

Editorial

Introduction: Dogs in every corner

Dan Wylie & Joan-Mari Barendse

Dan Wylie lectures in literary studies at Rhodes University, Grahamstown.
Email: D.Wylie@ru.ac.za

Joan-Mari Barendse is affiliated with the Department of Afrikaans and Dutch, Stellenbosch University.
Email: jmbarendse@gmail.com

If you look at almost any late eighteenth- or nineteenth-century painting of early urban settlements like Cape Town or Port Elizabeth, or depictions of African rural life or of trekkers hauling their wagons into the southern African interior, there in a corner, or sitting at someone's feet, or just sloping discreetly along ... is a dog. This is the common status of the dog in our literary texts, too: ever-present but seldom centralised, remarked upon, or explored—let alone accorded agency or a voice. Yet the dog's very ubiquity raises a host of questions. What was the position of the dog in pre-colonial societies? How did local domestications articulate with relations with wild canids such as hyenas, jackals and African painted dogs? In what ways have dogs helped to form our different communities' sense of themselves? What local inflections on dog-breeding, work, protection, and relations with other animals are discernible and important to the unfolding of southern African history? Other animals have been vital to human societies, religions and economies, and have been explored to a degree—William Beinart on sheep, Marguerite Poland on Nguni cattle, Sandra Swart on the horse—though seldom by way of their *literary*—fictional and poetic—representations. Such representations raise yet further questions about the reach and limits of artistry and imagination, of anthropomorphism and the problem of “animal mind”, of symbolism and language itself.

This collection, then, is the first of its kind to touch on such questions as they pertain to southern Africa's dogs. It arose from a conference, a spin-off of Wendy Woodward's successful series of colloquia on animal studies at the University of the Western Cape. The “Dogs in southern African literature” theme was mooted by Dan Wylie and Sam Naidu from Rhodes University, and ably organised by Andries Visagie and Joan-Mari Barendse at Stellenbosch University in April 2017. Karla Armbruster of Webster University was the keynote speaker, and kindly agreed to provide a foreword to the present collection.

Presentations at the conference—not all of which have transpired as articles here—were wide-ranging and enthusiastically received. They also manifested a common difficulty. Although dogs are ubiquitous in our literatures, they are not often so centralised in the narratives or poems that they bear much scrutiny. (Think of how often that phrase *A dog barked* is almost unthinkingly, yet tellingly, interpolated into a story, as an atmospheric filler, but in itself allows for no complex analysis.) Consequently, a number of papers ended up manifesting a fascination with this or that theoretical approach, rather than on the sometimes scanty appearances of dogs in the text ostensibly being studied. Nevertheless, as these articles show, the more one looks, the more do dogs appear—real, symbolic, metaphoric, proverbial. Moreover, advances in theory, especially in the burgeoning areas of literary animal studies, ecocriticism, and post-colonial studies—not to mention biology, neurology, consciousness studies, ecology and animal geography—are making major inroads into explorations of the meanings of animal representations. In our age of, on the one hand, mass breeding and utilisation of some animals, articulating with, on the other hand, mass extinctions in the wild, we are paying increasing attention to the social, ecological and moral importance of animals. Amongst those global theorists invoked in this collection, Jacques Derrida, Donna Haraway, Timothy Morton, and Deleuze and Guattari will be confirmed as particularly influential. In the southern African context, only J. M. Coetzee might be accorded similar stature, notably via his 1999 work *The Lives of Animals*. If Coetzee makes relatively slender appearance in this volume, it is not to question his importance; it rather reflects the fact that his depictions of dogs and of animal rights issues have been repeatedly examined elsewhere, so we actively encouraged participants to seek out previously unresearched representations of dogs. To a lesser degree the same applied to Marlene van Niekerk's *Triomf*, whose dogs have been quite frequently remarked upon. One glaring omission is Percy Fitzpatrick's more-than-famous *Jock of the Bushveld*, which is surely ripe for a post-colonial re-evaluation; that project remains open for some future scholar!

That said, we feel that this collection makes extensive and provocative interventions in the field, a foundation for more comprehensive studies to come. The collection opens with an essay by artist Wilma Cruise, one of whose sculptures adorns our cover. Cruise ruminates on her own art in relation to contemporary theory on animal communication, and communication with animals, including that which lies beyond spoken and written language. Despite this explicitly non-literary thrust, the essay broaches a number of theoretical ideas, themes and philosophical difficulties that reappear in various forms throughout the following articles.

Our demurral about J. M. Coetzee above notwithstanding, he *does* constitute half the focus of Henrietta Mondry's article, which startlingly levels Coetzee's novel *Disgrace* against a Ukrainian-set documentary about an isolated dog-res-

cuier; Mondry argues for both works as exemplars of Foucauldian “heterotopic” spaces, unsettling borderland narratives that question all kinds of former political and ethical assumptions and positions. The two texts are linked in some ways by the mythological trope of the “Dog-man”, an intriguing transnational means of comparing and linking local and global perspectives.

A second north-south comparison is offered by Catherine du Toit, whose article investigates parallels between Michel Houellebecq’s French-language novel, *La Possibilité d’une île* (2005) and *Op ’n dag, ’n hond* (2016) by John Miles. Du Toit also takes us back to the millennia-old trope of the dog as guide, and these modern novels continue to suggest that the agency of dog guides reminds us that the self has meaning only in relation to another and that human concerns are not absolute.

Wendy Woodward’s contribution treats of a genre too much neglected: lyric poetry. She dips into what is doubtless an extensive archive of dog-related poetry, showing how human-canine entanglements, both convivial and adversarial, manifest in the works of poets ranging from Ruth Miller to Mongane Serote. She ends with elegiac poems particular to the very recent past, symptomatic perhaps of shifting attitudes, at least in some sectors of society. In all her analyses, Woodward brings her own poet’s sensibility to bear.

A number of articles deal with canid appearances—domestic dogs as well as wild hyenas and jackals—in Afrikaans literature in particular. They all explore facets of dog entanglements with Afrikaans identity itself, and range from the earliest works in self-identifying Afrikaans to the most recent: a useful “book-end” is Willem Anker’s novel *Buys*, which re-imagines the peripatetic, morally challenging 1840s’ career of the maverick Coenraad de Buys. Anker (who attended the original conference himself) anchors the final section of Gerda Taljaard-Gilson’s article, which provides a useful survey of a range of Afrikaans works. She reveals the antithetical ways in which the dog has been seen as companionable but also as symbolic of humans’ own dark destructiveness, even of death itself. Most intriguingly, Gilson shows how these dog tropes owe as much to African as to European folkloric or mythic antecedents. This survey sets the framework for the articles that follow.

Jacomien van Niekerk, like Taljaard-Gilson, looks both to wild canids and to African — specifically Khoi—folklore as the origin of the Afrikaans *jakkals* and *wolf* (hyena) stories gathered and published by G. R. von Wielligh, and then circulated and re-told in numerous forms so as to become almost ineffably “Afrikaans”. The implication here, as in other of these articles, is that there are powerful congruences between cross-cultural and cross-species communications and (mis) understandings.

Joan-Mari Barendse then analyses in intimate detail a single work, Oswald Pirow’s 1955 story, *Ashambeni*, one of the few works explored in this collection

which is named for and centred on a dog-character. It is, importantly, a reminder that not all cross-cultural or cross-species imaginative ventures are intrinsically benign, inasmuch as Pirow depicts an African man's story through a thoroughly offensive right-wing lens—an aspect of Afrikaner identity now for many uncomfortable to recall.

Even more discomfiting in this respect is the work of Eben Venter, whose novel *Wolf, Wolf* is examined by Wemar Strydom, largely through the now-popular “becoming-animal” conceptualisations of Deleuze and Guattari. Like Mathilda Slabbert (below), Strydom attends to conjunctions between racism, sexism and speciesism—in Venter's case refracted through canine masks, games and actual animals. Here, as in many of this volume's discussions, problematic tensions emerge between depicting “real”, embodied or agentive animals as opposed to animal figures utilised merely as ciphers or symbols for anthropocentric concerns.

Finally in this Afrikaans-related set, Bibi Burger takes us into the futuristic nightmares of Deon Meyer's recent thriller *Fever*, in which dogs, especially a roaming and uncontrolled pack of dogs attack the protagonists; this attack provides an opening for Burger's meditation, via the ecological theories of Timothy Morton, on crucial contemporary debates about humans' capacity and propensity to control nature or “agrilogistics” (exemplified by the domestication of the dog) as opposed to recognising our more complex entanglement with it (what Morton calls “ecognosis”).

Mathilda Slabbert focuses on two very recent short stories, one by Ken Barris, the other by Sally-Ann Murray. Both feature dogs strongly as metonymic in particularly sharp and complex ways of their human protagonists' politics, gender conceptions, and senses of belonging in a divisive and racialised suburban South Africa. Murray's evocation of a dog shelter, figurative of many kinds of marginalisation and uncaring, echoes Mondry's analysis of Coetzee and Tyulkin, all symptomatic, in Slabbert's view, of South Africa's communal failure to address the needs of the vulnerable.

A trio of essays takes us north of the Limpopo. Innocent Dande and Sandra Swart provide a wide-ranging survey of canine representations in Zimbabwean archival sources, popular media formats, and Shona-language literatures. They show how dog evocations in traditional and proverbial lore ramify complexly into the politics and literatures of unfolding phases of Zimbabwe's conflicted history.

In contrast to this survey of fascinating and otherwise inaccessible material, Pat Louw — an established authority on Doris Lessing—takes just one short story of the Nobel Prize-winner's extensive oeuvre, “A tale of two dogs”. Louw shows how the differing treatment of the dogs therein reflects tensions and flaws within Rhodesia's colonial society, and argues that even in this early piece Lessing exhibits what might be termed a post-colonial stance.

Finally, Dan Wylie brings us into the contemporary period, examining two novels set in the turmoil of Zimbabwe's post-2000 land acquisitions, Graham Lang's *Place of Birth* and Ian Holding's *Unfeeling*. His exploration exhumes the ever-present role of dogs on all "sides" of the farm takeovers, and argues for contextualising them within a more comprehensive multispecies history of this phase. Wild animals as prey as well as the industry of livestock-for-food intersect in numerous ways with dogs' lives and their human owners racialised politics of ownership. Above all, dogs emerge here as victims.

This contrasts with the depictions explored in many if not most of the preceding articles, in which dogs are portrayed either as having symbolic power or as embodying serious threats, both bodily and existential. Literary representations of South Africa's dogs reflect those elsewhere on the globe, in which positive notions of dogs—as domesticated, companionable and communicable, malleable, helpful—wrestle with the negative—as potentially wild or feral, uncontrollable, ineluctably different, hapless or usefully dangerous. In various existential ways, dogs are a means by which we define and gauge our very humanity. At the same time, our literary dogs can scarcely evade being symbolic of southern African localities and societal specifics—particularly of racial dynamics in both farm and (sub)urban environments. Much remains open to further exploration, from the police dog to the township stray, and especially in southern Africa's other minority languages, but we are confident that the present collection makes a substantial start.