

BOOK REVIEW

Emily McGiffin. *Of Land, Bones, and Money: Toward a South African Eco-poetics.*

Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2019. 266 pp. Glossary. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$32.50. Paper. ISBN: 978-0813942766.

Emily McGiffin's excellent volume *Of Land, Bones, and Money* borrows its title from a poem by Alfred Themba Qabula, written in the late 1990s, which expressed Qabula's disillusionment at post-apartheid backsliding from promises of true liberation and at the new political elite's neglect of the cultural work(ers) who had played such an influential role in propelling them to power. One of the most important poets associated with FOSATU and the cultural-political resistance of the 1980s, Qabula was "deeply disappointed that revolution was taken over by a world of cellphones and briefcases" (84), and in the last years of his life retreated into something like self-imposed exile back in the hills of his Pondo homeland.

Qabula's story, that of a poet adapting traditional oral modes to the political ecology of modern South Africa's racialized capitalism, is one of the key objects of McGiffin's study of the work of twentieth-century *imbongi*—oral poets of the amaXhosa. Arguing that the *isibongo* "genre as traditionally practiced is inherently ecological because of its imbrication with landscape and ancestral dwelling upon that landscape" (177), McGiffin reads (if that's the right word) these poets' work in relation to the exploitation of South Africa's natural and mineral resources.

Framing her analysis theoretically in relation to postcolonial ecocriticism in the vein of Byron Caminero-Santangelo, Rob Nixon, and Cajetan Iheka, McGiffin explains that she does not wish to "impose yet another Western literary theory onto an African literature." Rather, her focus on poetry—"a global literary form that predates colonialism" (unlike the more widely studied novel)—and poetry in isiXhosa (rather than English) in particular allows her to "expand the range of literary genres and languages considered by ecocriticism and eco-poetics" (10–11).

The body of McGiffin's book begins with a brief history of isiXhosa literature and the communal significance of the traditional *imbongi*. Chapter 2 covers the work of Nontsizi Mqgqwetho (active from 1920 on), whose prominence as a female poet allows McGiffin to comment on the

complicated ways in which the massive rural-urban upheavals created by colonial capitalism, along with the rise of print culture, may have given Mqgweho license to challenge traditional Xhosa gender expectations.

Chapter 3, on the “Durban/Rural Nexus” of the worker-poets associated with *Black Mamba Rising*, also draws attention to the particular pressures on women during the apartheid era by examining not only the work of Alfred Qabula (whose famous panegyric to FOSATU is helpfully included as an appendix) but also that of Nise Malange, whose poems “Nightshift Mother” and “I, the Unemployed” vividly draw attention to women’s “double burden of wage labor and labor in the home” (79). In this chapter, McGiffin spends some time discussing how much is lost in translating these poets’ work, not just from one language to another but from the dynamism and sonic energy of performance to print.

The problem of translation notwithstanding, however, here as elsewhere, I would have liked to see closer reading of the texts, particularly of their explicitly environmental references. The chapter on the self-silencing of post-1994 iimbongi, for example, provides a clear political analysis of how some iimbongi (notably Zolani Mkiva) have successfully commercialized their art while others have avoided elements of personal criticism and social resistance in favor of outright sycophancy. However, it cites only one poem directly (the isibongo performed prior to Jacob Zuma’s 2016 State of the Nation Address in parliament), and even then focuses on the delicate balance between explicit praise and implicit criticism rather than anything explicitly environmental.

In the two final chapters on the ways in which oral poetry traditions may offer new ways of thinking about development and land tenure, while still tending to cite interviews concerning the role of iimbongi, McGiffin does get into some detail when talking about the significance of references to cattle, rivers, local birds, and so on. In her analysis of Thukela Poswayo’s 2015 isibongo for King Zwelonko, for instance, she stresses the vital practical and spiritual importance of such naming, as the poem moves from the local (the Mbhashe) to the distant (Thukela, Zambezi, Limpopo) to the mythic (Lubhelu) in order to invoke ancestors near and far.

McGiffin ends her book with a repeated plea to pay attention to isiXhosa oral culture, not only for its own intrinsic value but as a means to “reimagining the political order that has so polarized South Africa” (179). Her book provides a fascinating entry point for anyone wishing to do just that.

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