur with Coetzee that "the question of a language for Africa" is a central concern in much of Butler's work, I am not persuaded that "Near Hout Bay" addresses this question. The poem starts by expressing frustration about the awkward conversation at a reunion of old friends. Attempting to describe a scarcity of language, it in fact becomes prolix, enacting the desire to fill a void with words: "Each thread of phrase drifted from lips/ like a spider's web from a cave in a thousand-foot cliff,/ out, out into distance, finding nothing to cling to." Then the false starts at conversation were stopped by "the sufficiently epic view" of the mountains and the bay, and "silence took charge, a blessed burial of words/ ... We stood a long time, just listening", and when "the talk returned" it "attempted nothing whatever". The poem ends in a tone of calm resignation:

We accepted separation
as the ear those ignorant sounds
that filled that primitive silence
with sadness and with praise:
cicadas; doves; wind; surf.

(Butler 1999: 141)

The speaker is able to cope with the failure of language to reconnect unravelled human ties only because the sense data of the natural world provide some non-linguistic reassurance. This is not an "alien" environment: the elements in the "sound-scape" are hardly, as Coetzee suggests, unique to Africa. Rather, it is a comforting and spiritually invigorating environment – "not far from *natura codex dei*", Coetzee deduces – and the poem is very different to those of Butler's works that grapple with the linguistic rendition of Africa's topography, fauna and flora.

Coetzee may furnish the wrong example, but *Pilgrimage to Dias Cross* (published in book form a year before *White Writing*) vindicates his argument. The predominance in this long poem of the “elemental imagery” found in “Near Hout Bay” forcibly demonstrates “the breach between man and nature”, presenting the relationship between human history and natural history in a more convoluted fashion.⁵ As “the ageing speaker” (as Butler describes himself in a prologue) makes his imaginary pilgrimage, the narratives offered by each of the “historical ghosts” presiding along the Eastern Cape coastline are balanced by a more profound, constant, eternally repeated story: “Sea encountering sand, rock encountering sea,/ and sea and land all round encountering the sky” (Section II: 226). Without the ghostly voices, there is “no sound except/ the interminable/ pounding of the sea”; when they have finished speaking and fade away, the speaker is plunged into

A chasm of silence
which all the falling breakers can never fill.
Nothing but the elements, sea, land, sky.

(Section IX: 236)

There is something threatening about the “restless surfaces” of the sea, and a “blanket of silent air and stars/cannot console” him (Section XI: 237).

The climactic Section XIII begins with a resolute acceptance of nature’s indifference to individual and collective human histories:

We know how the sounds of the air
and the roar of the sea
obliterate instinctive cries,
reasoning voices, prayers, curses, songs.

(Section XIII: 240)

Our experiences – and the expression of those experiences – are at odds with the “arcane” elements, and we cling to artistic victories over an incomprehensible cosmos:

Sometimes a word outwits the cosmic noise,
sometimes by cunning or love
an action will flash into freedom,
feeling find form in song.

(Section XIII: 241)

5. Taken as a whole, the poem achieves an effect that Carrol Clarkson (she is discussing the work of artist Willem Boshoff) describes as “reanimating the soil with historical narratives”; nevertheless, as I argue here, the poem also emphasises the disjunction between “soil” and “narrative” – between natural phenomena/elements and human history. See “Verbal and Visual: The Restless View”, *scrutiny2* 11: 2 [2007] – forthcoming).

Yet “culture”, “gods”, “chains of command” – the “systems” we construct – all “decay and die”, to be followed by others. With this in mind, the eternal cycle of the ocean (wave breaking on shore, receding and returning again) no longer seems to be mocking human endeavour, but rather mirrors it. Matthew Arnold’s evocation of “the turbid ebb and flow/ Of human misery” in “Dover Beach” (1867) underscores the resolution reached by Butler: “History’s noise seems endless, like the sea’s” (Section XIII: 241). Though we feel helpless in the face of this dual onslaught – the inevitable cycles of human history and the supreme indifference of natural history – there is nevertheless some comfort to be found in the cogent symbols presented by natural phenomena. When vehicle and tenor are matched (the insistent sound of the sea and the inexorable march of “History”), the metaphor not only gratifies the poet, but also offers solace:

We are the traffic on its surface,
the life that sweats and labours
the singing voices on the shore.

(Section XIII: 241)

Although in *Pilgrimage to Dias Cross* the sea does not function simply as an external form embodying the poet’s state of mind, the poem is one of many instances in Butler’s poetry undermining Coetzee’s claim that the “one familiar avatar we do not find in Butler is the poet as a being who projects moods onto the landscape or is flooded by the mood of the landscape” (1988: 168). Coetzee makes this statement in order to foreground the “historicism” of Butler’s response to landscape, but I would argue that treating the relation between poet and natural environment “historically” does not preclude a lyrical response in which the “moods” of poet and landscape are mutual. In a 1950 lecture, Butler rebuked the strain of South African poetry that, “devoid of accurate perception or description”, makes the open countryside “no more than a place where a mood descends upon one, and where one bleats about one’s mood” (Butler 1950: 3). Yet, if he denounced a misplaced sentimental Romanticism for being “anachromatic and unsuitable to the particular spiritual climate of our time”, many of Butler’s own poems exhibit a blend of lyricism and acute observation. It is worth noting, for instance, that Muriel Bradbrook uses “Near Hout Bay” to demonstrate the “delicate blend of scene painting and mood” she finds in Butler’s poetry – a “wedding” of “outer and inner landscape” (1983: 156-157).

There is, it must be granted, the bold statement in “Having Seen through the Pathetic Fallacy” that

No cord ties us to earth.
Our bloods are in different groups.

Remotely different seasons
set our ungovernable moods.

(Butler 1999: 215)

This poem stands out in Butler's work as a bitter, desperate articulation of a state of emotional inertia, from which there is no prospect of escape.⁶ The cause of the speaker's anguish is unclear; he seems to be suffering from a version of writer's block (a year has passed "since last a living thing/ burst from my chrysalis") resulting from a spiritual crisis:

... the larger silk cocoon
of the Christian scheme was torn
and the cosmic hoar-frost stung
my soft heart into stone.

(Butler 1999: 215)

His despondency is exacerbated by the "seasonal swing" because the stale "winter" of his emotions is not relieved by the external changes of spring and summer – the sun cannot "warm a paralysis". The poem does not, however, prove Coetzee's supposition, for the bleak tone is achieved precisely by a rejection of that quality its author in fact demonstrates in so much of his work: "projecting moods onto the landscape" or "being flooded by the mood of the landscape".

The different kinds of Karoo rock were "implanted" in Butler's imagination as symbols of different temperaments: "sandstone stood for experience, for tradition", whereas "ironstone stood for raw instinct and energy tapped from the molten heart of things" (1977): 240-41).⁷ His own disposition shifted between these two, and in his constant search for synthesis (between African and European identities, between "rational" and

6. Dawid Malan comments that the poem "appears to contradict the message of hope and reconciliation" found in Butler's early plays, as it betrays both public and private causes for grief: "the socio-political overtones in the repetitive line, 'our bloods are in different groups', suggest that the poet's despair must be traced to the effects of the ideology of apartheid", while at the same time "'my chrysalis' in the second stanza suggests that the reason for his disillusionment is personal" (1986: 219). Given that the poem dates to 1955, the year before Butler and his wife Jean's first biological son was born – they had already adopted two infants by then – the imagery of parturition is suggestive.

7. The preponderance of "rock" in Butler's writing is reinforced by Coetzee's sense that "the true South African landscape is of rock, not of foliage" and that the South African artist must therefore "employ a geological, not a botanical, gaze" (curiously, he cites Butler's "Sweet Water" as one instance of the "art of deep reading" – that is, the poet's "penetrative divining art" rather than the painter's "representation of superficies" – for "buried beneath the unpromising surface of Africa" lies "life-giving underground water" (1988: 167-168).

“irrational” ways of responding to the human condition)⁸ he rejoiced in discovering lydianite, a sandstone-ironstone fusion: “something comparatively rare, a product of two worlds, partaking of both”, which represents “a possible integrity and function for the mind, or the moment, or the mood, which, while owing its origin to highly contrasted sources, is different from either”.⁹

In “Cradock Mountains”, the peaks’ “bone-bare silhouettes” are honoured for informing and presiding over Butler’s childhood – Coetzee considers this “the poem that most clearly reveals the depth of Butler’s debt to Wordsworth” in its “reflections on the power of remembered childhood scenes” (1988: 171).¹⁰ As these events are narrated, however (and even though the speaker concedes that “our affair is very one-sided/ and I mean nothing to you”) the mountains take on qualities that reflect the boy’s state of mind, or frame it by contrast. The combination of euphoria and guilt when hunting a dassie made his sight “slip, whip, skim/ ... go ricocheting through” the peaks; after “the dizzy, blinding first dive of a kiss”, he “surfaced gasping to find you floating remote,/ impassive as dreadnoughts through the winter air”.

The war poems are full of depictions of landscape that resonate with the poet’s mood. In poems of quiet hope or affirmation, the speaker seeks comfort in “Nature’s archetypal primacy” which can “harmonise man’s petty differences”, a process van der Mescht sees occurring in “Common Dawn” (1980: 21-22). In poems of grief or disillusionment, the horrors of the war are equated with an “assault on nature”. Van der Mescht quotes from an uncollected poem, “Fragment”, in which “dawn/ cracks open beneath the hammer of the guns”, and from “El Kahira”, where nature (symbolised by various flowers) has been displaced and replaced by that ancient wartime ally, the sex industry:

8. See Butler (1984).

9. See Dirk Klopper’s discussion of the psychological processes underlying this geological metaphor (1994: 142-44).

10. According to Coetzee, the weakness of the poem is that it “raises a Wordsworthian question – In what ways have I been moulded by the landscape in which I have lived? – but barely begins to answer it”; by thus playing out “themes from the English tradition against an African backdrop, Butler settles for no less provincial a goal than the Thomas Pringle of *Poems Illustrative of South Africa*”. This is too harsh. “Cradock Mountains” is, after all, an early poem. It is the work of a poet who does not yet have the critical scaffolding that would be developed in the years following the Second World War (and that Butler himself, in terms of South African literary scholarship, took the lead in constructing). Moreover, the Wordsworthian content and themes need not be seen as purely imitative – the poem can be read as a legitimate, sustained allusion or tribute by one poet to another.

In a doorway, half-ajar,
 she pauses, sways and throws –
 not cassia nor jasmine,
 nor oleander, rose,
 not even a flamboyant
 that burns beside the Nile –
 but a withered flower of the city
 a stale commercial smile.

(Butler 1999: 20)

Van der Mescht concludes his analysis by discussing two poems that were written in “lyrical praise of nature, an emphatic re-statement of the belief that man is part of her cycle” (1980: 24). This description gives a rather ambiguous place to human affairs. If “man is part of [Nature’s] cycle”, he is cast in an organic, non-intrusive (non-destructive) role – but this is hardly true of “man” in the Second World War. An alternative way of reading van der Mescht’s formulation is to consider man as having a minor part within the greater natural realm, in which case the appropriate response to “Nature’s supremacy” is to acknowledge her indifference to human affairs. Certainly, this is how van der Mescht interprets “The Colossi of Memnon”, which he associates with Shelley’s “Ozymandias” because the statues’ “doom is spelt out in stanza two: the elements, allied with time, will slowly wear them away” (p. 25). This is not necessarily the clear implication of the poem, however, written as it is in the continuing present. The opening line declares, “Imperial calm is on them still”; as, “faceless, they face the implacable east”, they seem to be braving – surviving – the elements with stoic resistance. Van der Mescht argues that “in the “[b]ees that hive in the cracks of their stone” the poet sees, paradoxically, a symbol of greater endurance than the stone statues” (p. 26), but ultimately the statues remain as unsusceptible as the “rock-still shadows of the hills” in “Karoo Town, 1939”.¹¹ These human impositions on the landscape are defiant, and seem to exist in a kind of equilibrium with natural elements.

“Syrian Spring” paints the picture of a different kind of human imposition: farming. Here there are “singing peasants” who, “in the first furrow’s turning, the hedge’s trimming” are inextricably involved in the spring “rejuvenation of a landscape” (van der Mescht’s phrase) that encourages the already war-weary poet: “changing a hillside, they change my heart”.¹² Yet, in the final stanza, the speaker stresses his observer status; the activities of sowing are

11. Differences between early and late drafts of the poem are illuminating. In the version quoted by van der Mescht, the final line concludes with “the Colossi, the broken kings”; in the *Collected Poems*, the Colossi are “stone-still kings”.

distinct from me:
I have no hold on them, no word to say
or wish to will on this soil in the sun.

(Butler 1999: 22)

Butler had seen the South African, north African and European landscapes not only as strong and enduring but also – like the poet-soldier himself – as fragile under the attack of warfare. Linking signs from the external natural world to his internal emotional world, the speaker “absorbs” nature:

By taking these changes into my heart
I have freed myself as a bird in an orchard,
or standing at ease, the stem of a tree.

(Butler 1999: 22)

When Coetzee denies that Butler is a poet who can be “flooded by the mood of the landscape”, he does not account for lines such as these.

2 Naming and Taming

In the final image in “Syrian Spring”, the speaker compares his freedom to that of a tree – a paradoxical association. How can a tree, fixed, rooted in place, be “free”? As an older man, Butler would exalt and take as an expression of his creed the words of settler Henry Hare Dugmore, “We must take root and grow, or die where we [stand]” (1970b: viii). Yet even Butler had to admit what other settler historians have stressed: belonging also meant taking possession. The land was scouted, marked out and divided amongst owners. In order for those who had come to settle in this new land to feel free, they had to subjugate those who were already there. Even settlers who sought nothing but a life of peaceful subsistence farming became complicit in the dislocation or ejection of previously settled peoples.

Of course, this pattern is by no means unique to the South African colonial encounter. Nor, indeed, is it specific to Western imperial expansion over the last five hundred years. The enterprise of farming has always entailed marking domains and mastering dominions. Jared Diamond argues in *The Rise and Fall of the Third Chimpanzee* (1991) and, more recently, *Guns, Germs and Steel* (1999) that the advent of agriculture – the centralisation of food stores, as opposed to the nomadic lifestyle of the hunter-gatherer – introduced widespread malnutrition and disease, entrenched class

12. Don Maclennan affirms that the “ancient wisdom of the peasants puts war into perspective, for nature persists and it is with nature, after all, that man must make his true accommodation” (1992: 202).

structures and exacerbated gender inequalities. Butler hints at these ill effects in his Introduction to Herman Potgieter's collection of aerial photographs, *South Africa: Landshapes, Landscapes and Manscapes* (1990). Although he celebrates the aesthetic effect of ploughed wheat fields or lush tea plantations, Butler also acknowledges that the basic technologies of farming introduced the hierarchies of power so familiar to us today: "It was only when [humankind] learnt to plant and cultivate ... to plough, irrigate and harvest, that [we] began to change the face of the earth. A steady food supply led to increases in population, to cities, to empires" (1990b: 7).

By way of contrast, there is Steve Biko's insistence that the traditional African attitude to property is anathema to "individual land ownership" ([1978]1996: 45). Although this assertion depends on what many consider to be an "essentialised" view of Africa, it is nonetheless evident that the inhabitants of large parts of what is now South Africa were ill-equipped to prevent the appropriation of land by settler farmers (whether privately or on behalf of colonising governments).¹³ The result is a fundamental site of conflict – literal and figurative – in South African history, one that has wide ramifications in current political debates over land restitution. The farms of the Eastern Cape that Butler knew and loved were integral both to his evocation of the Karoo landscape and to his conception of a South African English community, descending from the 1820 Settlers, that had "taken root" and had a substantial cultural-historical heritage. Unfortunately, however, the settler-farmers of South Africa were not simply early examples of "white Africans" who committed themselves to the soil and thus to the land itself; they were also, for better or worse, involved in the military and legislative oppression that accompanied colonisation and, later, apartheid.

Butler's poem "Farmer" depicts its subject staring out over the "three thousand morgen of good Karoo veld" that he "pilots" from his stoep, like a captain on "the bridge of his liner" (or that he has created, like the God of Genesis):

Some infinite assurance reached him through his eyes.
The arc of the horizon, that particular
configuration of ironstone and grey shale,
pale soil stippled with dark round shrubs,
red grass in seed shaking along the ragged ridges –

13. Again, conflicts caused by different approaches to the natural world are not limited to African colonial encounters. Australian historians, for instance, also record that Aboriginal peoples were confounded by European settlers because they had no concept of private landownership.

he'd taken all that he saw into himself
and found that it was good.

(Butler 1999: 173)

Farmer and land share an intimate, sacred relationship (the poet is reminded of “a praying child” or “lovers”) that the urbanite cannot claim to understand. Yet the farmer’s gaze across the veld is the same gaze identified by Malvern van Wyk Smith in a colonial literary tradition stretching back at least as far, locally, as Thomas Pringle’s descriptions of the South African landscape: “the carefully progressive sweep of the eye over the scene ... to effect a thorough colonization” (1990: 8).¹⁴ “Bronze Heads, Ife, Nigeria, 1954”, one of Butler’s more contested pieces, relates his response to visiting the famous sculptures representing an ancient Nigerian dynasty.¹⁵ The speaker is impressed by the imperturbable gaze of the great kings’ busts, “as if such staring were the first slow act/ by which man masters chaos anywhere”. This is also the gaze of domination and possession; it underlies the stare of the farmer who had “taken all that he saw into himself”, or even the soldier-poet who took the changing Syrian landscape “into [his] heart”.

Discussing what she calls the “looking relations” in E.M. Forster’s *A Passage to India* ([1924]1983), Linda van der Vijver notes that the “colonial gaze” is both a discourse and a way of objectifying the people and place of the colony. Consider the well-meaning Adela’s attempts to “see” India:

Although Adela wishes to avoid the Anglo-Indian mentality, she does not want to “sacrifice the authority of the word” ... in Anglo-Indian society, “speech must constitute either truth or lie”, and this culturally imposed constraint prevents Adela (and perhaps all the British characters and the narrator) from truly “seeing” India. This notion of “verbal truth” as paramount is frequently alluded to in the novel.

(van der Vijver 2005: 4)

The need for “verbal truth” or certainty is the coloniser’s imperative (consider Kenneth Kaunda’s comment that the Westerner “cannot live with contradictory ideas in his mind” (Kaunda quoted in Biko [1978]1996: 44)) With it comes the urge to name – to tame and to control – the unknown. *A Passage to India* offers useful examples, most notably the disastrous trip to the Marabar Caves, during which “there is some confusion about the identity of objects, which Adela wants to identify and name, while her Indian companions seem less concerned about doing so”. It is not made

14. The settler-writer thus “not only describes the ... domestication of the landscape, but enacts it” (p. 7).

15. Mike Kirkwood analysed extracts from “Bronze Heads” in his scathing (and not altogether fair) critique of “Butlerism” at the seminal *Poetry ’74* conference in Cape Town. See Kirkwood ([1974]1976).

clear whether low mounds at the side of the road are graves or symbols of the breasts of the goddess Parvati; after further “confusion” over whether or not a “thin, dark object” in the distance is a snake or a tree branch, the English are exasperated because nothing is “explained” (Forster [1924] 1983: 139). Similarly, the distraught Ronnie and Adela, having acknowledged that they cannot marry each other, seek comfort by talking about a bird, but find they cannot identify it. The bird “was of no importance, yet they would have liked to identify it, it would somehow have soled their hearts. But nothing in India is identifiable” (p. 92).

For the coloniser, naming objects and becoming familiar with them is a way of feeling less alien, of belonging – an understandable human desire. When van der Mescht suggests that “the question of belonging amounts to an obsession in the writings of Guy Butler” (1980: 12), he is referring not only to the broad project of acculturating English speakers in South Africa but also to the individual characters that populate Butler’s poetry, drama and prose fiction. Butler’s early “farm plays” provide examples: in *The Dam* (1953), Douglas Long, the protagonist, suggests that feeling “we belong” is “more than one has a right to expect” (p. 64); in *The Dove Returns* (1956), a British Lieutenant charged with the unenviable task of burning down a Boer homestead during the South African War recognises that, despite his differences with the matriarch of the house, “the need to belong is the same” (p. 33), while Simon, the ill-treated coloured servant, reluctantly accepts his life on the van Heerdens’ farm because “a man must belong somewhere” (p. 13). *The Dam* and *The Dove Returns* may not have enjoyed much success – certainly, they do not loom large in South African theatrical history – but they contributed to, perhaps even began, a dialogue or discourse in which the question of “belonging” would be more compellingly addressed by later playwrights.

Athol Fugard, for one, has acknowledged his debt to Butler in this regard.¹⁶ In Fugard’s *A Lesson from Aloes* (1981), one of the characters loves to identify and label the aloe specimens he collects because “it makes me feel that little bit more at home in my world” (p. 4). Yet this desire cannot easily be separated from the impulse to control and to assert one’s authority. The more malicious processes of conquest and naming leave the victims of colonial history without any sense of “belonging”. This is the plight of Boesman and Lena: uprooted, homeless, perpetually moving between places in which they are not welcome, places that have been named and circumscribed. Discussing the historicity of the place names that surface in *Boesman and Lena*, Peter Anderson comments:

16. See Fugard’s “Dedication” in *Olive Schreiner and After*, pp. xiii-xiv. *Boesman and Lena* premiered at the Rhodes Theatre – another of Butler’s projects – in 1969 (see Butler 1991: 237-238).

Toponymy is of obvious interest to any enquiry into place, since it reveals the most overt cultural inscription of space, the most profound act of inhabiting. The business of naming not only leaves behind it the cast of “origins” and original occupations, but it is always in some degree an act of dominion, as Adam’s prerogative shows.

(2005: 7)

To Butler, however, “naming and taming” was essential for poetic purposes, and for the development of an authentically South African tradition of English poetry. According to one of Butler’s early essays, “The English Poet in South Africa”, who wishes to make use of indigenous diction (South African English or borrowings from other South African languages) finds it difficult to do so “even when you have names for objects” because “those names lack exploitable connotations” for an Anglocentric audience (1956a: 47). Poets thus confront the “semantic poverty” of words that have not been in the lexicon of English poetry. “Why, after more than a century, should we in South Africa still be looking for words for the African landscape and climate?” asks Butler. The answer lies, he argues, in “the Romantic sensibility of our predecessors”:

The wide open spaces, whether here or in America or Australia, provided an excellent “objective correlative” for the Romantic love of the wild and the strange, of the receding horizon. “Vague”, “dim”, “strange”, “vast”, “mystic”, “boundless”, are favourite adjectives in much early South African poetry. In this sort of writing, no particular object is brought into a clear focus, and hence no troublesome proper names or precise epithets are needed. Indeed, “nameless” itself becomes a popular epithet.

(Butler 1991: 47)¹⁷

There is a strong correlation between Romanticism and imperialism. The adventurer, the European explorer of “uncharted” territory, enacts a process of colonisation in the very moment that he gratifies his pioneering spirit’s urge to be free. In recognising the inclination towards Romanticism, “The English Poet in South Africa” and similar essays presage Coetzee’s *White Writing*, van Wyk Smith’s *Grounds of Contest* and other works tracing the broad development in South African English literature from an initial concern primarily with the geography, flora and fauna of Africa to an awareness of the need to engage with the people of Africa – and ultimately,

17. It is significant that Butler consciously separates himself and his contemporaries from their “predecessors” – who did not pay close attention to the landscape and to the local vocabulary for that landscape – for in this light (and taking into account the emphasis on “sense data” in “The Difficulties of Teaching a Non-Indigenous Literature”), Dirk Klopper’s insistence that “Butler’s endeavour to establish a meaningful relation with the South African environment through the creation of an indigenous literary idiom is hardly new ... it can be traced back as far as Thomas Pringle” is less convincing (1991: 239).

with the political struggles of Africa. Yet when the conclusion to “The English Poet in South Africa” identifies hopeful signs of poets writing not about “boundless and unnamed spaces” but about people, those people are the missionaries and explorers “who measured and named” the landscape on behalf of the expanding colonial powers (p. 50). The essay thus avoids the political implications of the link between naming and appropriation.

Similarly, comparing the diaries of settler farmers to the consciously literary works produced by writers like Pringle, Butler emphasises that, because they weren’t “men of letters”, the farmers “weren’t displaying their mastery of the language”; rather, “they were using the language to master their experience of the land”, a land that “happens to be our land” (n.d.).¹⁸ Here naming is deemed a necessary, practical endeavour. Pragmatic map-makers, however, help to reinforce the narrative of domination begun by ideologues and greedy governments. In “The Language of the Land” (1960), Butler celebrates the rich variety of place names throughout South Africa – Khoi, San, Xhosa, Zulu, English, Afrikaans, Portuguese, Dutch, Malay – and the curious histories and mysteries behind them. He attempts to turn these into a metaphor for social unity:

Our dead have left their names side by side on a map. A mountain range can be one, although its peaks may be called Gaika’s Kop, the Hogsback, and the Katberg. One ocean washes Mosselbaai, and George, and Knysna. And the blood in all our veins is red.

(Butler 1960: 86)

This is a fine sentiment, but the tone of the essay is naive, almost deliberately so; Butler acknowledges that the process of naming “is still going on”, as is “the process of re-naming”, but he does not place this in the context of apartheid policies of “naming” and “re-naming” (p. 83). In the wake of the implementation of the Group Areas Act – it had already begun by the time Butler wrote “The Language of the Land”, with the forced removals from Sophiatown and the cynical renaming of that area as “Triomf” – the lyrical celebration of multilingual place names and name changes would prove even less felicitous.

3 “Man’s Defiance of Africa”/Africa’s Defiance of Man

When, in “The English Poet in South Africa”, Butler asserts that “as in frontier life, so in art: neither a beast nor an experience is tamed until it has an acceptable name”, he is nevertheless conscious that delineating

18. This extract is quoted from an undated manuscript for a lecture entitled “SA Diaries” (courtesy NELM), but Butler’s Introduction to *When Boys Were Men* (1969: x) makes the same assertion.

ownership and control of the land is in many ways a European affectation: “Western man can normally only commune with a nature which has been partially tamed” (1956a: 47-48).¹⁹ By implication, a nature that is untamed – the wilderness of Africa – may “inspire a primitive awe”, but the poet will not be able to establish an intimate relationship with it: “One cannot commune with Africa as Wordsworth did with the Lake District. As Aldous Huxley has suggested, lines like those ‘written above Tintern Abbey’ are not produced when there are tigers about, or in a country where devastating droughts and tribal wars are frequent” (1956a: 48).

This is a landscape that has not been tamed for the poet, and cannot be tamed by him. Thus, in “Bronze Heads”, although “rivers and ranges are mapped and properly named/ ... Africa is anything but tamed”.

The portrayal of Africa’s geographical features, both intoxicating and terrifying, in terms of the uncertain place of the European in Africa was an established trope on which Butler built both critical and creative responses. “The English Poet in South Africa” mentions Plomer’s scorpion and Campbell’s Adamastor masks of “a violent, capricious, and sometimes splendid energy”; in Butler’s own work, Africa is a land simultaneously threatening and comforting, its presiding gods or spirits at once impersonal and kenotic.²⁰ Like his “Farmer”, the poet observing the African landscape is “watching something loved but treacherous”. Even in “Karoo Town, 1939”, the bond between the farming community and the “soil” itself is tenuous: the image of a village “strung like a bead of life on the rail” is the first of many in Butler’s work portraying human outposts isolated in the stark Karoo.

In his early work, Butler often wrote and spoke of Africa as “comfortless”, a “frightening continent” with “harsh soil” (1949: 28). Flying home from England during his stint at Oxford, he found himself having to adjust to the horizons of a continent that was “vast, raw, bleak and inhuman in its scale” (Butler 1991: 44). *The Dam* is once again a key text in this regard – even if the formulations found there are crude – for in it, the natural world is not indifferent to human endeavour in the generalised sense that I have already discussed. Instead, the play stresses the specific extremes of the African climate. The chorus asks, “What significance have pride and fear/ In this our universe of rock and water?” (Butler 1953b: 45). When Douglas

19. Ian Buruma, however, observes that many East Asian cultures endorse human domination over the landscape independent of the “Western” pattern: in Japanese horticulture, for example, “nature must be tamed, or at least controlled” – it is “worshipped, yes, but only after it has been reshaped by human hands ... love of nature does not extend to nature in the raw” (2001: 65).

20. Klopper comments that Butler’s apprehension of the Adamastor myth is “characteristically ambivalent” insofar as Butler “both acknowledges its symbolic force and seeks to deny its validity by asserting, precisely, his sense of belonging” (1991: 233-234).

Long's first attempt to build a dam on his Karoo farm fails, he is plunged into crisis and turns bitterly against Africa as a demonised projection of himself: "O let this barren Africa, this me,/ Breed nothing but stones and thorns. No!/ Not even a thorn, not even a stone, nothing!" His original vision is of planting (of ensuring that he and his family "take root"), but in order to undertake his scheme of irrigation in the arid landscape he must change "what God has made". He faces the ecologically conservative criticism of the Afrikaner pastoralist Jan de Bruin, but Sybrand, Jan's son, sees the dam as an opportunity to "master the future" (p. 58). Thus, according to van der Mescht, the dam remains "a symbol of man's defiance of Nature, and of an English-speaking man's defiance of Africa ... a European's attempt at signing his name on an African landscape" (1980: 102).

Although the preindustrial African landscape inspires with its uninterrupted vistas and vast expanses of open terrain, the (European) individual encountering this "newborn world" is made to feel, like young Tom Stubbs in Butler's historical "children's novel" *A Rackety Colt*, "very small": the valleys "seem bigger and more bare, the distances greater, the whole world so lonely and quiet" (1989: 28, 37). *Demea* – the last of Butler's plays to be performed and published – ends in carnage and tragedy as, allegorically, the English-speaking South African (ESSA) fails to bring about peace between the warring factions of Afrikaner and African nationalism; in the final scene of the play, the *mis-en-scene* "slowly disintegrates" and the author's instructions read: "[T]he empty stage should suggest a Nature that is brilliant and hard beneath terrific pressures of light and space" (1990a: 4). The ESSA enterprises of trade and treaty have been confounded. When the British soldiers fighting the Boers in *The Dove Returns* are forced to cover wide stretches of land without signs of human habitation, they deem the semi-desert "immoral": "a building makes sense of things", but in Africa there is too much "bare, bleak veld, miles/ From a road or farm or any reminder/ That man has a place in the scheme of things" (1956b: 40). Gracy's dying wish is to be buried under a tree that will "cross me with its shadow every day", with "a wall round my grave, to keep it human;/ Not, not in the empty veld" (p. 58).

This experience is not, of course, singular to the European-in-Africa. In a 1953 interview, Butler pointed out that growing up "in a countryside which tends to dwarf mankind" stimulated his "passion for man-made objects", among which he listed "Bushman paintings, beads and implements" alongside more recent signs of human habitation and activity (1953a: n.p.). The African landscape and climate are not only "wild", "harsh" and "unwelcoming" to European settlers; the conditions were, objectively, as severe for Khoi/San hunter-gatherers or Xhosa cattle herders as they were for English farmers.²¹ The difference is one of perception.

21. Jared Diamond's anthropological theses in *Guns, Germs and Steel* are of interest here. Without resorting to race-based presuppositions, Diamond explains how

In “Servant Girl”, which appeared in Butler’s first volume of poems, *Stranger to Europe* (1952), the speaker’s inability to understand a song being sung in Xhosa leaves him feeling removed from and foreign to the African landscape. A comparison between early and later versions of this poem reveals several changes. Notably, “hill” becomes “sand-stone hill” – giving, as van der Mescht notes, a “sense of locality” (1980: 18) – while at the same time, the poet’s tongue is described not as “taught” (or “schooled”, presumably as opposed to the servant girl’s lack of education) but as “taut”, because it is “unaccustomed to giving shape to local sensations, feelings and thoughts”.²² Thus, “the speaker’s envy of the girl’s intuitively intimate relationship with her natural environment” emphasises his own alienation. Nevertheless, as an imitation of Wordsworth’s “Solitary Reaper”, the poem suggests the “long view” possibility of different cultural traditions co-existing and belonging within the same landscape – albeit that they respond differently to that landscape.

4 Political Ecology

Given Butler’s debt to Wordsworth and other Romantic poets, studies such as Jonathan Bate’s *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (1991) offer a consciously ecocritical paradigm for reading Butler’s poetry and prose. For example, Bate treats Wordsworth’s “second spring” as an affirmation that, despite “the volatile political order”, there is comfort in “the stability of the notion of ‘spring’, the knowledge that every winter will be followed by a spring which will bring warmth and new life” (1991: 2). It does not require too much contrivance to apply this to Butler’s “Syrian Spring”, or to his predilection for nature-as-transcendence above the realm of human affairs. Yet the conjunction of politics and ecology is richer than this simple opposition suggests.

Insofar as the work produced by a writer on environmental subject matter extends to the polemical, it may be regarded as a form of ecological

Europeans became “accidental conquerors”: European societies developed technologically and “politically” – that is, in terms of social organisation – because the suite of plants and animals found in their geographical location was most suitable for domestication. This was not the case in, for instance, most of Africa, America, or the Polynesian islands. It may not be altogether inaccurate or “racist”, therefore, to depict Africa as inhospitable to certain kinds of human endeavour or activity.

22. Tony Voss, in his review of Butler’s *Collected Poems*, comments that these and other changes in “Servant Girl” (such as the girl’s description as, variously, “Bantu”, “Fingo” and “Xhosa”) are “a small instance of Guy Butler’s dedication to his craft – *ars longa* – and of any poet’s ironic standing in the flow of social change” (1999: 229-230).

activism, or “politicised ecology”. There are instances of this in Butler’s work. Yet the poet’s response to nature – and to human interaction with the natural world – can also take on a quality that I am here calling “political ecology”. This is when the poet’s attitude to the natural environment (specifically, to the human mistreatment of that environment) reflects and complements his approach to human relations (specifically, to human relations under pressure or in conflict).

“Bronze Heads”, lamenting the paucity of artifacts or physical monuments to African culture and history, observes that no African peoples or nations (or so it seemed to Butler in 1954) “have paved a highway, keyed a bridge, or arch/ through which victorious regiments might march” (Butler 1999: 130). Yet these lines also hint that the great feats of architecture are inextricably linked to the bloodshed of organised, massed warfare – only the “old, storied lands” of the Mediterranean that Butler fell in love with could have furnished battlegrounds for the new horrors of World War Two, precisely because their “human record” was based on a history of violence. “Bronze Heads” thus seems to ignore Walter Benjamin’s famous reminder that “there is no document of civilisation that is not at the same time a document of barbarism” (1968: 254).²³

The wish that Africa could have been more thoroughly “mastered” by humans would be modified over the years as signs of the environmental damage caused by such mastery grew worldwide. Butler saw that, in South Africa specifically, a long history of colonial oppression and racial conflict had been shadowed by damage to the environment: the ecological imperative in his work was thus fused with his political dissent. This is particularly evident in the Introduction to *Out of the African Ark* (1988), an alphabetically arranged anthology (co-edited by Butler and his son, David) of poems about the fauna of Africa. The Butlers pre-empt a critical reader’s query over the motivation for a volume dedicated to Africa’s animals at such a crucial political juncture – amidst the violent death throes of apartheid – and present, in response, a reading of South Africa’s human history in terms of that history’s effects on South African fauna and flora.

They begin, inevitably, with the San, articulating a van der Postian reverence for “Man in Balance with Nature” (Butler 1988: 23). A rather simplistic opposition is laid out between these “stone-age hunter-gatherer[s]” (p. 25) and the relative “newcomers” – “pastoralists and agriculturalists”, both black and white, who “depended on domesticated animals

23. *Bursting World* in fact echoes the symmetry of Benjamin’s critique and presents Butler’s “fascination” with Europe – even when he was a student, before he joined the war effort – as anything but a naive admiration: “One might revere Beethoven, but what of Bismarck? One gazed on Michelangelo, but what of Mussolini? One worshipped Shakespeare, but what of Chamberlain? What was it in the continent that made its artists so splendid, and its politicians so terrible?” (Butler 1983: 26).

and on crops” and whose “flocks and herds drove the game away”. The “African” (in this case, as opposed to “European”) pastoralists are described as having, or having had, less sympathy with wild animals than the San, but as possessing nonetheless a tradition of oral narratives, poetry and proverbs in which non-domesticated animals are ubiquitous and have a consistent symbolic function.²⁴ Enter the white settler, “The Gentleman with Horse and Gun, the Destroyer of the Balance of Nature” (p. 29) and, as a result, the object of much censure. The devastating effect of the rifle on natural ecosystems is insisted upon throughout the book, while the dominance achieved by this superior firepower is disparaged:

Nothing can stand before this armed, mounted man. He clears the country to make it safe for his family, his animals and his plants. Anything that dares to kill or eat what he has tamed to kill or eat himself, becomes vermin ... Further, he does not only hunt for these practical reasons: he hunts because he enjoys hunting.

(Butler 1988: 29)

The settlers, so heroically portrayed in Butler's other accounts,²⁵ are lambasted in *Out of the African Ark* (one senses that David Butler's dry sense of humour influenced his father in the editorial tone adopted). Abrasive ecological and political critiques merge:

As relaxation from the routine struggles of protecting and feeding themselves and their flocks, our pioneering grandfathers found some relief in taking pot shots at as many forms of life as they could draw a bead on ... None of them, however, would have set out, deliberately, to shoot the last surviving animal of any species. Such paralysis of imagination would afflict them only when confronted by members of rival human breeds.

(Butler 1988: 195-196)

This satirical manner resurfaces in the book as the Butlers, searching for an animal name beginning with a “Y”, employ Swift's fabrication of the Yahoos in *Gulliver's Travels* (1726). As a species of higher primates bearing a remarkable resemblance to *Homo sapiens*, they are “quite as vicious and greedy ... with the same compulsion to exterminate other species” (p. 255), representing “a threat and danger to all other forms of

24. Urbanisation and urban poverty as a consequence of apartheid – along with the inaccessibility of game reserves to black South Africans – are deemed to have ruptured this tradition, but the Butlers express a hope that “proper conservation, with grassroots support, will restore these fading beasts to the eyes of the people who now know them as proverbs only” (Butler 1988: 27).

25. See Butler (1974b), (1970a) and (1969).

life”.²⁶ Throughout the book we are reminded of the destruction wreaked by humankind, most powerful but least likeable of all the animals in “their zest for killing off [other species], and their own kind”.

Butler’s condemnation of “the gentleman with horse and gun” in *Out of the African Ark* is the culmination of many years of artistic and ethical-intellectual engagement with that ambiguous image. The appeal of Roy Campbell’s “equestrianism”, Butler wrote in an essay on the poet, is not that of the fox-hunter or horse-racer, both of which are signs of man’s dominance over nature. Rather, it lies in the assertion of a deep connection between humans, animals and the life-giving elements of “the earth and the sun”; it is a reminder of “unalienated man”, of a way of life predating the factory and the industrialised city (Butler 1974a: 141). Nevertheless, as Butler notes, it is unclear where the line can be drawn between this “noble” (feudal) icon and the uglier sides of “the great chivalric and aristocratic tradition” – witness Campbell’s fascism and anti-semitism.

In the same essay, Butler likens Campbell to D.H. Lawrence, whose pursuit of “dark gods” lies beneath the surface of Butler’s own brand of primitivism. In *Karoo Morning* (1977), Butler’s first volume of autobiography, the author ministers to his atavistic leanings by reflecting on his childhood experiences of hunting. These were mostly harmless adventures, and for young Butler, hunting a dassie or jackal or springhare was an initiation into the ancient instincts of the land itself. Similarly, “Myths” evokes a powerful moment in which, having “smashed a five-foot cobra’s head to pulp” (Butler 1999: 109) (amongst aloes, under the Karoo sun), Butler did not feel that he had subdued the African landscape – rather, his experience revealed that the manifestations of the European culture he had grown up in were “invaders”, “alien” to the African environment in which they had been planted.²⁷

By contrast, there are depictions of hunting in Butler’s work that reproach hunters for vanquishing the wild animals of Africa. In the settler play *Take Root or Die*, a longsuffering wife brands her husband and his hunting companions as “mad” for assuming that “God made men to be only the most deadly of the many beasts of prey” (1970b: 69). One of the central episodes in *A Rackety Colt* is the elephant hunt that young Tom Stubbs

26. Swift’s tale is assigned a peculiarly South African setting when the Yahoos are blamed for the extinction of the Quagga (docile cousins of their enemies and masters, the Houynyhymms – *Equus Rationalis*).

27. Dirk Klopper reads the poem very differently: “the slaying of the cobra on the sacrificial rock at noon” is an “act of violence against nature”, and “the sudden intrusive presence of the aloes, lichen and clouds is accusative. They bear witness to an atrocity” (1994: 150-52). Thus, “although the speaker experiences a sense of power” as, “gauntleted” by the sun, he is initiated into a knightly order of conquest, he also “loses his innocence and gains insight into his state of alienation as a colonist”.

joins. Butler wrote in a note on the sources used for the novel that the elephant hunt is without basis in Stubbs's reminiscences, and yet he builds to something of a purple patch depicting the young protagonist's reluctant participation in what amounts to an act of slaughter. Driven by financial despair into the brutal ivory trade, Tom nevertheless feels "a sneaking sympathy for the great beasts. It was one thing to be hunted by men with spears and primitive traps, but to be felled by thunder sticks in the hands of creatures you rarely saw" was quite another (1989: 116). The hunt itself seems terribly cruel. Tom's friend and fellow-hunter Ronnie Thackwray is killed, but it is the elephants' suffering that receives the more sympathetic treatment; indeed, it defies description: "Our shots rang out in sequence ... Language can't cope with that noise, nor the screaming of the beasts that followed" (Butler 1989: 116)

The greedy and bloodthirsty actions of human hunters are shown to be no different to the behaviour of other predators. Soon after the elephant hunt, Tom sees vultures descending on the carcasses, then hyenas and jackals: "One jackal had its throat cut by the slash of a vulture's beak and bled to death under a bush – from which his carcass was dragged by an observant hyena"; wild dogs attack an orphaned baby elephant, which haunts Tom with its "high, hysterical screaming" (p. 130). The parallel does not, however, offer any exculpation for the human predators. Our technologically aided capacity for both self-defence and for killing marks us off from other animals: the development of these tools represents our ability to reason (to act against our instincts), and it is this same ability that must govern our treatment of and responsibilities towards the animal kingdom.

A Rackety Colt raises another environmental issue – deforestation. Tom is as uncomfortable with the mantle of the lumberjack as he is with that of the hunter. After three days in a saw pit with the ponderous George Wood, he looks up at "the great, doomed trees" and asks, "What business have we laying them level with the earth?" (p. 86). Wood's docile reply, "We do it because we need the timber", makes Tom explode with anger: "Are our needs everything?" Persistent protest against the too-easy aphorism that "it's Man's business to subdue the earth" constitutes an important aspect of Butler's ecological writing. This particular episode is interesting, however, not simply as an instance of such protest, but rather because trees (as suggested by Dugmore's injunction to "take root") fulfill a vital "need" in Butler's symbology.²⁸

The "poplar, oak or pine" mentioned in "Myths" are European signifiers, and – while these carry deep resonances of a history to which the poet lays claim – when Butler seeks to emphasise his African artistic credentials, he insists that his "own trees" are the "aloe and mimosa", which "twine their

28. Anthony Akal remarks on the prevalence of other forms of "tree symbolism" in Butler's plays – notably *Richard Gush of Salem* and *The Silver Spoon* (2003: 120).

roots around my bones”. “Myths” and “Aloe and Mimosa” are just two examples of an often-repeated motif in Butler’s poetry and prose, but will suffice here to demonstrate a specific “search for synthesis” between indigenous and alien flora. Although they ostensibly “have no history” because “no Christ or Caesar enjoyed the shade/ of their niggardly foliage”, the African trees can nevertheless be reconciled with these twin icons of Butler’s Western heritage: the mimosa produces a crown of “long white thorns”, while the aloe annually bears “new green and scarlet” leaves, like an emperor’s laurel.

The synthesis is not, however, simply an aesthetic or symbolic one. Planting and preserving foreign trees and plants alongside or in place of indigenous species carries practical implications in terms of biodiversity (including animal habitats) and water resources. Still, Butler felt a certain empathy and respect towards the floral “invaders” that have made a home in South Africa. He defended “exotic pest plants” like the Port Jackson willow on the premise that “a weed is, after all, merely a plant in the wrong place”:

There is a desperate need for quick-growing trees ... to provide (a) cheap fuel and (b) light timber for housing. So, far from seeing this plant as a deadly enemy, let us espouse it as an ally, and allocate largish tracts of otherwise stony hillside to its cultivation and proper management. By all means root it out of areas which have a claim to careful ecological protection.

(Butler 1990c: n.p.)

Reciprocally, he anticipated the need for educational programmes to ensure the conservation of indigenous flora. Here he is writing about the Eastern Cape:

There is little hope of our preserving indigenous fynbos areas if they are seen by most of our population as one of the white man’s fanciful luxuries. Indigenous botanical areas should perhaps be open to African herbalists to gather traditional “muti”. We should enlighten the public as to what uses these plants were put (and still are put) ... Botanical guide books and pamphlets should make a point of giving the Xhosa names of plants, and any folklore relating to them.

(Butler 1990c: n.p.)

By referring to the perception of ecological projects as “the white man’s fanciful luxuries”, Butler is acknowledging that, during apartheid, it was sheer hypocrisy for the state to prioritise the careful preservation of natural ecosystems while systematically oppressing the majority of South Africans and forcing them to live in squalour. Such duplicitousness led Es’kia Mphahlele to vent his disgust with the sentimental “Western attachment to animals” (cited in van Wyk Smith 1990: 107); clearly Mphahlele was not suggesting that Africans have no attachment to animals or consideration for environmental matters, but rather that if whites patently did not care about

other (black) human beings, then their ecological concern was misplaced. The corollary to this condemnation is an affirmation of the “political ecology” espoused by Butler. If the crux of power represented by “cantering horses and blazing guns” (Butler 1990a: 61) is both a threat to the natural world and a source of subjugation of one group of people by another, then the resolution of human conflict and the preservation of natural resources are, in fact, mutually inclusive. Thus, although the perennial Europe-Africa theme is integral to ecological problems as they currently exist, it must eventually be transcended in responses to those problems.

In his Introduction to *South Africa: Landshapes, Landscapes and Manscapes*, Butler returns briefly to ideas he had first laid out thirty years before: that “there are no straight lines in nature” (1990b: 7), that the circle is the definitive shape of traditional or undeveloped Africa, and that the straight lines of agriculture or industry represent activities introduced by colonisers from “advanced societies”. These distinctions are not altogether persuasive (indeed, some of the photographs in the book undermine such neat delineations), but the point is not made – as in Butler’s earlier work – to suggest the rich possibilities of interaction between irrational and rational, pre-scientific and scientific peoples. Rather, the tone of the whole Introduction suggests that, while breaking the circle and introducing straight lines does not in itself disrupt the balance of nature, it signals the start of “industry” (farm, factory, mine) and thus of ecological damage.

A counter-trend is “the growing chorus of individuals and governments who see the need to preserve the earth” against the “destruction of our green, breathing wildernesses” (p. 8) and the consequent “effects which threaten our survival” (p. 9). The visual tour de force of Potgieter’s images substantiates Butler’s claim that “the liberties we have taken with nature are insensitive and shortsighted”. Our “daring and power” in industry – abusing the skills that allow us “to dominate nature and subdue the earth to [our] purposes” – prevent a “happy symbiosis” between man and nature; instead of acting as “custodian”, man has become the “exploiter” of “his vulnerable world” (p. 123). Insofar as “European” industrial development and non-sustainable “African” pastoral or agricultural techniques are equally complicit in this exploitation, neither black nor white can abjure the responsibility of reforming land use. In this text, as in various other strands of Butler’s political ecology, the ecological imperative is ultimately able to overcome political divisions.

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