



**Journal  
of  
Namibian Studies**

*History, Politics, Culture*

**32 / 2022**

Otjivanda Presse.Bochum

ISSN 1863-5954 (print)  
ISSN 2197-5523 (online)

**Journal of Namibian Studies**  
**History Politics Culture**

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**Review:** Sarala Krishnamurthy, Nelson Mlambo and Helen Vale, (eds.), *Writing Namibia Coming of Age*, Basler Afrika Bibliographien 2022.

Namibia, richly endowed with game, has a fine record for conservation of this vital resource. Some of these splendid creatures wander through game reserves. A literary compilation of this nature is akin to visiting one of these reserves. The fences are the perimeters of what is included and excluded. The three editors are the ones who stock the reserve and preserve balance. And each of the texts is part of the abundant life, each one true to her/his/their own nature, living out their sense of presence.

This might be an image that carries us into this well-stocked game reserve of a book. I recall humanist Walt Whitman, poet, essayist and journalist, in his *Song of Myself*:

*I think I could turn and live with animals,  
they are so placid and self-contain'd,  
I stand and look at them long and long...  
Not one is dissatisfied, not one is de-  
mented with the mania of owning things,  
Not one kneels to another, nor to his  
kind...*

There is a democracy in the way the entries coexist in this literary reserve, this space. The informative Introduction and Contents page serve as a travel guide to this particular Namibian game reserve, rich in diversity and voice:

“This volume consists of a total of 17 chapters which engage with the broad theme of writing Namibia from different angles that are free from restrictions of what might be called area studies. Literary works discussed in this new volume are

wide-ranging and encompass creative writers in English, Afrikaans, German and Oshiwambo, and cover all four genres of creative writing, viz., poetry, drama, fiction and the autobiography.” (Introduction).

Part of this rich tradition of conservation within Namibia includes the vision of what developed into the Gondwana Collection. Around the time of Namibian independence, a visionary group bought overgrazed farmland, took down fences and promoted eco-tourism, restoring wildlife and vegetation. In this literary selection, these entries, some of them individual, some of them collective, take down academic fences and enlarge the boundaries, as the invisible is made visible, the silent given voice and all welcomed into the park.

Metaphors of course cannot be pushed to absurdity. They only take us so far. So there are no predators in this book, where one article claims space or sovereignty over another. To shift to another metaphor – the texts are rich in imagery – the entries all graze equally in each other’s company, a kind of Noah’s Ark of writer and subject navigating the sea of sand after a cataclysmic colonial history of destruction akin to the Biblical flood. The volume, one of a trilogy, brings with it the promise of a dove of peace with the branch of reconstruction and new possibilities for identity in its beak.

There is reference to wildlife and ark metaphors in a few of the texts. In his erudite entry, worthy of its own review, André du Pisani reminds us “Essentially, a therianthrope is a shaman who has partially or almost entirely transformed into an animal during the trance dance. In the spirit world, shamans take on the

appearance of various animals and absorb the spiritual power (potency) of the specific animal.” He also includes among his stunning photographs, for example, an elephant painting at Hornkranz-South.

Another elephant roams through the text. “The selected texts for this chapter include reference to *Taming my Elephant* (2016) by Tshiva Trudie Amulungu, and *Catharsis in Namibian Women’s Autobiography* (Magdalena Cloete and Sarala Krishnamurthy). Rich in diversity, the volume also addresses the elephant in the room. (See *Dealing with Trauma and the Limits to Liberation* for academic, author and political analyst Henning Melber’s engagement with ex-detainees and Mercy Chiruvo-Mushonga and Nelson Mlambo’s *Representations of Post-Independence Leadership in Selected Namibian Poetry*.)

Ecology emerges as a seminal theme in Jean Lombard’s consideration of George Weideman’s “consciousness of broader, holistic connections. Weideman wrote with the definite conviction that literature could help retrieve the primal connections between humanity and nature. His holistic vision, which includes a strong ecological consciousness.”

The Ark metaphor arrives in *Ecocriticism and Verse: Insights from Tales of the Rainbow: A collection of poems in English...* (Swama Simaneka, Kandali Andimba and Jairos Kangira):

“This study is couched in the Ecocriticism theory. It focused on the scrutiny of ecological implications and human-nature relationships in literary text...analysing the poets’ views on humankind’s relationship with the natural environment through their poems...The Rainbow is stylistically prominent...expressing a reading on

anecdotes of hope and harmony as rainbows are renowned for their symbolism of God’s mercy and the promise he made to Noah, and all mankind not to destroy the world again after the great worldwide flood (Genesis 9: 13–16)... Ecocriticism has a related interest in animal welfare and the representation of animals.”

The volume is inclusive. The editor trilogy stress that “Literature as a concept has been defined broadly so that new expressions of literature and narrative, such as rock art, are also included”. In *Mindscapes: The story of Namibia in art and stone*, emeritus professor and polymath André du Pisani writes:

“San rock art and its reading is a form of visual literature, history, politics, visual narrative and social change, for it provides important markers of all of these. It is also a symbolic and virtual narrative that tells stories from the past and about the three tiers in the cosmology of the hunter-gatherer. It is about animals and ‘signs’, about a tangible ‘other world’.”

As did its predecessor, *Writing Namibia Literature in Transition* (2018), this second collection takes down other literary fences, extending the debate, as in: *The Significance of Oshiwambo Wedding Songs* where ceremony involves lineages, villages and the entire community (Petrus Angula Mbenzi) which grazes side by side with *Life Stories of Namibian Child Refugees: A Literature Review* (Yvonne Niekrenz, Caroline Schmitt and Matthias D. Witte) plus an examination as to whether the crime narrative can be seen as an explanation or rather an allegory of Namibia’s past and present: Julia Augart’s *Crimes in the Colony*. Reading

Giselher W. Hoffmann's novel *Diamantenfeber* as a metaphor of German-Namibian History and the author (Weideman) seeing himself "as a jester and a trickster" (Jean Lombard). Sarala Krishnamurthy and Alexandra Tjiramanga explore *Herero Genocide Survivor Narratives*: "Trauma theory has gained a lot of traction in the last thirty years in psychoanalytical criticism and literary studies."

Silence (another elephant in the Namibian room) is given voice in several texts. Authoring the "*Unspeakables*", *Moralising the Public Sphere: A Literary Examination of Social Commitment and the Artistic Vision* in Sifiso Nyathi's works (Litula Leena and Nelson Mlambo).

In 1990, coincidentally the year of Namibian independence, Cecily Lockett's *Breaking the Silence: A Century of South African Women's Poetry* arrived on the bookshelves. It is a sad and sobering thought that more than twenty years later, silence still shrouds Namibian women's voices. They are a vital part of *Writing Namibia Coming of Age* for we have not yet come of age. These texts refer to gender representations in cultural productions, as in *Catharsis in Namibian women's autobiography* (Magdalena Cloete and Sarala Krishnamurthy).

Political leadership gone awry offers readers another elephant in the Namibian room. *Representations of Post-Independence Leadership in Selected Namibian Poetry* (1990–2020) (Mercy Chiruvo-Mushonga and Nelson Mlambo) shares poetry (Joseph Molapong and Axaro Thaniseb) depicting leadership emanating from "greed, malice and corruption". The authors quote Palestinian-American professor of literature at Columbia and

formative voice in postcolonial studies, Edward Said's caution: "You leaders cannot continue to victimize someone else just because you yourselves were a victim once – there has to be a limit." Here is part of a Molapong poem – *The Scars on my Skin* – endorsing these words:

*The hopeless faces I have seen  
Asking for explanation/  
Answers to their plight  
The cry of a community  
Forgotten by fat politicians*

The authors also reference Frantz Fanon, psychiatrist and political philosopher:

"Before independence, the leader generously embodied the aspirations of the people for independence, political liberty and national dignity. But as soon as independence is declared, far from embodying in concrete form the needs of the people, in what touches bread, law and the restoration of the country to the sacred hands of the people, the leader will reveal his inner purpose: to become the general president of that company of profiteers...".

Mercy Chiruvo-Mushonga and Nelson Mlambo argue that through poetry, authors have presented their "purest and raw thoughts and feelings about the post-independent Namibian society. Greed emerges as the malaise that defines Namibian leadership to the extent that true independence will remain a myth if the leadership does not change its ways." Greed is indeed a colonial and post-colonial criminal act. In the final chapter, *Interrogating the narrative "#MenAreTrash" in Namibian women's spoken poetry with a focus on Gender Based Violence* (Frieda Etuhole Mukufa and Sarala Krishnamurthy), a

prevalent and heart-rending issue is tackled through the Spoken Word.

Henning Melber engages with another elephant – the ‘unsaid’ aspects of Namibian history which continue to haunt contemporary society. His entry point is that while public holidays commemorate fallen heroes “no room is afforded to commemorate and reflect on another chapter of the struggle history, personified by the few hundred so-called ex-detainees who survived torture and the ordeal of being kept in dungeons. . . . It is estimated that thousands of others accused of treason as South African spies had disappeared and not survived.”

Other entries offer literary theory and meta criticism as in a critique of western scholarship and insights as to the unconscious biases that assume neutrality in an act of writing. *Queering the Archive: African praxis in performative writing* (Nashilongweshipwe Mushaandja) presents the argument that Performative Writing is a creative-critical approach of scholarly writing that transgresses the normative and conventional rubrics of academic discourse.

A brief comment on the language of the texts since words determine our perceptions of reality and consequent interpretation of story, influencing the intent of our quest. While some authors still trade in academic rhetoric, for me, from fossilised Jurassic Park, I found it refreshing to find the arrival of words usually taboo in academia. Some texts endorse Albert Einstein’s call for simplicity on the other side of complexity. I enjoyed phrases such as “Painted in miniature, the panel is truly remarkable for its compactness, energy, intimacy and spirituality” (Andre Du

Pisani), and in other chapters the extensive inclusion of oral voices inviting the reader to be listener, such as in Stephan Mühr’s *Oral Traditions in German-Namibian Literature*. Another example appears in the spoken poetry included in *Interrogating the Narrative*. Here is an excerpt from Childhood Trauma by Tangi Uushona:

*When I was little I told my mom I wanted to be Catholic, and I was 6,  
So yeah it probably sounded a little off-ish but it wasn't because I understood the culture, It's cause that way every once a week on Sundays,  
I'd get to see my Father.*

I’m reminded of a recent leadership publication, Kosheek Sewchurran’s book, *Sounding the Depths of Leadership* (2022). Sewchurran is Director of the Executive MBA programme at UCT. His choice of vocabulary in this philosophic text privileges words normally taboo in leadership debate or academic rhetoric – such as ‘soul’, ‘goodness’, ‘happy’, ‘consciousness’ and ‘joy’. *The Book of Joy* (the exchange between the Dalai Lama and Bishop Desmond Tutu) and *Wabi-Sabi – Japanese Wisdom for a perfectly imperfect life* are included in the EMBA reading curriculum.

I await with interest the third volume of the trilogy. Basler Afrika Bibliographien, in its generosity, looms huge on the Namibian literary landscape in its faithfulness and consistency as publisher of many a volume. There is an African legend where Elephant sacrificed his life at a time when animals only ate each other and feared decimation. Elephant offered that after death when it became a mighty spirit, legs and trunk would become trees, tail the

branches, tusks the roots, ears and tendons plants, hide would become grass. The editors and publisher, in presenting this game reserve of a book, offer this kind of generosity.

The volume calls for responses, as does this review. I trust it will initiate debate. There is a Chinese proverb, "Better to do without book than believe everything they say." This is an invitation to engage in respectful responses.

I wish to apply Walt Whitman's response to his fellow creatures (*Song of Myself*) to editors Sarala Krishnamurthy, Nelson Mlambo and Helen Vale:

*So they show their relations to me and I  
accept them,  
They bring me tokens of myself, they  
evinced them plainly in their possession.*

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