

# Introduction

## Rosemary Gray

This collection of articles is the fourth to incorporate reworked papers from the International Conference on the Humanities in Southern Africa held in late June 2008 (see *EAR* 26(1&2) 2009; *EAR* 27(1) 2010; & *JLS* 26(2) 2010). Assisted by my peer reviewers, I have selected ten articles on literary theory from a superb range of one hundred and thirty-two papers from that joint conference.

What is particularly impressive about this present selection of articles, is the range of theoretical approaches: from production to metacriticism, from theorising about theory to its rigorous application. These ten articles represent a tour de force of various generic categories of writing. Stephen Gray's guiding metaphor in *Southern African Literature: An Introduction* (1979: 14) pertains: "Southern African literature [and South African literary criticism] is like an archipelago".

Any survey of the southern African literary scene should, of necessity, begin with a discussion of Olive Schreiner's seminal text: *The Story of an African Farm* (1873). Any survey, however brief, should indicate the extent and complexity of South African literature. This is precisely what the present collection seeks to do.

Stephen Gray's article "The Koodoo on our Kar(r)oo: Reclaiming and Editing our Literary Heritage" at once celebrates the 125th anniversary of the publication of Olive Schreiner's novel and delineates the importance and pitfalls of the editorial project. In his quest to provide the definitive *African Farm*, Gray provides a scholarly overview of what he calls "the backroom business of text production". What is particularly pertinent to this selection of articles as a whole, is his discussion of English South African usages which, in this text, incorporate many Schreiner neologisms. There are several proto-Afrikaans lexical terms that have, since the first printing of Ralph Iron's novel over a century ago, become "nativised into common usage".

Ileana Dimitriu's article takes up this lexicographical thrust. It argues for the interdisciplinarity of English Studies: for English as a "translated" discipline. More particularly, Dimitriu proposes that "English as a lingua franca (of state, business and tertiary education) has a responsibility to seek communication across languages and cultures". "A 'Translated' Discipline:

English as Intercultural Communication” convincingly argues for the use of translation in the English curriculum.

Marguerite MacRobert’s article “Right before Writing” continues the discussion of the English curriculum, while Harry Sewlall’s “‘Image, Music, Text’: Elvis Presley as a Postmodern, Semiotic Construct” concisely demonstrates the interdisciplinary nature of English Studies. Dawid de Villiers, in turn, sustains both the musical strand evoked by Sewlall and Dimitriu’s injunction for communication across languages.

Inspired by the braided threads of “stimulation and development of South African culture and identity through the development of writing, literary expression and literature” and the promotion of “innovation and new literary forms and genres” (DACST 1998: 28, 31), MacRobert makes a plea for proper preparation, planning and management of the teaching of creative writing; for the “right” foundation or training to inculcate thinking and writing creatively – which form a large part of the matriculation [school-leaving] curriculum.

Quoting Whitmer (1996: x), Sewlall’s opening gambit points to the truism that three words – Jesus, Coke and Elvis – “need no translation to convey their meaning”. Embedded in poststructuralist theory, this article explores the mystique of the Elvis image, asserting that “in crossing the liminal zone between black R & B and white country and western music, Presley, a white southerner, negotiates a fluid, performative identity that characterises the hybrid nature of the rock genre itself”. (One might today make a case for the late Michael Jackson as having continued this borderless legacy.)

Just as Gray and Sewlall tacitly explore the significance to the corpus of writer, Schreiner, and balladeer, Presley, respectively, so Dawid W. de Villiers attempts to determine that of singer/songwriter David Kramer’s historical musical drama *Die ballade van Koos Sas* (2007). Drawing attention to the “heterogeneous, multicultural origins of Afrikaans (as language and cultural matrix)”, this article outlines and elucidates Kramer’s critique – through the character of his self-styled legendary “laaste Boesman”, Sas – of subjection by, “among other things, fixing identities and relations”. De Villiers is persuasive in his claim that Kramer’s critique itself critiques “the taxonomies and ideological imperatives of cultural memory as history”.

Continuing the discussion of an amelioration of the trauma of cultural subjection by a fixing of identities, Sope Maithufi demonstrates how, through the creative act, Zoë Wicomb militates against stereotypical images of black depersonalisation “especially as it pertains to the corporal body”. In this article, entitled “Secular Blackness in Zoë Wicomb’s Short Stories”, Maitufi shows how self-reclamation here accrues from the “ritual enactment” of storytelling; how the nostalgic imperative of revisiting and reclaiming memories of selfhood through conscious artistry is able to authenticate black identity.



Premised on the notion of identities in transition, implicitly raised in the previous two articles, Fetson Kalua explores another aspect of subjection: that of female entrapment in Unity Dow's *The Heavens May Fall*. In this article, identity, that is subjectivity, is predicated on "the idea of the embodied, sexualised and racial 'other'". Kalua argues that Dow's life [as a gendered subject: a female High Court Judge in Botswana] and her fiction "embody the kind of subjectivity that allows for multiple modes of belonging and celebrate borderlands of cultures". "Identities in Transition: The 1990 High Court case and Unity Dow's *The Heavens May Fall*" thus challenges phallogentrism and "other misplaced forms of modernity".

As if in response to the aforementioned articles, the metacritical articles of Ivan Rabinowitz and Michael Chapman point the way forward in literary criticism. In "'Filipendula Literaria': Applied Literary Studies", Rabinowitz unseats critical subjectivity by arguing that "by definition, disengaged literary exegesis ... retreats from the prospect of integrating 'art' and 'life'". It retreats, too, from the prospect of "investing the discipline [of literary criticism] with existential purpose or propensity". Just as MacRobert's article focuses on effective writing, so this article draws attention to effective reading. Rabinowitz investigates ways in which "consciousness is represented to consciousness", in which "readers 'model' consciousness in order to make it available to itself".

In delineating the extent and complexity of southern African literary studies, this selection of articles now comes full circle – from Schreiner at the start to two articles on South Africa's latest Nobel laureate, J.M. Coetzee. (Why, one might ask, does our other much-celebrated Nobel laureate not feature too. The guest editor is in no way culpable, neither are the referees. Of the very many papers presented at the joint conference, none (inexplicably) discusses the works of the redoubtable Nadine Gordimer!)

Michael Chapman continues Rabinowitz's debate on ways of reading. "The Case of Coetzee: South African Literary Criticism, 1990 to Today" provokes discussion of what Chapman claims was, by the late 1990s, in danger of becoming a new orthodoxy, in which literary theory with its highly specialised terminology effectively intruded into the text, becoming a veneer over the reading project, interpenetrating the text and "often erasing the very character that grants the literary work its experiential distinctiveness". This polemical article points to the polarity between "the 'instrumental' (or political) critics and those of 'art' persuasion" both, however, preoccupied with the J.M. Coetzee corpus and, more especially, with *Disgrace*. Chapman, himself a prolific critic of the southern African literary scene, calls for "a new critical project" for "the new millennium, moving beyond 'Disgrace'".

Rick de Villiers answers Chapman's call by providing one such "new" critical approach. In "Narrative (De)construction: Mr Coetzee, in the Basement, with a Quill: A Discussion of Authorial Complicity in J.M.

Coetzee's *Foe*", the analysis mimics the text, presenting itself "as a piece of intertextual writing which questions not only the construction of the novel ... but also its own modes of composition". De Villiers interrogates the credibility of authorship (Susan Barton, *Foe*, Daniel Defoe, J.M. Coetzee) in the novel, inspecting Coetzee's use of punctuation and illustrating "the various ways in which *Foe* betrays the fallibility of language and representation".

I conclude, in defence of the sequence I have settled on in this issue of the *Journal of Literary Studies/Tydskrif vir Literatuurwetenskap*, by invoking once again Gray's (1979: 14) topographical metaphor: "the islands with their peaks protrude in set positions even if one does not readily see the connections between them beneath the surface". This, at first, seemingly diffuse collection of articles is a series of islands connected invisibly below the tidal water. The peaks explicate inter alia, relevance and identity as a social construct, subjectivity, multiculturalism, gendering and "othering", modernity, and interdisciplinarity – ways of seeing (to borrow John Berger's term) that have pre-occupied south(ern) African writers for more than a century. As Stephen Gray (1979: 3) insists: "South Africa is here used metonymically without any rigid sense of geopolitical borders; it is merely a convenient term applied for interim ends".

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