

# ABSTRACTS

5<sup>th</sup> Annual Amazwi

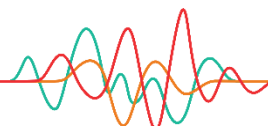
**Literature Heritage Ecology Conference**

25 and 26 March 2026 | Makhanda

Conference theme

**People and Other Animals**

*The pulse of  
South African stories*



## KEYNOTE ADDRESS

LUCY GRAHAM, UNIVERSITY OF JOHANNESBURG

### *BRUTUS AND THE BIRDS*

This paper contributes to scholarship on the environment and climate change by examining wordscapes in Dennis Brutus's poetry, and specifically in his poetry about birds. While Brutus has been acclaimed as a poet of protest and political revolt, his work has not yet been examined through an ecocritical lens. I find this strange, given his involvement in the 2002 summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg (also known as "Rio+10"), where he organised 30 000 people to march on Sandton against the UN for ignoring the climate crisis, and the fact that his last public speech before he died was an indictment of climate change. Moreover, in his poetry from the 1990s onwards one can see a marked concern about environmental destruction. In his early work, notably his prison writings, birds appear as a symbol, but by the 1990s he began to apply pressure to the ordinary meanings of words to write the living, breathing animal in relation to impending environmental catastrophe, thus circumventing two problems with writing about animals, namely an inclination to write the animal as a mere symbol or allegory of the human condition, and a tendency to see ecology through the lens of Platonic idealism. Furthermore, examining Brutus's work through the lens of decolonial ecology as conceptualised by Malcolm Ferdinand reveals "modernity's colonial and environmental double fracture", a "fracture [that] separates the colonial history of the world from its environmental history" (Ferdinand Decolonial Ecology, 3). As such, Brutus's work breaks from what Lesley Green has called "the unbearable whiteness of green" by exploring how inequality, colonialism/neocolonialism and environmental destruction intersect.



### *Biography*

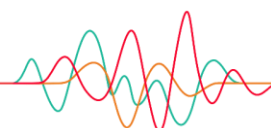
Lucy Graham is an Associate Professor in the Department of English at the University of Johannesburg. She is the author of a monograph on representations of gender-based violence in South African literature (*State of Peril: Race and Rape in South African Literature*, OUP, 2012), and numerous peer-reviewed articles and book chapters. Her research interests are South African and African literature and culture, and debates on intersectionality and decoloniality. Her new work includes a focus on ecocriticism, including cultural rights and the environment.

### **Mbali Khumalo**

#### ***Gcina Mhlophe as a practitioner of South African Black Theatre***

This paper considers Gcina Mhlophe as a practitioner of South African Black Theatre whose storytelling draws deeply from indigenous folklore to help make sense of what it means to be human. Through animal stories, myth, and oral performance, Mhlophe uses the wisdom of the animal kingdom to speak about values such as care, responsibility, community, and belonging. Her work shows how stories have long been used to orient African children within the world. Not as separate from nature, but as part of it.

By looking at selected stories and performances, this paper explores how animals in Mhlophe's work function as teachers rather than metaphors, carrying knowledge about how to live well with others, both human and non-human. Drawing on Black Theatre, indigenous ways of knowing, and social constructionist thinking, the paper argues that Mhlophe's storytelling is both cultural and political work. It preserves memory, resists colonial ways of seeing the world, and offers young audiences a language for understanding themselves, their environment, and their place within it. In this way, her work continues to shape ethical imagination and cultural grounding in contemporary South Africa.



**Simphiwe Mpho Zondani and Charne Bronkhorst**

***Human as 'Other Animal': Ecosocially interrogating the persistence and insistence upon anthropocentrism in Bazterrica's Tender is the Flesh (2020)***

Drawing on Joel Kovel's 'Ecosocialism as a Human Phenomenon,' and Mogobe Ramose's 'African Philosophy through Ubuntu,' this paper offers a close Ecosocialist and philosophical reading of Agustina Bazterrica's *Tender Is the Flesh* (2020), a novel where the slaughter, consumption, and subjugation of animals for meat are inverted following a viral pandemic that renders them inedible. In response, governments legalise and sanction the breeding and consumption of humans for meat. Within this new dispensation, humans bred for consumption are termed "head," a linguistic operation that dehumanises them through animalistic nomenclature and reduces them from subjects to objects of neoliberal consumption.

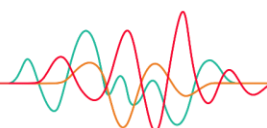
This paper argues that while the tension between what is considered human and animal is explored and satirised within the hyperreal simulacrum of the text, the original human/animal dichotomy is ultimately reinforced through the ontologisation of the class of humans bred for consumption, casting them as animals, and therefore as 'other'.

As such, the novel paradoxically (both) critiques anthropocentrism while simultaneously reinscribing its logic, revealing the persistence and ideological resilience of anthropocentrism even within a speculative critique.

**Nthabiseng R JahRose Jafta, North West University**

***PeoPlanters: Ecological poetry, ethnobotany and indigenous knowledge in Sesotho literature. "Ba re mmao ke mobu, ntatao ke peo"***

This paper is anchored in the line "Ba re mmao ke mobu, ntatao ke peo" from JahRose's poem 'Mmabasootho', written in Sesotho. The poem-song invokes in the chorus Setshwana, understood here as the darker one, the child of the soil as an ecological and ontological figure through which human life is imagined as emerging from land and plant reproduction. Soil and seed are positioned as parental forces, locating the human body within vegetal and earthly genealogies. Confirming that language is indeed land. Engaging the conference theme "People and Other Animals," the paper extends multi-specie inquiry beyond animal life to include plants and soil as active participants in shared ecological worlds. Drawing on ethnobotanical research and ecological poems composed in Sesotho, the paper demonstrates how plants appear as ancestors, healers, witnesses, and ethical interlocutors within Indigenous Knowledge Systems. These poetic representations foreground relationality, care, and reciprocity as foundational ecological values linking humans, other animals, plants, and land. Methodologically, the paper brings ecocritical and decolonial literary analysis into conversation with indigenous epistemologies grounded in language, orality, and place-based knowledge. Poetry is approached as both creative practice and ecological archive, preserving plant knowledge, healing traditions, and land memory threatened by ecological degradation and epistemic erasure. By foregrounding Mmabasootho and Setshwana as a theoretical concept of soil-bound personhood, this paper argues that Sesotho ecological poetry offers vital resources for reimagining multispecies coexistence. It insists that plants, alongside people and other animals, are central to indigenous ecological thought and to the cultivation of ethical relations in times of environmental crisis.



**Slindokuhle Tshisevhe, uMsunduzi Museum**

***Crafting Identity: Beadwork, textiles, and the economy of meaning in KZN: A focus on traditional crafts, their makers, and their evolving meanings in modern society.***

This paper examines beadwork and textile traditions in KwaZulu-Natal as sites where identity, heritage, and human-animal relationships are continuously crafted and reinterpreted. Historically embedded in social systems of kinship, ritual, and status, these material practices draw deeply on ecological knowledge and the symbolic use of animal-derived materials such as hides, fibres, dyes, and motifs that reference livestock, wildlife, and ancestral cosmologies. Through an interdisciplinary lens that brings together literary studies, heritage studies, and material culture analysis, the paper explores how craft functions as a language through which relationships between people and other animals are narrated, negotiated, and remembered.

Focusing on contemporary craft makers, the paper traces how traditional forms adapt within modern economic contexts shaped by tourism, urbanisation, and global markets. While beadwork and textiles are increasingly commodified, they continue to carry layered meanings that speak to gender, labour, spirituality, and ecological belonging. The “economy of meaning” surrounding these crafts reveals tensions between preservation and innovation, authenticity and adaptation, and sustainability and survival.

By situating KwaZulu-Natal craft practices within the broader theme of People and Other Animals, this paper argues that material culture offers a vital archive of interspecies relationships. It demonstrates how craft not only reflects human engagements with animals and environments but also actively shapes ethical, cultural, and economic imaginaries in contemporary South African society. In doing so, the paper contributes to ongoing conversations about heritage, ecology, and the entanglement of human and non-human lives in the making of identity.

**Alan Northover, University of South Africa**

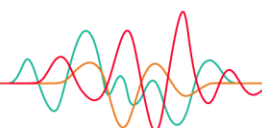
***The humanimal sculptures of Dylan Lewis***

The Dylan Lewis Sculpture Garden outside Stellenbosch is home both to many of Dylan Lewis’s human and animal sculptures and a sanctuary of indigenous vegetation. This paper seeks to use indigenous knowledge systems in an exploration of the sculptures’ significance. While Lewis himself and Ian McCallum, the eco-poet whose work Lewis references, acknowledge the importance of the theories of psychoanalyst Carl Gustav Jung as a key to understanding his sculptures, this paper applies the shamanistic and neuropsychological model of South African archaeologist David Lewis-Williams to illuminate his work. A key question concerns the degree to which Lewis blends Western and African epistemologies in his human, animal and humanimal sculptures. A related question involves how the sculptures should be viewed. The paper argues that the sculptures are better viewed as expressions of a universal life force than as mere representations of objects. The paper concludes with a reflection on the relevance of Lewis’s sculptures in a world where animal and human lives are increasingly objectified and instrumentalised.

**Itumeleng Percyval Ngalo, Arts practitioner, writer, and cultural producer**

***Literature and ecology***

This paper explores the dynamic intersections between literature and ecology, arguing that literary texts offer vital ways of understanding, imagining, and responding to contemporary environmental crises. Drawing on South African and global eco-literary traditions, the study examines how writers use narrative, metaphor, and memory to foreground ecological vulnerability while also offering alternative modes of coexistence with the natural world. By analysing a range of genres—including fiction, poetry, and life writing—the paper highlights how literary works both



document ecological change and challenge dominant extractivist worldviews. The discussion also considers how literary heritage institutions can foster ecological consciousness through preservation, curation, and public engagement. Ultimately, the paper proposes that literature acts not only as a mirror to environmental realities but also as a transformative space for rethinking human–nature relationships, imagining sustainable futures, and cultivating a more ethical environmental sensibility.

**Marike Beyers, Amazwi Museums**

***What does it mean to be human, perhaps only the animals can know: Ceridwen Dovey's stories in conversation with literary representations of animals.***

Ceridwen Dovey's collection of short stories 'Only the Animals' presents the stories of ten animals, each killed in a human conflict of the past century or so. Their stories are told in the voice of the souls of each animal and pay homage to a human writer who has written imaginatively about animals during the same time span. This paper will touch on responses to Dovey's work in terms of anthropomorphism and posthumanism and discuss the stories in terms of the role literature can play in our understanding of the relational nature of all living creatures in this world.

**Zongezile Matshoba, Amazwi Museums**

***Human-animality: African Musing***

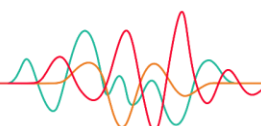
From the beginning (creation) animals came first, then came the humans. Strangely, man was given dominion over animals (with no reason/s ever forwarded). Some animals obeyed the man; others left for the jungle. Humans have, ever since, been juggling in between these animals in various ways, loving them, caring for them, fearing them, hunting them, drawing them, writing them, photographing them, doing all sorts of things that fascinate humans.

Africa is seen or perceived by some in the west as a wild, dark continent where Tarzan lived and was raised (in the Congo basin). This paper aims to look at Africans and their interactions with animals, for example through clan names, folklores, use of language, et cetera. It will pay a particular focus on isiXhosa indigenous classics. Our indigenous languages have been enriched too. Furthermore, it will look at how our indigenous literatures feature a wide variety of animals metaphorically, not as characters with a primary focus but to symbolise human culture and societal issues.

**Dan Wylie, Rhodes University**

***Jock of the Bushveld's other animals: A multispecies reading***

Not without reason, most treatments of Percy FitzPatrick's classic *Jock of the Bushveld* (1907) have focused almost exclusively on the plucky character of the eponymous dog. An occasional voice has queried FitzPatrick's elision of the horrors of migrant labour, the grim realities of mining, and the contemporaneous eradication of the region's wildlife. Though almost all of Jock's exploits involve other animals, the roles and literary representation of those animals have scarcely been explored. Yet the book is, as FitzPatrick himself stated, "a hunting tale". His treatment of wildlife – kudu, crocodile, lion, baboon – as well as of the captive stock – horses, mules and trek oxen – is at times richly insightful, but also societally blinkered. Almost every page of the novel evidences a world of multispecies interdependencies, an intertwining of relationships fundamental to the society's very survival and to the narrative itself.



**Isabel Rawlins, University of Zululand**

***Bad beetles: Exuberance and unease in Henrietta Rose-Innes' Nineveh.***

In Shelley's "The Sensitive-Plant", the figure of the Lady distinguishes between insects as pests and pollinators, treating both with care. The poem thus demonstrates an early Romantic articulation of ethical attention to insects. Like Shelley's Lady, Katya Grubbs, the protagonist of Rose-Innes's novel *Nineveh* (2011), runs a company that removes insects carefully rather than exterminating them. Various critics note the novel's engagement with human-insect relations: Samuelson (2012) identifies "porosity" both between urban spaces and between living organisms; Woodward (2014) reads Katya's insect-approximation as feral embodiment; Barendse (2018) recognises Katya's kind and ethical treatment of insects, and Byrne (2020) casts insects as stand-ins for the racialised Other. Following Green's (2023) call to take the more-than-human world seriously rather than allegorically, I focus on the unease provoked by insects as "pests". What compels us to reach for the Doom or call pest control? Peterson's (2025) argument is useful: the extreme exuberance of autonomous nonhuman organisms, like algae, provokes anxiety by challenging human exceptionalism. In *Nineveh*, insect swarms generate just such unease, exposing the illusion of human control. Read this way, the novel's human-insect relations meditate on exuberant life, resonating with Romantic reflections on the nonhuman and with concerns about the present-day insect apocalypse.

**Carol Leff, Independent**

***An ecocritical reading of Aimee Nezhukumatathil's Oceanic and Sally Huband's Sea Bean.***

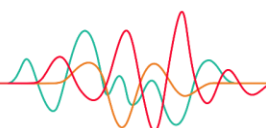
This paper offers a creative, ecocritical reading of Aimee Nezhukumatathil's poetry collection "Oceanic" (2018) alongside Sally Huband's creative nonfiction work, "Sea Bean" (2023), with a focus on human relationships with marine animals. In *Oceanic*, sea creatures such as jellyfish, dolphins, and whales are not mere symbolic backdrops. Rather, these animals are active presences that shape human feeling. *Sea Bean* complements this poetics through its careful, tactile engagement with ocean-drifting matter and the coastal ecologies that sustain both human and nonhuman life. Both *Oceanic* and *Sea Bean* foreground the shared vulnerability of animals, plants, and humans within marine systems. Drawing on hydrofeminist and blue humanities theory, I argue that both texts invite an ecocritical approach grounded in multispecies entanglement rather than human exceptionalism. Through close reading and reflective analysis, the paper shows how poetry and creative nonfiction can function as modes of ecological attunement. Both *Oceanic* and *Sea Bean* are creative offerings that illustrate the possibility of more ethical relations between humans and other animals during the current era of ocean precarity. This paper illustrates how works such as these are significant contributions to emerging conversations in blue humanities, marine cultural heritage, and environmental care.

**Prof. Garth Mason ([masongj@unisa.ac.za](mailto:masongj@unisa.ac.za)) and Prof. Deirdre Byrne ([byrnedc@unisa.ac.za](mailto:byrnedc@unisa.ac.za))**

**University of South Africa**

***"Forgive, spine-covered leaf, soft-bodied spider": The politics of human relationships with animals in Jane Hirshfield's poetry***

Jane Hirshfield's ecological poetry has become increasingly political over the course of her career, with the publication of *Ledger* in 2020, during Donald Trump's first term as President of the US, marking a significant milestone in her activism for the natural world. Following the White House's silencing of scientific findings about climate change and the subsequent March for Science on 22 April 2017, Hirshfield's poetry became used as a rallying cry for protesters who wanted to see enhanced environmental justice. Her 2004 poem "Global Warming" was cited



in a lawsuit over environmental rights, and “Let them not say”, which was published on the day of Trump’s inauguration, became, in her words, “something of an anthem poem for activism” (2022).

In this paper we examine the trajectory of Hirshfield’s poetic representation of relationships between animals and humans through the lens of Engaged Buddhism. We find that, although she has consistently expressed compassion for animals, in line with the heritage of Buddhist thinking, her poetry has shifted towards active contestation of denialism and anti-science policies in government. This is undertaken in the name of the natural world as a whole, but in the paper we focus on Hirshfield’s advocacy of animal rights and of a deeper, more understanding and inclusive vision of animals, even when their ways are predatory or incomprehensible. This is exemplified in the poem “Calmness” (1997: 48), where a woman watches a hyena eating parts of her body with equanimity. Hirshfield suggests that this is only possible through a non-dual understanding of the woman’s relationship with natural phenomena.

## 26 March

**Shannon Morreira, University of Cape Town**

***Untenable fictions on the urban edge: A tale of two trees and the Hadedas Ibis***

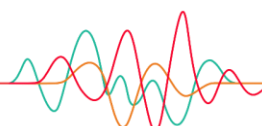
*There is no space on this planet that is outside a living system. The nature/society boundary must be recognised for what it is: an untenable fiction.* (Green, 2020:208)

On the urban edge of Cape Town, less than 100 metres from Table Mountain National Park, sits an old farmhouse, framed on its north and south side by two enormous *Ficus Natalensis* trees. This is the house in which I live. In the South tree, each year, a family of hadedas returns to nest. The symmetry of the two trees, framing the house, is not a product of chance but of human intervention. The two trees, estimated to be around 130 years old, were deliberately planted, as while *Ficus Natalensis* is indigenous to other parts of South Africa, it is not indigenous to the Cape. Hadedas, too, are also new arrivals that were not present in Cape Town until approximately twenty years ago. In 2022, the trees were put forward for status as Champion Trees – trees with special significance which are eligible for protection under the 1998 National Forests Act. This paper traces the process of this application, alongside the life and death of five broods of hadedas, as a means of examining contemporary ideas of heritage and ecology in public discourses in South Africa. I focus particularly on the ways in which ideas of authenticity and belonging surface in these discourses.

**Catherine Rudolph, Rhodes University**

***“Now you have also begun to speak to dogs!”: Agency, Voice and Relation Across Difference in Es’kia Mphahlele’s Mrs Plum and K. Sello Duiker’s Hidden Star***

Looking at Es’kia Mphahlele’s novella *Mrs Plum* (1967) and K. Sello Duiker’s posthumous novel *Hidden Star* (2006), this paper considers the differing modes of relation between the Black protagonist and the central dog figures. In both Mphahlele’s white apartheid suburb and Duiker’s post-apartheid township, space is constructed through interspecies relationality and its attendant power relations. In the first instance, dog-ownership functions as part of Whiteness’s control of bodies, labour and selective kinships. The novella shows the racialization of dogs, so that they become both invested with power and, at the same time, non-agential in their relation to Whiteness. In view of the subjugation of both human and non-human beings, I seek to highlight the ethics of relation which emerge for the protagonist, Karabo, through relation across human and species difference. While dogs are given privileges above Black staff, Karabo sees



the dogs' incapacity to resist their instrumentalization. Their voicelessness stands contrary to the ability of Black people to speak – as a subversive form of self-articulation – in defiance of the white system. In contrast, Duiker's *Hidden Star* represents the gang of street dogs as fully agential beings who decry being owned. The township is both a space of material hardship and vibrant life, outside of the white gaze. Free to roam and able to speak with the child-narrator, Nolitye, the dogs help her through the magical animist world to find her real mother. Significantly, however, it is only children who can converse with the dogs, indicating a specific intimacy and insight which adults have lost. Read together, these texts subvert hegemonic discourses of human-dog relation in the suburb and township, illustrating different systems of value, conceptions of agency and relational ethics which can inform multispecies thriving.

**Kudzai Nherera, University of Pretoria**

***Gendered human–animal relations as articulated in women's narrative accounts of livelihood practices.***

This paper examines gendered human–animal relations as articulated in women's narrative accounts of livelihood practices in Southern Africa. While dominant development and conservation discourses tend to represent animals as passive resources or ecological problems, women's stories reveal relational understandings shaped by care, obligation, survival, and ethical negotiation. These narratives offer an alternative epistemological frame through which to read human animal coexistence under socio-ecological stress.

Drawing on the author's previous research on cross-border women traders and ongoing doctoral work in development studies, the paper explores how women narrate their interactions with animals such as livestock, poultry, and fish, as integral to everyday survival amid climate variability, water insecurity, and economic precarity. Situated within oral storytelling traditions and inherited cultural knowledge, these accounts function as literary forms that encode ecological ethics, gendered labour, and interspecies responsibility.

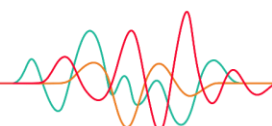
Engaging literature through narrative and oral forms, heritage through indigenous knowledge systems, and ecology through feminist political ecology, the paper adopts an ecocritical lens to challenge anthropocentric distinctions between humans and other animals. It argues that women's narratives disrupt dominant binaries by foregrounding animals as co-participants in social life. By centering gendered storytelling, the paper contributes to debates on animal studies and proposes narrative as a critical site for reimagining more just and relational socio-ecological futures.

**Toroga Denver, Activist**

***The relational world of the Khoikhoi First Nation Communities and their engagement with animals***

This paper reflects on the deep relational world of the Khoikhoi First nation communities and their engagement with animals, with particular focus on the eland (*Taurotragus oryx*), an animal of immense spiritual, cultural, and ecological significance. Drawing from oral histories, ethnographic sources, and the symbolic presence of the eland in Khoikhoi rock art, the study explores how language and ritual practices reveal a worldview in which animals are kin, teachers, and mediators between the human and the spiritual realms.

The Khoikhoi language encodes nuanced relationships with the natural world, using metaphors, praise names, and ritual speech to articulate respect for the eland and other beings. The eland, often depicted in rock art across Southern Africa, is not merely a subject of representation but a central figure in rites of passage, healing practices, and communal identity. Its presence reflects a cosmological framework in which survival, spirituality, and belonging are bound to the cycles of the land and the lives of animals.



By situating Khoikhoi understandings of the eland within broader Indigenous epistemologies, the paper challenges colonial readings of rock art as static “artifacts” and instead foregrounds them as living archives of language, memory, and ecological intimacy. In doing so, the analysis highlights the ways in which Khoikhoi knowledge systems continue to offer alternative visions of human and animal relations that resist extractive, colonial categories of “nature” and “culture.”

This reflection contributes to ongoing efforts to revitalise Khoikhoi language and heritage by affirming that animals like the eland are not peripheral to Indigenous identity, but central to it. The paper ultimately argues that re-engaging with these ancestral relationships through language, ritual, and art is a critical act of cultural continuity and decolonial imagination.

**Khaya Gqibitole, University of Zululand**

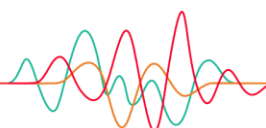
***Buyel’embo! Exploring amaXhosa clans’ symbiotic relationship with nature through totems – “a return to the source”***

IsiXhosa language uses idiomatic expression that make it one of the most expressive languages – something missionaries attempted to disrupt. Rituals, which connect and anchor amaXhosa clans with ancestors, are mainly based on animals – hence totems are the bedrock of Xhosa clans. Based on this, the study seeks to study debunk colonial notions that amaXhosa do not have eco-philosophies. As the study demonstrates, amaXhosa eco-philosophy locates them within nature. Scholarship has extensively dealt with amaXhosa culture and traditions, but its paucity on the role and centrality of totems is glaring. The study argues that animals and birds are crucial for the AmaXhosa social cohesion which has a potential to play an indelible role in ecological preservation. Therefore, the social identity approach is deployed to demonstrate that totems entrench social solidarity and deepen ecological appreciation. This study sets out to explore how totems can be utilized in sustaining forests. This intricate and endangered interdependence is examined using the ecocriticism lens. Accordingly, the paper concerns itself with the degradation of nature and the impact the demise of totems has on clans that believe in them. The study contributes to the clarion call for the preservation of nature through the appreciation of indigenous knowledge systems.

**Thabelo Mbedzi and Viwe Sibanga, Nelson Mandela Museum**

***Ecological identifiers in the relationships between people and animals in the Nguni and Sotho groups***

In Africa, the relationship between people and animals is a complex, reciprocal, and ancient bond characterised by emotional connections, cultural benefits, ethical, and historical interactions. Among the Nguni and Sotho groups in South Africa, there exists a special relationship with a particular animal as an ecological identifier. The marker of this relationship association with these animals, which is often seen through totems that are adopted by group of people. In Mapulana culture, among the Batswana and Basotho, most of the clans identify with a lion. The cultural significance of human-animal relations varies, it can symbolise royalty, leadership, strength and or bravery. This desktop study seeks to provide two dimensions of human-animal relations, first: during the pre-colonial era in terms of totemism, kinship, and pastoralism; and second: in the colonial and post-colonial eras in terms of conflict, co-existence, commercialisation, conservation, rewilding and reconnection. The paper makes a clarion call to re-imagine the usefulness of clan names in the 21st century. The paper will investigate the roots of clan association with animals and the different purposes served by such relationships. It will investigate why clans with the different clan names will identify with the same animal as their totem. The study concludes that the relationship between humans and other animal has largely been disrupted since the arrival of Western modernity and its darker side, colonisation. The



authors agree that throughout evolution, humans and other animals remained central to African ways of living, knowing and societal organisation.

**Philista Malaki**

***The Heritage of the Abasuba community: People, other animals, and living landscapes of Lake Victoria***

The Abasuba community of Lake Victoria possesses a unique cultural heritage shaped through intimate and enduring relationships between people, animals, and the lacustrine environment. This paper explores how Abasuba identity, language, oral traditions, and livelihood practices reflect deep ecological knowledge and multispecies coexistence. Animals particularly fish, birds, and domesticated specie feature prominently in Abasuba folklore, clan totems, rituals, and subsistence systems, revealing ethical frameworks that emphasize respect, reciprocity, and sustainability. Through storytelling, proverbs, and ritual performances, the community encodes ecological memory and intergenerational knowledge that guide interactions between humans and the natural world. The paper further examines how colonial disruption, language marginalization, environmental degradation, and socio-economic change have threatened both cultural heritage and biodiversity within the Lake Victoria ecosystem. Despite these pressures, Abasuba heritage remains resilient, maintained through oral tradition, cultural revival initiatives, and everyday engagement with the lake landscape. This study demonstrates how cultural survival and ecological conservation are deeply interconnected. Safeguarding indigenous heritage is essential not only for cultural identity but also for sustaining the fragile human–animal–environment relationships of Lake Victoria.

**Nadine Franzsen, Msunduzi Museum**

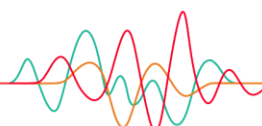
***The politics of display from an ecocritical perspective***

The uMsunduzi Museum is a cultural history museum that reflects South Africa’s multicultural heritage. Its colonial origins have undergone much transformation over the years with the politics of display shifting to include the previously marginalised histories that were erased from colonial narratives. This process of transformation is ongoing and central to the Museum’s curatorial strategy. While the Museum foregrounds cultural history, the natural environment receives limited narrative focus within its exhibitions, despite the display of animals and natural resources. This paper examines the politics of display from an ecocritical lens by analysing three exhibitions at the uMsunduzi Museum; The Lifestyle of the Voortrekkers exhibition and its representation of the ox during the Great Trek; the depiction of the twelve ceremonial trees planted at the opening of the Museum in 1912; and the Connecting Cultures exhibition, which portrays animals as shared resources amongst multiple cultural groups. The paper critiques the curatorial framing of non-human animals and the natural environment within these exhibitions, arguing that such representations offer opportunities to reimagine the politics of display in history-focused museums by considering the environment and its place in the narratives of human culture.

**Sandiso Sakhile Gift Ncube, North West University**

***Ecological literacy pedagogy.***

It is recommended that university students acquire ecological literacy pedagogy. There is a demand for eco-literate tertiary education in South Africa. Considering the surging ecological disruptions by humans, there is a need to subvert epistemic injustice in the ecosystem. This conceptual paper recounts an exploration of ecological heritage in Anansi and the Moss-Covered Rock, a West African oral folklore called Anansesem. Anansesem is conceptualised as a reading resource to enhance ecological literacy pedagogy in English Home Language lessons. Critical social epistemology and eco-criticism complement the Transformative paradigm that underpins conceptual ecological



literacy enhancement. What is more, Schema Theory supported the conceptual framing of the study. The reader's a priori and a posteriori ecological knowledge (literacy) were conceptual variables. Document analysis method framed the facilitation of data generation through a document analysis protocol. Consequently, thematic analysis was conducted on the selected text to formulate codes and themes. Anansi and the Moss-Covered Rock enhances ecological literacy through animal characters, such as the spider and a little spotted deer. Epistemic justice, interdependence, communal knowledge, and ecological criticism are the salient ecological heritage practices from Anansesem. Including folklore texts that embody Anansesem's ecological heritage in teacher education was recommended to enhance eco-literate tertiary education.

**Rob O'Donoghue and Wilma van Staden, Rhodes University**

***Activating change projects in curriculum settings: ESD as heritage-informed, intersectional learning at the nexus of biocultural heritage, lived experience and disciplinary knowledge.***

The paper examines some of the pedagogical exclusions in a disciplinary separation of people and nature within the empirical sciences. These dialectics mask biocultural heritage as a mirror for Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) as knowledge mediated action learning in the face of contemporary sustainability challenges. Examples of southern African heritage of biocultural relational dynamics are developed as a vantage point for engaging contemporary sustainability concerns. This heritage of sustaining human-environment relations is illustrated in:

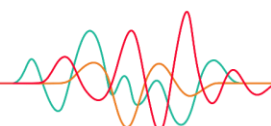
- Seasonal use of fire and hunting as a 'Land-Taming' ethic (Chigwedere 2016)
- Nagana migrations and pasture husbandry (Fuse in Edgecombe, 1982)
- Cattle husbandry as an action learning knowledgescape (Masuku 2018)
- Reciprocal signalling in honeyguide-human mutualism. (Spottiswoode et al., 2016)
- Nguni biocultural relations between cattle and Imifino (vanStaden et al., 2024)

We note how from early environmental education, the ideal of holism and ecological concepts have provided us with a deepening grasp of both interdependence and human impact to inform ESD. Alongside this, heritage practices are necessary roots for informing ESD as ethics-led process of knowledge co-production to resolve sustainability problems.

**Silke Heiss, Independent**

***When the wild things approach me: Two animal-based card divination systems, one from North America ('Medicine Cards' by Jamie Sams and David Carson) and one from Africa ('Wild Voices' by Anne Keating), showing how literature, language, heritage and ecology entwine naturally when separation between the human mind and body is surrendered.***

My paper presents two books offering medicine to the human soul by means of the spirits of wild animals. They are 'Medicine Cards' (1988, 1999) by Jamie Sams and David Carson, with illustrations by Angela Werneke, and 'Wild Voices: Messages from the Soul of Africa' (2015) by Anne Keating, with card artwork by Mama ka Grace. Both books offer cards as a hands-on divination system, along with guidance on how to use the systems in a variety of ways. The animal spirits involved are respectively North American and African. By way of providing cultural context, I refer to therianthropes in Bushman rock art and include a recent testament regarding inhabitation by nature spirits in Nicola Robins' book 'Diviner Mind' (2025). I include poems and artwork of my own, reflecting willing loss of self in favour of absorption into animal, plant and elemental beings. My presentation shows how literature, language, heritage and



ecology entwine naturally when provisional boundaries between the human mind and body, and between human consciousness and the unconscious, are surrendered, and connections are remembered and reimagined.

**Ingrid Schudel, Rhodes University**

***Engaging ecological complexities for foundation phase learners through the arts***

In the South African Foundation Phase (FP) Life Skills curriculum, young learners engage with different foci of the topic of animals each year. The curriculum offers sound content coverage in relation to animal habitats (those that live in fresh water, salt water, and on land), types (wild/pet, helpful/harmful, day/night), life cycles, and key features and characteristics. However, echoing Von Solms's (2023) review of the later grades — highlighting the need to foster more “harmonious, more-than-human communal relationships” — my analysis of the early grades reveals that anthropocentric perspectives (framed in terms of what humans can gain from animals) and simplistic classification systems continue to dominate the discourse. Following Kopnina (2014), this paper argues that young children are capable of moving beyond such discourse limitations. The presentation shares a series of theme-based materials developed for FP teachers-in-training. These materials are designed to encourage teaching that promotes more critical thinking about complex ecologies of human–environment relationships and ethics of care in FP classrooms. Through poetry (featuring an anti-hero mosquito) and storytelling (a mystery in which Mole, Worm, and Human collaborate to solve a problem in the vegetable garden), we aim to do greater justice to the playfulness, intelligence, and curiosity of young children.

**Noncedo Ndlwana, University of the Witwatersrand**

***Understanding religious perspectives on human-animal relationships.***

The existence of humans and other non-human creatures can be investigated using different approaches. While science and humanities both equip us with the understanding of the humankind and help us to discover the natural world around us (Meyer, L. 1974), forces such as religion cannot be ignored when probing this subject. Religion is a broad area of human existence (Waldu, P. cited in Singer, P. 2006). Rich in its diversity and social standing, religion has different beliefs and a set of values instilled to its people. Some believers, for example, are of the view that certain animals are bringers of luck, while some are interconnected to humans and their clans (Singer, 2006). In the Christian bible, animals such as pigs are considered to be unclean and therefore not ideal for consumption. Another key aspect of investigation when exploring the human-animal relationship include communication, habitat, anatomy and diet. Appreciating the key differences and similarities between animals and ourselves is a key step forward in addressing our future relationships. While researchers continue to explore the boundaries that exist between us and them, and the need to reimagine them, two things need to be employed- mutual respect and coexistence.

