



**Reading the Forest as Inter-Species Commune in Matthee's *Circles in a Forest* (1984) and Ehrlich & Reed's *My Octopus Teacher* (2020)**

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## Declaration

I, René Louw, declare that this dissertation hereby submitted for the qualification of Master's degree in English at the University of the Free State is my own work and that I have not previously submitted the same work at another university.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'René Louw', written in a cursive style. The signature is positioned above a horizontal line.

René Louw

Bloemfontein

November 2022

## **Dedication and Acknowledgements**

I dedicate this thesis to the South African landscape where my love and appreciation for the natural world was birthed.

This dissertation was made possible by the help and support of my loving community of supervisors, family, friends, and others. I am extremely grateful to my supervisors, Dr Philip Aghoghovwia and Prof Helene Strauss, for their patient guidance in this academic endeavor where they never failed to show their consideration and understanding during the research and writing process. I am lucky to form part of the University of the Free State's English department. Here, I am always challenged by its unparalleled academic standards whilst the caring connections between academic and admin staff bring joy to the mundane tasks of everyday work-life. A special thank you to Karen McGuire and Stacey-Lee Kojane for decorating the lonesome in-office work sessions with warming conversation and laughs.

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## Abstract

This study investigates the forest as a site of commune for human and nonhuman sentients in Matthee's *Circles in a Forest* (2005), the Afrikaans novel published in 1984 and the English translation published in 2005, and the Netflix nature documentary, *My Octopus Teacher* (2020). The objective of this work is to find the ways in which the forest space extends and adds to the conversation around ecological sustainability by means of regenerative communities. South African author, Dalene Matthee's *Circles in a Forest* (2005) presents the Knysna forest as an example of a sustainable biological and relational system that is made possible by the responsible practices of those who partake in its community of human and nonhuman inhabitants. South Africa's first ever Netflix Original nature documentary, *My Octopus Teacher* (2020), directed by Pippa Ehrlich and James Reed, documents the interspecies encounters between a local film maker, Craig Foster, and a common octopus or *octopus vulgaris*, within a False Bay kelp forest, located within the South Atlantic Ocean, off the South African coast. This dissertation investigates how intimate connections between human and nonhuman lead to rehabilitative and sensitising possibilities within the space of the forest. A textual analysis of the two primary texts alongside a comparative study reveals how the forest offers alternative ways of practicing community-based ethics within human-disturbed landscapes which can be used to inspire sustainable futures for the environment. The terrestrial Knysna forest and aquatic kelp forest engage in relational economies of reciprocity, vulnerability, and deep interconnection, the combination of which forms the units of exchange between the encounters of humans, nonhumans, and the environment.

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# Chapter 1 – Animism, ecocriticism, and deep histories of the landscape

## 1.1 Background

Just ask the animals, and they

will teach you.

Ask the birds of the sky, and they will

tell you.

Speak to the earth, and it will instruct

you.

Let the fish in the sea speak to you.

– Job 12:7-8

Interspecies entanglements that once seemed the stuff of fables are now materials for serious discussion among biologists and ecologists, who show how life requires the interplay of many kinds of beings.

– Anna Tsing (2015)

The survival of the human is not dependent on the most recent advancements in modern technology, nor on the human ability to turn nature and natural resources into commodities for market capitalism's consumption. Human existence relies on the interconnectedness of all beings - human and more-than-humans who share the earth as ecological home. Anna Tsing (2015) states that Western thought has offered representations of nature as an awe-inspiring force that forms an inactive backdrop to human ambitions and activity. Yet, the task of reminding humans of their lively and interdependent state of being with all other living matter, was left to the non-Western storytellers (Glotfelty, 1996; Tsing, 2015; Stuckey, 2013).

Ecocriticism has seen a particularly insightful turn away from the human-centred approach that has governed past conversations about the environment, and towards the earth and its people to find some answers regarding sustainable futures. The earth's people are those who understand that the earth's vitality is directly connected to their own wellbeing. They take up responsibility for the earth since it is ultimately our home. Indigenous knowledge systems have been a key focus of recent ecological inquiries aimed at destabilising Anthropocentric views,

and emphasising interconnection between humans, the earth, and its more-than-human inhabitants (Green, 2013; Woodward, 2017; Harvey, 2013, Kimmerer, 2013).

The above quote is taken from the Biblical book of Job. It asks of one to lean into the earth so that it can reveal its mysteries to whoever is asking; one translation reads: “Put your ear to the earth, learn the basics. Listen, the fish in the ocean will tell you their stories” (Job 12 [MSG]). The earth is willing to teach us the basics of living respectfully with the nonhuman world. Yet, one is required to ask first, and then, to speak; to be open to instruction, and to be spoken to. The earth, the ocean, all nonhuman creatures have something to say, if we can bear to heed ourselves to their teachings.

I have chosen to look at two texts where a sense of ‘leaning in’ towards the earth takes place. These texts speak to what it means to live within as well as alongside the earth and its inhabitants. They present a world where the environment, the human, and the nonhuman co-inhabit the landscapes where discordant subjectivities interconnect to form spaces of multispecies survival. Within each text, there exists relationships between human, nonhuman, and their shared forest home. The nature of the relationships closely resembles, if not redefines, that of a good friendship as companionship, vulnerability, and mutual interests. Combined with these characteristics, are healthy, and desperately necessary social values, the willingness to lean into discomfort, and the strength and intelligence to be meek with one another. Throughout this study, I will show how these texts present insightful understandings and practices, such as interspecies alignment through community-driven forest networks and meaningful multispecies gatherings, which bring further materiality to the conversation about maintainable ecologies.

Dalene Matthee’s *Kringe in ‘n Bos (1984)/Circles in a Forest (2005)* is set in late 19<sup>th</sup> century South Africa and tells the story of Saul Barnard, a Knysna forest worker of Dutch descent, who shows an unusual sensitivity towards the non-human other and the forest environment. Barnard is raised in a family of woodcutters who have lived and worked in the Knysna forest all their life. However, the forest is gradually being destroyed by deforestation, because of the rapid expansion of South African towns, alongside a brief gold rush in the 1870s. Matthee’s protagonist foresees the environmental danger that increasingly large amounts of wood cutting and gold mining poses to the forest and its human and nonhuman inhabitants. Moreover, Barnard shares an interspecies bond with Old Foot, a legendary elephant patriarch of the forest. Matthee creates a world in which the nature-culture divide, a popular trope in the ecocritical

imagination, is non-existent for Saul Barnard and the forest that is ultimately his home. He shows an acute awareness of his kinship with the animal other, and the destruction of their shared home, the Knysna forest. Barnard and Old Foot are animal-human brothers, who share a closeness that is evident throughout their lives in moments of meeting, such as their first encounter where Old Foot's corporeal presence represents his sympathy and respect for the passing away of Barnard's mother and sister.

*My Octopus Teacher* (2020) is a multiple award-winning Netflix Original documentary, directed by Pippa Ehrlich and James Reed. The film has since received numerous accolades, such as the BAFTA Award for Best Documentary and the Academy Award for the Best Documentary Feature.<sup>1</sup> The film documents the daily visits of a local filmmaker Craig Foster to an octopus in a kelp forest near False Bay, located off the South Atlantic coast off Cape Town. The nature documentary consists of footage taken over a year where viewers see Foster enter the cold Cape waters every day in order to understand the life of the octopus, her kelp forest home and its other non-human inhabitants. Foster decides to commit to this year-long trip to the kelp forest and the octopus, because he finds mental and emotional release from the extreme burn-out that he faces in both his personal and professional life. The daily visits to the underwater forest teach him about vulnerability and trust that he otherwise lacks in his personal relationships. Foster explains that his bond with the octopus grows, so does the bond between himself and his family members.

A comparative reading of these two texts presents a valuable contribution to the interdisciplinary scholarships of both ecocriticism and animal studies, since the novel and nature documentary feature interspecies connection, trans-species communication and proximity (Iheka, 2018) that take place within the regenerative forest space that is host to multispecies communities. The novel and the nature documentary tell stories that explore the relationship between the human and nonhuman in the natural habitat of the forest: the terrestrial Knysna forest in the novel and the aquatic kelp forest in the documentary. My reading of the two texts is sensitive to the issue of white males who voluntarily engage with the ostensible exotic other in an attempt to intimately form and feel part of the natural world, considering

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<sup>1</sup> The nature documentary won several awards, some of which include the award for Best Cinematography and Best Nature Documentary at the Critics' Choice Documentary Awards (CCDA), the award for Best Film, Best Marine Film, and Best Story at the Green Screen Wildlife Film Festival, the Grand Teton award at the Jackson Wild Media Awards, and the award for Outstanding Producer of Documentary Theatrical Motion Pictures at the Producers Guild of America Awards.

Saul Barnard's connection to an outcast elephant and Craig Foster's obsession with a common octopus.

This study also examines the remarkable blurring of human and nonhuman binaries, since forest ecologist Suzanne Simard (2021) suggests that terrestrial forests are complex systems that communicate feedbacks and adaptations through below-ground fungal networks. For her, forests are more than a collection of trees, as the existence of these feedbacks and warning signals demonstrates the forests' resilience through means of symbiotic plant communication resembling human social networks. My study explores the intricacies of the Knysna forest system, its indigenous trees like the Outeniqua Yellowwood, or kalander, as well as the sense of community that enables the forest to endure and flourish amidst human disturbance.

Additionally, the aquatic forest is home to the relationship between the octopus and Foster, which is the focus of the film's major conservation efforts. The production team of the Netflix' nature documentary works in partnership with The Sea Change Project, an organisation that uses storytelling as a means of fostering ocean protection. The Sea Change team aims to use films, such as *My Octopus Teacher* (2020), books, exhibitions, and marine biology research, and other creative collaborations, to contribute to the long-term protection of South Africa's marine environment by making a global icon of the Great African Sea Forest – a name given to the underwater kelp forest that is home to the only giant bamboo kelp on earth. This aquatic forest stretches from the shores of Cape Town northwards to about 1000km into Namibia and is thought to be unique in its inexplicable growth amidst the shrinking or disappearance of many other kelp forests around the world (Sea Change Project, 2021). This submerged forest is worth investigating alongside the terrestrial forest in Matthee's text, because of their unusual patterns of health and growth, and their particular ability to host interspecies connections and multispecies encounters as depicted in the texts under investigation.

## **1.2 Methodology**

My approach to this research project is inspired by Cajetan Iheka's (2018) method of maintaining a holistic sense of ecological existence, which is based upon both human and nonhuman rights and responsibilities. In reading the forest as a space of interspecies commune, I draw on what Iheka calls his overarching goal in *Naturalising Africa*, namely, to remember "the all-important need to create spaces and habitats where various species can thrive" (15). The novel and nature documentary feature characteristically healthy, welcoming habitats – the

biodiverse aquatic kelp forest and the terrestrial Knysna – wherein natural elements, plant and organism, human and nonhuman, work together in creating a thriving ecological home. I examine how the forest offers alternative ways of practicing community-based ethics which can be used to inspire sustainable futures for the environment. As forest trees have been found to ‘talk’ to each other through inter-tree communication that is similar to human social networks (Simard, 2016), I aim to look at what further connections can be drawn between human and nonhuman communities, particularly focusing on what principles the forest network can offer to the already proven resemblance between forest and human communication. I also analyse how the two texts, both individually and comparatively, offer alternative means of human and nonhuman encounters within the kelp and Knysna forests. The forest is a living, dwelling space that provides fertile soil and space for engagement in a “cross-species sense of community” (Wylie, 2014: 133). The forest is also one member of the larger network of nature that enables a community of sharedness and care, an interconnected system where reciprocity and relationships form part of its currency of exchange (Green, 2020; Kimmerer, 2020).

As I read for interspecies commune, I analyse the stylistic approaches that enable the articulation of ecological issues. The novel portrays the Knysna forest as an all-knowing, all-seeing and ever-feeling energy whose life is equally significant to those who dwell within or without it. The novel’s circular narrative structure decentralises Westernised conceptions of time as nonlinear timelines of indigenous and nonhuman figures are premised in text.<sup>2</sup> The nature documentary adopts a sensitising trope in its documentation and approach to narrative storytelling of the relationship between the octopus, the kelp forest, and Foster. I discuss these textual and creative techniques in further detail in chapters two and three.

The primary selection criteria for the two texts under investigation are the existence of interdependent relationships between the human, the nonhuman, and the environment within South African forest spaces. These texts also emphasise ecological issues such as the endangerment of species, sustainable ecology, and rethinking our sense of community that might transcend species divides.

The textual analysis will involve a post-colonial approach to the texts and proposed themes under investigation, such as the sense of community that is enabled by the terrestrial and aquatic forest spaces and how one can draw from these sites of commune to inspire everyday practices

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<sup>2</sup> My usage of the term ‘indigenous’ is sensitive to the fact that the term traditionally refers to plants and things, whereas the correct term to refer to local inhabitants is ‘indigene’ (Mellet, 2021). For the sake of popular reference and writing, I employ indigenous when referring to local inhabitants.

of sustainable ecology. I draw on the work of theorists including Cajetan Iheka, Anna Tsing, Harry Garuba, Ursula Heise, Robin Kimmerer, Donna Haraway, Priscilla Stuckey, Louise Green, and Lesley Green, for their decentring of the human subject within nature. Each of their works recognises the postcolony's sense of dispossession and oppression, caused by disjointed and competing regimes of value and unfinished projects of liberation. A post-colonial approach also grants nature its agency through regenerative cultural practices that allow for a sense of community and interdependency between human, nonhuman, and the environment (Iheka, 2018, L.A. Green, 2020).

### **1.3 Literature review: post-colonial scholarship in the environmental humanities**

This project is located in Ecocriticism, an interdisciplinary field of research that studies the relationship between literature and the physical environment (Glotfelty, 1996: xviii). The central theme to this literature review is the move from conventional methods of perceiving nature as the mere place where humankind is to act out its story, towards research that focuses on indigenous knowledge systems that have come to reshape and continues to define ecocriticism as a field of study, because of its integrative approach to the understanding of both nature and its inhabitants.

Cheryll Glotfelty, a professor of literature and the environment, is known for her pioneering work in environmental studies in the 1990s. In her anthology, *The ecocriticism reader* (1996), she identifies several pivotal questions that ecocritics ask when looking at a text:

How is nature represented in this text? What role does the physical setting play in the plot of the text? Are the values expressed in this text consistent with ecological wisdom? How do our metaphors of the land influence the way we treat it? How can we characterize nature writing as a genre? In addition to race, class, and gender, should place become a new critical category? Do men write about nature differently than women do? In what ways has literacy itself affected humankind's relationship to the natural world? In what ways and to what effect is the environmental crisis creeping into contemporary literature and popular culture? (1996: xix).

Glotfelty argues that all ecological literary criticism upholds one essential principle, namely that human culture is connected to the physical world (xix). Ecocriticism seeks subjects where nature and culture interconnect, especially within the fields of language and literature (xix). It

positions its argument equally between literature and the land; between human and nonhuman (xix). Ecocriticism considers the entire ecosphere when analysing the world where it finds itself. Glotfelty claims that literature is not removed from our everyday lives, but instead, “plays a part in an immensely complex global system” in which the material world and ideas interrelate (xix). Ecocritics analyse the shared relationships that exist between humans, nonhumans, and the land, looking specifically at nature as a significant actor in the drama, as opposed to nature having been considered the stage upon which the human plot is told (xxi). Glotfelty’s anthology helped to connect ecocritics who were previously unaware of their interrelated work. Her working definition of ecocriticism remains relevant to the field of study today, but it has branched further and more widely to include questions particularly aimed at developing sustainable futures and understanding the relationship between the human and nonhuman. I use Glotfelty’s core questions that connect literature and the environment as a premeditation that aids in understanding where my argument fits into the larger and older puzzle that is ecological literary criticism.

More than a decade later, Timothy Morton (2010) argues that we should do away with Nature, an arbitrary and transcendental concept that has been fetishized by the romantic writers of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Instead of upholding this sublime object of nature, Morton opts for a “dark ecology” that does not distinguish between the human and nature, but views everything as being intricately interconnected. This conception of the environment ultimately divorces nature from everyday life. Many post-colonial ecocritics have rejected this exclusive approach towards nature and instead, argue that indigenous knowledge systems hold the answers to a world in which the human, the non-human, and their shared environment can be better integrated and understood (Muthien and Bam, 2021; Durrant, 2021, Lesley Green, 2020; Kimmerer, 2020; Samuelson and Lavery, 2019; Iheka, 2018; Woodward, 2003 and 2017; Haraway, 2016; Tsing, 2015; Wylie, 2014; Louise Green, 2013; Garuba, 2003; 2013). I aim to use the post-colonial ecocritics’ argument as a point of departure to explore further the blurring of human and nonhuman species located in the forest communities within the novel and nature documentary.

## **Interspecies proximity and animism**

Current scholarship in Africa and Southern Africa explores the significance of alternative approaches to nature that draw from the day-to-day practices of local communities and their interdependent relationship with the environment. Cajetan Iheka's *Naturalising Africa* (2018), challenges a Eurocentric approach to the environment and their human and nonhuman inhabitants, and instead looks towards African literary works for its indigenous knowledge regarding interspecies connection and closeness. Iheka (1) argues that the relationships between humans and nonhumans in African works contain important premises needed for answering questions of agency and resistance in both African and post-colonial studies. There are four interventions suggested throughout Iheka's book: (1) African literary studies is extended to human-nonhuman relationships as opposed to a human-centred approach; (2) the concept of agency is redefined to explore varieties of agency at work between human and other nonhuman actors; (3) how ecological devastation is caused by violent resistance despite its traditional association with liberation; and (4) how it adds to the larger conversation about the prospect of alternative and sustainable ecologies (Iheka, 2018: 2). Iheka challenges the mainstream anthropocentric approach to agency by offering the notion of "distributed agency" instead. This notion proposes that humans share agency with the land and its animals. Nonhumans are considered as "actant" even in instances of human agency, since they continue to participate in, and produce effects on the environment. Diffuse agency, then, is the distributed actions that take place between a web of actors (4). Iheka also argues that other-than human actors must be recognised as companions in a perilous world by means of their proximity to humans. His criteria for understanding this proximity consist of the spatial nearness between human and nonhuman, their joint biological characteristics, and shared vulnerabilities such as objectification, suffering, and death (5). *Naturalising Africa* (2018) proposes a shift in the human perspective where ecological violence has become standardised, and humans are predominantly favoured to prosper even to the detriment of other beings (13). It is, therefore, necessary that the anthropocentric position is destabilised, that there is:

a change of human perspective in order to see and relate with the plants and animals, lands and forests around us as constitutive of the living world and not as mere resources for indiscriminate exploitation. (Iheka, 2018: 5)

My study draws from Iheka's understanding of dismantling the well-known anthropocentric approach to nature as well as his four dimensions to representing proximity: (1) multispecies

presence, (2) interspecies relationship, (3) distributed agency, and (4) indistinction between human and nonhuman (2018) through the related premises of spatiality and similar attributes between species. Matthee's novel (2005) employs literary techniques that equally premise the land and its earth-beings as woodworkers, and elephants are seen as spirit-bound brothers, and an English settler is of similar textual importance as an indigenous Yellowwood tree, who both share the status of forest inhabitant. *My Octopus Teacher* (2020) similarly attempts to decentre the human and partake in different levels of proximity: Foster allows himself to be taught a new approach to daily life by his octopus teacher, and thereby advocates that his human approach has come to little fruition. As he learns from the octopus, boundaries between human and nonhuman dissolve, not only through close physical touch, but also by exposing himself to her everyday vulnerabilities within her kelp forest home.

My reading of the indigenous San and Outeniqua characters' worldview, in the respective texts, is informed by the long history of thought embedded in the old and new scholarships on animism (Garuba, 2003 and 2013; Harvey, 2006 and 2013; L.A. Green, 2018; Durrant 2021). In doing so, I consider the cautious words of Louise Green, when she states that "to invoke animism is to use a word populated, even overpopulated, with the intentions of others. The archive of animism is in many ways an impossible archive" (2018: 313). In his book *Animism: Respecting the Living World* (2006), Graham Harvey explains that animism is used in two ways: "the older refers to a putative concern with knowing what is alive and what makes a being alive", while the newer usage implies to the well-known understanding that "humans share this world with a wide range of persons, only some of whom are human" (xi). Harry Garuba's article, "Explorations in Animist Materialism" (2003) argues that the animist unconscious is a mode of collective subjectivity that frames being and consciousness in typically animist societies and cultures (269). Garuba contends that animist logic destabilises the authority of modern science by reinstating the authority of magic within the interstices of Western rationalism and thus, opens up a new world of possibilities (271). Animism is made up of two basic tenets: "one, things possess a life of their own and, two, when their souls are awakened their breath is freed and may migrate into other objects" (272). Unlike Christianity or Islam, animism is detached from a specific religion; instead, it is the umbrella term for a mode of religious consciousness that imputes a spiritual dimension to material objects (272). In basic terms, animism is the belief in objects because gods and spirits are located in objects such as stones or trees, and therefore the objects are the material manifestations of the gods and spirits (267). Garuba (2003) states that a perpetual re-enchantment permeates the contemporary

world whereby “the rational and scientific are appropriated and transformed into the mystical and magical” (267). The deployment of traditional cultural forms, folktale motifs, and magical practices in the context of modern, social, and political arenas, is “a manifestation of an animist unconscious” which functions through a continual re-enchantment of the world by way of prepossessing the future, “laying claim to what in the present is yet to be invented” (264, 265, 271). I employ Garuba’s understanding of the animist unconscious to further understand the animist logic that underpins the Knysna and kelp forests’ lively multispecies world that is subtly mediated by the indigenous groups that populate the landscapes in the texts under investigation.

In his essay “On Animism, Modernity/Colonialism and the African order of Knowledge: Provisional Reflections,” Garuba (2013) further accounts for the new interest in animism as a site for transcending the fixed binaries constructed by the Western epistemological order (50). He asserts that “animism is the spectral Other” as it is a constituent of modernity because of its recognition through non-recognition in Western regimes of knowledge (45). Garuba asserts that there lies a challenge in discovering a conceptual space and language of discourse that is capable of reclaiming the commodity as Karl Marx recognised it: “a constitutive co-presence of both material and mystical object” and not as a construction of separate knowledge domains (47). He warns against the danger of new literature on animism becoming a knowledge construct of the West through its conscription into modernity as animists’ lived experiences are prone to be disciplined into formal knowledge (48). Garuba claims that the resurgence of interest in animism will be beneficial to African knowledge systems only if it discards the modernist, linear conception of time and instead, seeks to understand “the complex embeddedness of different temporalities” within one historical moment (49). Garuba’s nonlinear conception of time with regard to new and old animist literatures informs my analysis of the forest’s discordant interspecies and landscape formations since the animist lifeways of indigenous figures, like the Outeniquas in the novel, and the San in the film, have a direct impact on the encounters between humans and more-than-human inhabitants.

Commenting on the transitory nature of the new materialist project, Louise Green (2018) argues that “a reconsideration of materiality that ignores the contribution of African thought to this topic remains incomplete” (306). L.A Green contends that fetishism, a concept that predominantly permeates Western philosophical thought, has its origins in animism, “an incommensurable system of thought” (304). She uses the notion of the fetish to challenge the current trend in the materialist project that has gained popularity in response to recent

ecological crises (304). L.A. Green discusses vital materialism as the system of thought that attributes a liveliness to matter that is detached from human beings (310). Vital materialism, according to L.A. Green (2018), bears a “close resemblance to animist modes of thought”, and points towards an abstract mode of thinking which she refers to as “thinking outside the body” (311). L.A. Green’s text informs my understanding of animism that is historically embedded in more recent enthusiasms of materialism. In the texts under investigation, the everyday practices of Foster, and the octopus in the film, and Saul, Maska, and Old Sanna in the novel, are intertwined with animist and materialist approaches that attribute a spiritual liveliness to the objects which find themselves constrained within their physical contexts.

Sam Durrant’s article “Critical Spirits: New Animism as Historical Materialism” (2021) seeks to make clear pathways for new animism’s critique of capitalism through becoming aware of a fully historicised nature. Durrant seeks to invoke a critical spirit whose objective is two-fold: one that acknowledges the animacy of the world of the human and the nonhuman, as well as a critical consciousness of the danger in romanticising this belief as it leads to a re-enchantment of nature (5). Durrant states that new anthropology often displays the need to follow the animistic practices of indigenous people in resisting colonial anthropology’s othering gesture towards the belief in spirits as primitive (8). New animism works to overcome Eurocentric logic by adopting the “native informant as an exemplary guide” to nature, culture, and life itself (9). New animism is not so much concerned with discerning between who or what is alive as it is more focused on understanding how to behave appropriately towards all beings – human and nonhuman (9). Durrant draws upon the writings of Metis scholar and artist, Warren Cariou who states that the trajectory of Western practices is reversed by indigenous language philosophies that use the land as both a starting point for sustenance and knowledge. Cariou argues that we are therefore, “in a way, studying the land and trying to learn from it” (2018: 341). Durrant (2015) explains that new animism can be understood as a practice of following that includes an act of pausing, a critical act of self-reflection that is imbued with a sense of playfulness at the very heart of the indigenous animists’ belief in spirits, such as that of the Yukaghir, an indigenous people situated in the Russian Far East (10-11). Durrant looks toward the Yukaghir’s doubled relation to their own traditions to deduce that following animists also means learning to follow their ironic, ludic, reflective, and lively ways of animism which always leaves room for the distance between contemporary practice and ancestral belief, that which he refers to as an element of mimesis (12). This pattern of doubling is described by Durrant as a *mise en abyme* because “new animists follow animists who are themselves

engaged in multiple acts of following” (12). Animists follow their ancestors’ practices, that is, the act of following a prey while being careful not to become prey themselves; they avoid being followed by the spirits of those they hunt and kill (12). Therefore, new animism is the attempt to learn from or ‘follow’ animist cultures that aids the disruption of the deceptively animating forces of global capitalism (31). I draw on Durrant’s work to analyse the acts of following in the novel and the nature documentary, considering that both white males turn to the worldviews of those with access to ancient animist knowledges in navigating their relation to the nonhuman and the natural world that often associates with the material and spiritual realms.

### **Environmental and narrative histories of the Cape**

Matthee’s *Circles in a Forest* (2005) is set in the Knysna-George region towards the end of the 19th century. *My Octopus Teacher* (2020) was filmed during 2010 in the False Bay area, located off Cape Town’s coast. I employ a situated reading of the two texts under investigation by analysing the settler-colonial pasts and indigenous narratives that continue to impact their present-day realities.

Patric Tariq Mellet’s *The Lie of 1652* (2020) investigates the existing pre-colonial and colonial histories of South Africa which permeate our past and present realities. Mellet contends that the country’s manifestations of xenophobic and racist surges are rooted in the “modern identity formations within a European-defined national territory” (1). The common perception of early Cape history is influenced by a painting by Charles Bell where Jan van Riebeeck meets an amazed ‘primitive’ Khoe people at the Table Bay coastline (81). This imagined event presents the first encounter between Khoe communities and Europeans as their first meeting and disregards the 180 years of engagement that took place before 1652 (81). After the end of the South African War at the start of the 20th century, different groups of African people were bureaucratically deprived of their ethnic identity by being labelled either ‘Coloured’ or ‘Natives’ (2). This configuration of the country was carried through to the post-democratic South Africa which failed to address the erased history of African social groups (ibid., 2021: 2). The terms Coloured, Khoe, San, Khoisan, Bantu, Nguni and black are colonial constructs loaded with a history founded on racist ethnographies (3). Mellet’s text informs my reading of the Cape landscape where the indigenous Khoe, San, as well as the Outeniqua clan, are represented in both the novel and film. I analyse how their representations in the texts either

conform to or challenge the conventional tropes that function through cultural erasure and dismissiveness toward their deep histories with the terrestrial and aquatic environments.

Lesley Green (2013) reconceptualises conventional understandings of ecology that create a division between science and alternative ways of understanding the environment. In envisioning different knowledge systems that think alongside local theory, Green draws on a wide spectrum of settings located in the South to intervene in current dialogues on ecology. In one of her more recent works, *Rock / Water / Life*, Lesley Green (2020) seeks to uncover the thoughtful ways that we can navigate ecological situations as opposed to the capitalist-driven approaches to understanding nature. She claims that “scientific” environmental approaches in South Africa have come to serve as an authorising space for white authority, and she rejects the various expressions of environmental sciences, environmental management, and environmental activism which hold an authoritarian claim to transcendental knowledge (16). Green critiques most of the South African scientific community for being unwilling to recognise or explore its close connections to the racialised history of claims to authority in the country (17). Because of this, Green criticises environmental authoritarianism that uses scientific reductionism and transcendence to claim all spaces of critical enquiry where humans, technologies, politics, and the environment are concerned. Instead, Green attempts to navigate a path where scientific enquiry and achievements, as well as integrative thinking, are welcomed and celebrated. She asks critical questions such as how we can be more considerate of erased pasts, and how we can better understand the feelings of those who find themselves in other places, times, and disciplines. Green wants to know how one can keep caring relationships alive while the present neoliberalist order scrutinises most relations for their monetary value (14). Green’s book focuses on the manner in which the water, land, and mountain’s pasts remain relevant to current debates over these natural resources. Her argument suggests that several versions of “environment” continue to impact her case studies of Table Mountain and the Karoo, and therefore, “how something is understood to be ‘natural’ or ‘environmental’ is an effect of the ecopolitical relations of a historical moment” (18). I apply Green’s approach to focus on South Africa, specifically the manner in which the Cape province’s ecology has lived and responded towards its ever-evolving human and nonhuman impacts in the section titled “Settler colonial narratives and the deep history of the indigenous Khoe” in chapter two.

“Ocean Regime Shift” features toward the end of Lesley Green’s book, wherein she argues for an environmental and science scholarship that works integratively, one that “becomes active in building alliances and partnerships with communities” that span across ecology, economy, and

society (186-187). Green recalls eight warning signals in and around Cape Town's Ocean that went off from the late 1980s until the present. This involves (1) the washing up of forty tons of abalone along the False Bay coast in 1989, (2) the mass stranding of rock lobsters in during the 1990s, (3) the mass migration of lobsters from Cape Point to Cape Hangklip, also during the 1990s, and (4) local fishing communities fighting for "the right to be legally recognised as a specific sector of fishers and to cease being criminalised as poachers" from 1997 to 2013 (172). The second half of the series of alarm bells consisted of (5) the mobilisation of the army to protect against the extinction of perlemoen in 2014, (6) the city's denial of the danger of its marine sewer outfalls from 2014 to 2015 that could cause severe gastroenteritis, (7) an extraordinary drought in Cape Town in 2017 to which the city proposed emergency desalination plants located near the marine sewage outfalls, and (8) the release of an article that apparently confirms that the city's sea marine outfalls "pose no significant risk to human health and do not measurably affect inshore water quality of the wider environment" (174). She argues that this ecological regime shift requires a shift in ocean scholarship that considers the "full range of flows of matter regardless of imagined boundaries" regarding the long list of oceanic crises relating to harmful algal blooms, rock lobsters, abalone, kelp forests, fish stocks, ocean warming, ocean acidification, and ocean plastics (176). Green claims that "regime-changing scholarship is integrative", meaning that past histories are extended into the present (180). These complicated situations point towards the lack of recognition that Cape Town's urban and marine realities intersect since nature is represented as though it were in a pristine state that functions separately from society (175). Green asserts that caring connections must be re-established to transform science into a method for addressing the damages of human-centred negligence towards the city's atmospheric and oceanic landscapes (199). I draw on Green's work (2020) to analyse the texts' engagement with a politics of care towards ecology and community within the novel and the film.

In the article, "The Oceanic South" (2019), Meg Samuelson and Charne Lavery read fictional texts situated within the oceans of the Southern hemisphere within a "fluid and lively framework that is both three-dimensional and turbulent" and which investigates the role of the North's extractive market capitalism as well as the country's history of settler colonialism. Samuelson and Lavery pay particular attention to the nature of this ocean that suggests new pathways to navigating its turbulent surfaces and its animated depths (2). The oceanic South is unique because the Atlantic, Indian, and the Pacific oceans merge within this "neglected ocean" (2) which also forms the contact zone of the relationships between Foster and the octopus, and

her aquatic home. The novel likewise features the flourishing Cape and Knysna sea trade that is presented as an unfamiliar world of wonder and escape to Saul Barnard.

Louise Green's book *Fragments from the History of Loss: The Nature Industry and the Postcolony* (2020) argues that recent references to the Anthropocene, and its immediate disastrous effects, alludes to a way of thinking that dismisses the environment's deep history and centralises the ephemeral present. L.A. Green claims that an alternative approach to nature is necessary to refuse market-driven ambitions that project nature's value in terms of monetary and consumerist terms. L.A. Green frames nature from an African post-colonial perspective that investigates narratives embedded within imperial and colonial histories, where nature constitutes everyday life practices that involve relationships between humans as well as human-to-nonhuman relations. L.A. Green uses the site of South Africa, in its fractured state, caused by the uncompleted project of liberation and the ongoing project of capitalism, to read the series of inconsistencies that unravel between capitalist modernity and environmental limitations (5). I specifically draw on the chapter, "The Cult of the Wild" (2020) in navigating the politics surrounding the white males' engagements with nonhumans in the texts, such as Saul Barnard's connection to Old Foot and Craig Foster's relationship with a common octopus.

In *Rethinking Africa: Indigenous Women Re-interpret Southern Africa's Pasts* (2021) Bernedette Muthien and June Bam, alongside their many female contributors, express the necessity of rethinking and rewriting the knowledge production and understanding of the precolonial past and its ongoing presence from an indigenous feminist perspective in South Africa (11). Bam and Muthien emphasise the limitations of Western-based research methods in acknowledging the attempted violent erasures and marginalisation of indigenous knowledge and beliefs of the people of the oldCape colony. The contributors to this book draw on feminist indigenous scholarship and seek to redress the colonial trope of the "static and frozen in time 'Peaceful Bushman'" that predominates contemporary writings on indigenous peoples (6). The book aims to navigate new pathways for critical decolonial scholarship by using different historical lenses, philosophies, epistemologies, and interpretations which challenge the accepted histories of "how we came to understand the African past" (13). I consider two contributors' work, Babalwa Magoqwana and Sylvia Vollenhoven, to further understand the only female Outeniqua character in Matthee's novel, as well as the indigenous feminist

histories of the Cape's coastal region, which are given little reference in the nature documentary's local conservation organisation, The Sea Change Project.

By drawing on the work done by indigenous, post-colonial scholars, who specifically focus on South Africa's indigenous deep histories, as well as the Cape landscape's settler-colonial and racist pasts, I am able to conduct a politically and historically informed analysis of Matthee's novel and Ehrlich and Reed's documentary (2020).

### **Multispecies communities**

Regional spaces, communities, societies, and worlds that feature multispecies gatherings embrace the existence of humans alongside more-than-human beings, as Tsing (2015) states that "species are not always the right units for telling the life of the forest. The term 'multispecies' is only a stand-in for moving beyond human exceptionalism" (162). I identify multispecies worlding as an emergent trope within ecocritical scholars' work where nature's community-driven systems seem to outwit that of its human others.

Tsing focuses on the collaborative survival of humans and nonhumans within capitalist-disturbed landscapes in her book, *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (2015). Tsing argues that geologists' recent reference to the Anthropocene, the epoch in which human disturbance outranks other geological forces, "blocks attention to patchy landscapes, multiple temporalities, and shifting assemblages of humans and nonhumans" (20). Tsing suggests that precarity, referring to "the state of acknowledgement of our vulnerability to others" (29), is an undeniable condition of our time and by embracing indeterminacy, we might find answers to survival beyond the dreams of modernisation and progress. Through studying the Matsutake mushroom, and its unusual growth amongst deeply disturbed forests, Tsing argues that contamination, that is, "transformation through encounter," is necessary for collaborative survival (27). Landscapes are, according to Tsing, places for patchy assemblages where both human and nonhuman participants collaborate through encounter as the pines, matsutake mushrooms, and humans in Tsing's research, all cultivate each other unintentionally (152). Tsing refers to this as the overlapping of world-making activities of various multispecies agents (152). Tsing focuses on disturbance as an important component to understanding the human and nonhuman histories that have impacted a landscape (160). She defines disturbance as an "open-ended range of unsettling phenomena" (161) and argues that human and/or nonhuman disturbed landscapes bring us into heterogeneity. Assemblages or patches illustrate how ways

of life survive and adapt through coordination in disturbance and thereby, shows “the possibility of common life on a human-disturbed earth” (163). Tsing frequently refers to multispecies-related terms such as multispecies- “attunements” (158), “storytelling” (x), “time making” (21), “world making” (22), and “multispecies historical ecology” (143). My analysis is inspired by Tsing’s work as I identify the different gatherings or assemblages, in the novel and the film respectively, where multispecies world making activities make up the communities of the forest.

Suzanne Simard’s work in forest tree communication, namely her book *Finding the Mother Tree: Discovering the Wisdom of the Forest* (2021) informs my reading of the terrestrial Knysna forest. Simard (2021) argues that forest trees have been found to ‘talk’ to each other through complex, symbiotic networks to communicate and move essential products such as water, carbon, and nutrients between and among trees. This inter-tree communication and interaction is similar to human neural and social networks, according to Simard. She explains that she is not the first person to come upon this discovery, since this was also the ancient wisdom of many Aboriginal people:

The late Bruce “Subiyay” Miller of the Skokomish Nation, whose people live on the eastern Olympic Peninsula of Washington State, had told a story about the symbiotic nature and diversity of the forest, mentioning that under its floor “there is an intricate and vast system of roots and fungi that keeps the forest strong.” (Simard, 2021: 327)

I aim to look at what further connections can be drawn between human and nonhuman communities, particularly focusing on what principles the forest network can offer to the already proven resemblance between forest and human communication.

In a keynote talk on “Environmental Futures and the Agency of Trees,” Ursula Heise investigates what value trees rings might offer to humans’ linear conception of history as their vast expanse offers a different spatial metaphor through concentric circles. Heise explores:

...what kind of temporality the new attention to the lives of trees and forests implies or might generate through their textual and image representations. The representation of trees, particularly their longevity, tends to foreground a special kind of temporality that decentres the human. (Heise, 2021)

Heise argues that tree rings offer a way for humans to access environmental histories that far outlive the ephemeral human life span as well as an alternative method to scale the large-sized

Anthropocene. I deploy Heise's work on trees' non-linear conception of time to understand the indigenous Knysna trees' large time scale. When an ancient Yellowwood tree is felled in the forest, a multispecies outcry points towards the nonhuman's historical situatedness that is distinct from that of the human inhabitants of the forest, and which indicates the forest's transcendental past, present, and futures.

Environmental and forest biologist, Robin Wall Kimmerer employs an economic model drawn from indigenous wisdom and ecological systems to reimagine currencies of exchange in her landmark book, *Braiding Sweetgrass* (2015). Kimmerer draws on her personal life as a woman, mother, and an indigenous Potawatomi in arguing for humans' recognition of our reciprocal and interdependent relationship with nature and all its living beings. In her more recent essay, "The Serviceberry: An Economy of Abundance" (2020), Kimmerer focuses on an ecological economy that offers a sustainable future where the mutual flourishing of both human and nonhuman life is accommodated. The indigenous Serviceberry tree or *Bozakmin*, in Potawatomi, provides a model of economy that is based upon reciprocity rather than accumulation (2). The forest depends upon an economy of renewal, namely gratitude, reciprocity and relationships that make up its currencies of exchange (3). I deploy Kimmerer's ecological network of exchange to show how the forest site resembles a community where a regenerative natural system is at work, because of the manner in which the forest treats its inhabitants and those who are willing to partake in its principles of reciprocity. Barnard makes the Knysna forest his home when he experiences continued rejection and exile from everyone he encounters – his father banishes him from his woodcutting team and McDonald expels him from the town outside the forest. In finding a place of belonging in the forest, Barnard continues to act and think in ways that point towards the responsible inhabitation of the forest and its buck, bird, tree, and elephant community. Likewise, Craig Foster's establishment and involvement in the Sea Change Project, aimed at the conservation of South Africa's marine environment, is in direct correlation with his year-long visits to the kelp forest at False Bay, where he forms relationships based upon a give-and-take system of commerce.

In *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (2016) Donna Haraway offers new pathways to reconfigure humans' relations to our animal kin and the environment by means of what she terms "sympoiesis", or making-with, other-than-human beings (58). Haraway claims that "staying with the trouble requires making oddkin; that is, we require each other (humans and nonhumans) in unexpected collaborations and combinations, in hot compost piles" (4). In the chapter entitled, "Sympoiesis: Symbiogenesis and the Lively Arts of Staying with the

Trouble,” Haraway (2016) looks at four exemplary models that draw on ordinary stories of oddkin involvement that propose ways to stay with the trouble on a damaged planet. Haraway studies the value of a collaborative crochet coral reef project as an exemplary model for symbiotic assemblages, using this term to refer to “knots of diverse intra-active relatings in dynamic complex systems” (60). This collaborative art project weaves together mathematics, marine biology, environmental activism, and women’s handicrafts as they practice multispecies worlding making activities (78). My reading of the nature documentary is inspired by Haraway’s work, in that the Sea Change Project participates in unconventional, creative collaborations where indigenous and modern human artists work together with instruments drawn from oceanic spaces to capture the song of the aquatic kelp forest.

In this literature review I have so far explored current research in ecological literary criticism and the methodological shift that marks the move away from a Eurocentric approach to nature and ecology, and towards African indigenous knowledge systems that offer alternative means of practicing sustainable ecologies. Post-colonial and African studies have aided ecocritical research to consider an environment and its inhabitants in terms of its ever-influencing socio-political and ecological histories. The human/animal divide is continually challenged by scholarship analysing interspecies connection and communication that transcends this binary relationship to include all living beings. As the forest is a living, dwelling space that provides a condition for engagement in a “cross-species sense of community” (Wylie, 2014: 133), I deploy the term multispecies when referring to gatherings, collages, and presences of humans and other-than-human sentients in the novel’s terrestrial Knysna forest and nature documentary’s aquatic kelp forest. I look at the current conversations regarding environmental studies, animism, interspecies encounters, and communicative forest systems to frame my study.

#### **1.4 Chapter outline**

There are five chapters that constitute this study on interspecies communications in the terrestrial and aquatic forest in the texts under investigation. This chapter consisted of the study’s position within the relevant ecocritical lens that forms part of the foundational background to the research undertaken, the methodological approaches applied such as the post-colonial methods to environmental studies, as well as the wide range of literatures which informs my textual analysis of the novel and the nature documentary. Chapter two captures

several multispecies gatherings, between woodcutters, elephants, English state officials, a Yellowwood tree, and a multitude of lourie birds, within Matthee's novel, *Circles in a Forest* (2005). Matthee's circling narrative structure complements this diverse space of human, nonhuman, and environmental agency. Here, the discordant ideologies of humans and nonhumans converge within the terrestrial Knysna Forest – a landscape characterised by precarity, non-verbal communications, and the deep histories of Outeniqua animist lifeways.

*My Octopus Teacher* (2020) and its aquatic forest community forms the central focus of the analysis undertaken in chapter three. A common octopus becomes the teacher to an overworked filmmaker, Craig Foster, who experiences a relentless pulling towards the Cape's oceanic landscape. Once unmoored from his conventional terrestrial home, Foster engages in the interspecies kinship that takes place within an underwater forest consisting of giant bamboo kelp located in the waters of False Bay. Directors Ehrlich and Reed's episodic breaks in-between major plot events in the film accurately narrate the intermingling of physical and magical worlds in the film's forest and relational community.

Chapter four expands on four tropes that transpire from my analysis of Matthee's *Circles in a Forest* (2005) and the nature documentary *My Octopus Teacher* (2020) in the previous two chapters. I investigate the role of white male figures – Saul Barnard in the novel and Craig Foster in the film – and their position as white males who encounter and embrace 'wildness' within post-colonial South Africa. By focusing on the inconsistencies between the novel and the nature documentary, I study the texts' varying intersections between the ecological spheres of the respective land-based and aquatic forests, and the nearby urban and infrastructural worlds. Another distinction I investigate is the representations of indigenous Khoe, San, and Outeniqua groups and the Western trend to dismiss the landscape's deep history. The figurative and conceptual space of the forest forms the overarching connection point between the novel and the nature documentary, which I return to at the end of the chapter.

Chapter five concludes the study by offering a renewed perspective on the ways in which the forest space creates opportunities for regenerative community practices within aquatic and terrestrial landscapes.

## Chapter 2 – Multispecies entanglement amidst divergent subjectivities in Matthee’s *Circles in a Forest* (2005)

### 2.1 Introduction

Dalene Matthee’s *Circles in a Forest* (2005) is the English translated version of Matthee’s 1984 novel *Kringe in a Bos*. It tells the story of a woodcutter’s son, Saul Barnard, who struggles against the destruction of his natural home, the Knysna forest. This novel achieved international success and was translated into more than eleven languages. Matthee grew up in Riversdale in the Southern Cape, South Africa, and started her forest novels after hiking through the Outeniqua area around Knysna (DaleneMatthee.co.za). She is best known for her forest book series that comprise *Kringe in ‘n Bos* (1984)/ *Circles in a Forest*, *Fiela se Kind* (1985)/ *Fiela’s Child* (1986), *Moerbeibos* (1987)/ *The Mulberry Forest* (1990), and *Toorbos/ Dreamforest* (2003).

This post-colonial reading of Matthee’s fictional-historical novel investigates patterns of land dispossession and cultural erasure caused by the convergence of ideologies between English imperialists, local Dutch woodcutters, and the indigenous Outeniquas. I read the Knysna Forest for interspecies encounters and multispecies communications and gatherings between the human constituents, namely woodcutters, English settlers, and gold diggers, and the nonhuman community members comprising of elephants, birds, trees, bucks, wild pigs, and natural elements like the Forest wind, rain, fog, and fires.

This chapter begins with an overview of the historical context of the novel which allows for a situated understanding and critical analysis of the text’s events. Matthee draws inspiration from true events that took place during South Africa’s early colonial period during the 16th and 17th centuries (Dalene Matthee, 2022). She also includes the history of the indigenous Outeniqua people who lived in the Knysna area long before the arrival of European settlers. I employ Garuba’s understanding of the animist unconscious (2003) to further understand the animist logic that underpins the Forest’s lively multispecies world. Originally written in Afrikaans, the novel has been translated into fourteen languages. Arguably, the English translated version, *Circles in a Forest* (2005), manages to keep most of the forest ethos that is characteristic to its specific cultural, spatial, and historical context because it was translated by the author herself (Cloete, 2002). Cloete (2002) investigates the novel’s interesting dimension regarding its translatability as he claims that Dalene Matthee found herself in the privileged position of author-translator that granted her a “near-perfect understanding of the different layers of

meaning and intention of the source text and eliminated the gap between the author and translator” (vi). The English text, alongside other translations for which it served as source text, is more descriptive than the Afrikaans text with additional explanatory footnotes (Cloete, 2002). These changes make the text more accessible to the English target audience and the international audience. Matthee capitalises the word ‘Forest’ throughout the novel to show that it is a proper noun indicating the name of a specific place - the home of the woodcutters’ community and its nonhuman inhabitants. I continue to use this proper noun when referring to the space of the Knysna Forest in this chapter. The English translation of the novel is the primary text under analysis in this research project. Matthee’s circular narrative structure compliments the animist undertone of the novel as the multiple temporalities of humans and nonhumans intersect within the same cultural, spatial, and historical moment, or otherwise referred to in this analysis, as an assemblage (Tsing, 2015).

Following this, I look at three assemblages that consist of overlapping occurrences where disturbances within the landscape (Tsing, 2015) facilitate interspecies encounters and multispecies entanglements between human and nonhuman (Iheka, 2018). I employ Tsing’s approach to how people and nonhumans interact in the natural world, which I adapt to Matthee’s literary text. The assemblages I identify are formed by instances in the narrative when humans as well as several plant and animal species momentarily come together. This approach allows me to recognise the gathering of multiple Forest members and the diverse dynamics which it entails: both human and nonhuman agents are actant in the moments of organic assembly. I draw on Iheka’s understanding of the aesthetics of proximity (2018) to make sense of the intermingling of human and nonhuman worlds, such as the encounters between human and elephant, the shared suffering between forest tree and woodcutter, and the forest’s communal mourning over an elephant death. It is important to note that these assemblages of the nonhuman world are nevertheless filtered through an anthropomorphic lens.

The first assemblage involves the manner in which the Forest responds to disease and death within the Barnard family. During this turbulent time, Saul and Old Foot’s transcorporeal interspecies connection forms and leads to multiple temporalities that surge between the two forest inhabitants. Saul’s elder brother, Jozef’s response to meeting Old Foot provides a contrast to this. He rejects the prospect of a transformative interspecies encounter and closes himself off to recognising the nonhumans’ agency within their Forest home.

The second assemblage features an array of Forest inhabitants whose subjectivities are forced to intersect when an ancient Outeniqua Yellowwood tree knots them together. A team of local woodcutters fell the ancient kalander tree over seven days of turbulence. The convergence of various discordant agendas creates a contaminated diversity that is specific to this local assemblage made up of local woodcutters, a British government official, an Outeniqua Yellowwood tree, Saul, Old Foot, and the collective Forest community. Nonhuman agents such as Old Foot and the kalander tree disrupt the humans' linear conception of time while the tree's survival after death is made possible through its below-ground communication network (Simard, 2021). Saul's transcorporeal connection to Old Foot and the Forest also extends to the felled tree and he becomes aware of the tree's spirit that can live past its physical death.

The communal mourning over Old Foot's death is the focus of the last assemblage under investigation. Tsing's idea of disturbance (2015) continues to permeate the Knysna landscape when the elephant patriarch is shot by gold diggers and dies a premature death. The animal's death allows for a multispecies outcry amidst a turbulent time of death and desolation for humans and nonhumans alike. The Forest's ecological system of exchange (Kimmerer, 2020) is at work during the nonhuman inhabitants' various responses, from grief to gratitude, over the elephant's life. Saul mourns his animal-brother's death even though the animist unconscious (Garuba, 2013) reminds him of Old Foot's spirit that can transcend its dead body. Saul struggles against the limits of his human body that is unable to bury Old Foot, because the traditional mourning ritual of the elephant cows take precedence in this multispecies gathering.

## **2.2 Settler colonial narratives and the history of the indigenous Khoe**

The novel is set in the late 1800s in the Western Cape, South Africa when the Knysna Forest was denuded for its wood in building South African towns and railways. This period coincided with the brief gold rush in the 1870s which is also depicted in the novel as gold prospectors gradually eradicate the Forest' fauna and flora to make space for gold mining. Archaeological evidence indicates that the Southern Cape has been home to the Khoe people for thousands of years dating back to the later part of the Earlier Stone Age (Knysna Museums, 2022).<sup>3</sup> The indigenous Outeniquas, descendants of the Khoe people, lived in the Garden Route area in the

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<sup>3</sup> In this dissertation I use the term 'Khoe' in referring to the indigenous people of the old Cape Colony which means 'person' instead of the patriarchal 'Khoi' or 'KhoiKhoi' denoting 'men' and 'men of men' (Bam, 2021: 106).

pre-colonial period, leaving verbal clues of their interdependence with the land and the forest as many of the region's sites have been named by this indigenous people.<sup>4</sup>

In Mattee's novel, Maska is a descendent of the Outeniqua people, an indigenous people who originally lived in 'Outeniqualand' or the Knysna area, as it is known today, before colonial exploitation of timber began in the late 1700s. Maska's ancient animist beliefs in the land and its inhabitants guide Saul in making sense of his transcorporeal connections to Old Foot and the Forest. I refer to Harry Garuba's work on animism (2003 and 2013), as indicated in the previous chapter, in analysing Saul's connection to the spiritual realm of the Knysna Forest. Garuba (2003) proposes "a model for accounting for this virtually all-pervasive phenomenon of modern African society" where the animist unconscious involves a "continuous re-enchantment of the world" (265). Garuba explains that the animist unconscious persistently transforms concepts in science and technology into a mystical worldview (267). Animism, according to Garuba, "is as elastic as the user is willing to stretch it" (267). Garuba argues that animist approaches to the material world employ a spiritualizing lens, since animist gods are situated in the physical objects (267). Garuba contends that modern practices are re-enriched with the metaphorical and magical through the animist unconscious that structures everyday practices of animist cultures (269). In the novel, the international settlers and local woodcutters are unattuned to the magical dimensions of the Forest. Contrastingly, figures like Maska and Saul, rely on their spiritual conception of the Forest world, to make sense of material occurrences such as deaths and suffering. Saul struggles to deny the mystical realm of the Forest that, at times, makes more sense to him than the world of the rational and physical.

Garuba warns against the threats of new literatures on animism in his chapter titled, 'On animism, modernity/colonialism and the African order of knowledge: Provisional reflections' (2013). He states that animist thought is susceptible to Western knowledge constructs through its modernising tropes (48). Yet, Garuba contends that the recent interest in animism dislodges former notions "which equated animism with everything that was childlike and epistemologically challenged" imposed by Western rationalism. He asserts that this new interest in animism must show a sensitivity towards the intricacies of discordant temporalities in fulfilling its beneficial role towards African knowledge systems, which rejects a linear conception of time (49). Garuba's nonlinear conception of time with regard to new and old animist literatures informs my analysis of the Knysna forest's discordant interspecies and

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<sup>4</sup> Outeniqua means Honey Gatherers, Hessequa means Men of the Trees, Tsitsikamma means bright waters, and Knysna means ferns (De Jongh, 2016).

landscape formations, since the animist beliefs of the indigenous Outeniqua figures, like Maska and Old Sanna, permeate Saul Barnard's interspecies encounters and the forest's multispecies communications which I refer to as a multilogue: a conversation that is many-to-many through the utterances, sounds, and non-linguistic ways of demonstrating presence and agency among human and nonhuman sentients in the Forest landscape.<sup>5</sup>

In 1652, the Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie (VOC) – or Dutch East India Company – settled at the Cape of Good Hope in need of a timber supply for use in infrastructure development such as to construct buildings, to burn as fuel, to build tools, ships, and wagons (Knysna Museums, 2022). At first, timber was imported from Mauritius and later from the Overberg region, but these lines of supply quickly dried up (2). Governor J. de la Fontaine journeyed to Outeniqualand in 1734, now known as the Garden Route, and by 1763 the colonists had already begun the indiscriminate exploitation of the estimated 250, 000 hectares of high-quality timber (2). However, transporting the timber was costly and slow due to the region's deep gorges and high mountains with no formal access roads (2). In the novel, Matthee depicts this physical challenge as woodcutters struggle to transport large amounts of wood from the Forest to the town of Knysna. George Rex, a figure Matthee also makes brief mention of in her novel, played an important role in gaining British power and control over the region's timber exports when, in 1804, he bought Melkhoutkraal, a farm on the banks of the Knysna River, and promoted the establishment of a harbour for quick and efficient timber transportation via the Western passage into the Knysna lagoon. Timber exports supported the Knysna economy throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century and in 1928 the George-Knysna branch line transitioned timber exports over to the railway service (3). By then, a government programme attempted to protect the local indigenous forests by planting exotic trees that had helped to create a ready timber harvest during the 1930s (3). At this time, the Dutch woodcutters who had lived and worked in the forests were prohibited to fell trees as Knysna's forests were restricted for harvesting only. The woodcutters resorted to either working for the Department of Forestry or they were pensioned off under the Woodcutters Annuities Act no. 11 of 1939 (3). Matthee's novel takes place between 1860-1889 and focuses on how the start of British control over the Knysna forest brought increasing change to the lives of the Dutch woodcutters' independent way of life. *Circles in a Forest* (Matthee, 2005) also portrays what impact the

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<sup>5</sup> Multilogue is a combination of the two words 'multi-' and 'dialogue' and is commonly used when referring to conversations that are many-to-many on social networking platforms (WordSense Dictionary, 2022). In this study, I use multilogue when specifically referring to a multitude of communications happening simultaneously amongst humans and nonhumans.

discovery of gold and the proclamation of a goldfield in the Knysna forest had on the forest community as the gold rush was short-lived and resulted in a ghost town because of its poor yield. Today the Knysna forest consists of 160,000 hectares of surviving indigenous trees which are protected by the Garden Route National Park since the nature area that remains has endured around 200 years of capitalist extraction and exploitation (4).

Matthee's novel portrays the events from Saul Barnard's third-person limited point of view. Saul's third-person narration reveals his particular attunement to the natural world of the Knysna Forest, his annoyance with the woodcutters' naivety, and his dissatisfaction with the English government's destruction of the Forest. The thoughts and intentions of other characters like Old Foot, Outeniquas, gold diggers, English settlers, and the local woodcutters remain undisclosed except when Saul encounters these respective groups and as readers one sees his perception of their behaviour. Saul is a descendant of the Dutch settlers, who work as woodcutters in the Knysna Forest. The Forest workers or '*Bos mense*' in Afrikaans, literally meaning bush people, make up the woodcutters' community. The woodcutters or foresters are represented as a fiercely stubborn and sincere people which add to their misery in being exploited by English settlers and developers. The title of the novel, *Circles in a Forest* (2005), refers to Saul's pursuit of Old Foot, the elephant king of the Forest. Yet, it is also suggested that Old Foot leads Saul in circles through the Forest for two possible reasons: either Old Foot wants to trample Saul as the danger of elephants is an ever-present thought to the Forest people, or because the elephant wants to remind him of the proliferating destruction caused by the woodcutters and the gold diggers (Cloete, 2002). The 'circles' are symbolic of the vicious cycles of exploitation as the forest is being destroyed by the woodcutters who are, in turn, exploited and repressed by the wood buyers. It also speaks to Saul's repetitive struggles against his intermediate identity and place in society as he finds himself in the simultaneous position of outsider and defender of the Forest. His own Forest people reject him as they brand him as a traitor when he works for the wood buyer, MacDonald, while the English townsfolk regard him as a "bush baboon" who does not understand his subordinate position among them (22). Saul exposes the naivety and prejudice of both groups as he points out injustices and exploitation and acts as a conscience to both sides (23). Even though he is in conflict with the two groups, his intermediate disposition allows him to acquire a position of material untouchability:

He becomes relatively rich digging for gold thanks to his strength, perseverance and local knowledge, as well as luck (or Providence) that enables him to accompany the Australian expert into the forest to prospect for gold. Over the years he develops both emotionally and mentally to a level well beyond the snobbery and contempt of the townsfolk and the childish spitefulness of his own people. When, in due time, Saul resolves to protect Oupoot [Old Foot] at all costs instead of shooting him, his true humanity and strength of character emerge. (Cloete, 2002: 6)

The woodcutters' community constitute a hybrid ideological identity since their European roots intersect with those of the indigenous Outeniqua people, producing a cultural identity that approaches the nonhuman world with respect, but which continues to think in the direction of human exceptionalism and capitalist expansion as being separate to the natural world. This intersection is a result of the woodcutters' community who reside together with the Outeniquas in the Forest for several years where spiritual, cultural, and linguistic patterns have rubbed off on each other. This separation is evidenced in the way Saul's father, Joram, comments on Saul's fourteenth birthday. Joram states that Saul is on the brink of manhood and compares his adolescence to that of a maturing tree:

“... Once a man is fourteen, he starts getting flesh on his bones and bark on his skin, and he can look forward to the day he'll swing his own axe...” It was a strange feeling. The fourteen feeling. As if you were standing in two trees at the same time. (Matthee, 2005: 23)

The image created by Joram, commenting on Saul's impending adulthood, invokes both human and nonhuman qualities: Saul's adulthood simultaneously involves growing in human form and shape, striving towards becoming a woodcutter, and acquiring “bark on his skin” which refers to the process of becoming ‘hardened’ and emotionally mature as one ages. Joram Barnard's manner of speaking relates to the woodcutters' hybrid perception of the world. Joram's statement combines the Outeniquas' belief in a spiritual dimension underscoring the physical realm, alongside the capitalist system of thought that discards the impact of industrial expansion through impending destruction when he assumes his son's decision to become a woodcutter. Saul, on the other hand, dissociates his fourteenth birthday with the anticipation of becoming woodcutter, and instead associates his new age with a sense of interspecies embodiment. Saul fails to relate to his father's woodcutting analogy by instead considering his resonance with a tree rather than the act of swinging a woodcutters' axe.

The human-nature divide runs as a thread throughout the novel as woodcutters and settlers alike fail to recognise the impacts of rapid capitalist expansion on the natural world of the Knysna Forest. Nancy Fraser (2022) expounds on the clear separation between the natural and the economic realm that is structurally facilitated by capitalism. She argues that this sharp division is further emphasised by the distinction between “Humanity – seen as spiritual, sociocultural, and historical – and (nonhuman) Nature, seen as material, objectively given, and ahistorical” (11). Saul Barnard embodies a holistic approach to humanity and nature since he is aware of the woodcutter community’s complex predicament. The woodcutters’ livelihoods depend on the unfair subjection of the wood buyers who demand increasing amounts of wood for little payment, while neither of the two groups consider the threatening eradication of the Forest’s indigenous trees. Saul objects to this way of life when he states to his father and the Barnard woodcutting team, “I don’t want to swing an axe until I’m hollow inside like deadwood” (Matthee, 2005: 93). Saul foresees the devastating end that relentless wood-felling holds for the woodcutters’ livelihood and tries to communicate this on two separate occasions – first to his brother, Jozef, and then to his father:

“Can’t you see for yourself? Can’t you *see* we are killing the Forest and that the Forest is killing us?” (Matthee, 2005: 83).

“What are we, Pa? We kill the Forest to feed them [the wood buyers] and in the end we’ll die together with the Forest!” (Matthee, 2005: 91-92).

The Forest ‘kills’ the woodcutters in that their lives become further entrenched in the subjugation of the wood buyers’ ridiculously low compensation for hard labour that figuratively overpowers them, and sometimes, literally kills the woodcutters. Saul’s father dies a tragic death while felling a tree that unexpectedly falls in the wrong direction, to which Saul sadly comments that “Joram Barnard had felled one tree too many” (192).

Dalene Matthee employs a circling narrative structure to convey the story of Saul Barnard and the Knysna Forest. The novel begins *in medias res* and the reader is challenged to piece together different sections of the story:

So his feet are walking once more the ground he had sworn to leave, his ears are hearing once more the louries in the Forest. He is once more in the twilight world of the Forest and Fred Terblans will have to shoot him before he can raise a gun to Old Foot. There are four days left to Friday. The *Pictor* will not sail before Monday.

Saul Barnard, son of woodcutter Joram Barnard, was conceived and born and brought up in the Forest. He was born on this side of Krisjan's Neck under a white alder on the seventh day of January 1860... (Matthee, 2005: 8)

This is the first narrative jump in the novel that brings together the present – Saul's seemingly final return to Forest before leaving the Knysna region forever – and the past – Saul's history and upbringing in the Forest, twenty-nine years earlier. Matthee contrasts Saul's present apathy towards the Forest, which "he had sworn to leave," with his familiarity with the Forest space that has been home to him since his birth. This passage involves a small assemblage of groups evident within the two converging timelines, considering the nonhuman sentients like the Forest floor, the white alder tree, the louries, the twilight atmosphere, as well as the humans including an ivory hunter, Terblans, and the Barnards family of woodcutters. This opening narrative fragmentation contains a collage of people, places, and presences that pertain to the Knysna Forest's landscape of diversity and divergence that is explored in further detail in the three assemblages that follow. The Knysna Forest is a space where capitalist exploitation, land dispossession, and cultural erasure form some of the several turbulences that play host to the multiple species who co-exist within this setting. Tsing's research (2015), which I referred to in chapter 1, examines the connections between capitalist devastation and cooperative survival within landscapes inhabited by human and nonhuman species. Tsing investigates the different forms of cohabitation that emerge from the fungal matsutake mushrooms and the human-disturbed forest ecologies where it manages to survive. She argues that Anthropocentrism is destabilised by the inconsistent landscapes and unstable temporalities of multispecies existence. I consider Tsing's work in navigating the Forest's turbulent landscape that is host to the collective survival of trees, elephants, birds, woodcutters, Outeniquas, and settlers. The Forest landscape is disturbed by colonial dispossession, proliferating logging, fires, elephant shootings, gold mining, as well as human deaths by illness, elephant trampling and tree felling, yet it remains a space of interconnected vitality and coexistence – all of which I expound on in the four sections that follow.

### **2.3 Assemblage one: disease and elephant-human encounters**

The first assemblage I look at shows the overlapping of events that occur around the time when Saul Barnard turns fourteen years old. This assemblage consists of the death of Saul's mother and sister caused by a measles outbreak in the forest, where multispecies presence is evident

during the deaths of the Forest's community members. This unexpected tragedy leads to the meeting between Saul and Old Foot in the underbrush. Here, an interspecies connection is enabled by the transcorporeal encounter between elephant and woodcutter within the landscape of the Forest. In this assemblage, disturbance in the form of illness, death, and transitional temporalities paves the way for multispecies presence and new interspecies encounters between human and nonhuman:

Saul was fourteen when he saw Old Foot for the first time. Many things happened to him when he was fourteen... Two months before his birthday the godsickness came through the Forest: measles, whooping-cough and even chickenpox in some places. Magdalena was the first to go down with it. When Sara caught it their mother became ill, too. Measles. (Matthee, 2005: 14)

I analyse the identified assemblages for interspecies connections and encounters between the human and nonhuman protagonists, Saul Barnard, and elephant patriarch Old Foot, as well as amongst the Knysna Forest and its various inhabitants. I deploy what Cajetan Iheka refers to as the “aesthetics of proximity” (2018) and three of its demonstrative principles relevant to the novel, namely multispecies presence, interspecies relationship, and distributed agency, in reading for the sense of nearness amongst the pluriverse of species in the Forest, as stated in chapter one. In *Naturalising Africa* (2018) Iheka claims that a certain body of African literature is characterised by what he calls the “aesthetics of proximity” (22) that is divided into two sections: one deals with the spatial sense of nearness and the other attends to a form of proximity enabled by similarities and shared characteristics between humans and nonhumans (22-23). Iheka focuses on human and nonhuman proximity and interconnectivity – a twofold concept that it is brought about by the blurring of spatial distances as well as the joint attributes that exist between human and other-than-human constituents of the natural world – which challenge the Western idea of human exceptionalism and problematises strong anthropocentrism, which Iheka critiques in his book (23). He proposes that proximity is evidenced by four dimensions. The first dimension is multispecies presence that is signalled by spatial closeness between the human and nonhuman (23). Interspecies relationship is the second dimension of proximity that is indicated by both spatiality and shared characteristics between humans and nonhumans (23). The third and fourth dimensions are distributed agency and indistinction between human and nonhuman, respectively. Both these principles make use of common attributes between species in representing their interconnectedness (23). Iheka's concept of the “aesthetics of proximity” situates my reading of the interspecies encounters

between Saul and Old Foot as well as the multispecies response to the deaths in the Barnard family.

The Barnard woodcutting team, including Joram, Saul's father, Jozef, Saul's older brother, and old Arno, an additional forest worker, had been cutting wood far from home when they were sent for to attend to their ill mother and sister who had come down with measles. Once the men reach their home at Big Island, they realise the deaths of Maria, Saul's mother, and Sara, his younger sister, are imminent. The Forest leans into this moment of turbulence for the Barnard family and other woodcutter families who have been struck with this "godsickness" (Matthee, 2005: 14). The presence of the Forest is strongly felt during this moment of disturbance through illness as we read that the "Forest lay like a thick, black, hunchbacked wall around Big Island" (16) at this sombre time. Since the woodcutters are a strongly religious people who believe that the angels or "angelings" (16) take the dead to the heavenly realm, the Forest's dome-shaped wall is symbolic of the heavenly realm that opens in this transitory moment between death and the afterlife. This image also speaks to the Forest's attunement to the loss of two community members. A multispecies world emerges during this moment of death as the Barnards react in grief and disbelief at the passing of a mother and daughter/sister, while the nonhuman Forest creates a dense enclosure where mourning is able to take place.

The death of Maria and Sara Barnard leads to the meeting between Saul and the legendary elephant patriarch Old Foot, also known as the king of the Forest. Shortly after the two women pass away, Saul and Jozef are sent to deliver the news of their mother and sister's passing to their family at Deep Walls, a day's walk from where they stay at Big Island. During this day of travel, Saul and Jozef unexpectedly stumble across Old Foot, the most-feared elephant in the Forest:

There was a movement in the underbrush to their left. At first, he thought it was just a lourie or something, but then it moved again and he got the fright of his life when he realised that it was two giant ears flapping amongst the foliage. It was an elephant! ... The elephant must have been standing there all the time, watching them. (Matthee, 2005: 17)

Iheka (2018) argues that distributed agency entails "imbuing nonhuman aspects of the environment with specific agentic capacities" (44). In this passage, Matthee places the nonhuman and the environment at the centre of the narrative as Old Foot uses his corporeal proximity to the Forest landscape to stay hidden from the human brothers. The elephant

displays an embodied oneness with the Forest trees when he camouflages himself amongst the trees until his chosen moment of unveiling. It takes Saul a second moment of consideration to recognise the elephant's "two giant ears flapping amongst the foliage" (Matthee, 2005: 17) as he mistakes the animal's movement for a bird within the canopy. Old Foot first watches and then announces his presence to the two boys. The elephant pushes the narrative forward, because as he moves within the underbrush and steps out into the clearing, it enables him and Saul to meet and form an interspecies connection. Iheka (2018) challenges the common anthropocentric belief that nonhumans are devoid of agency by identifying the ways in which nonhuman actors impact and participate in narratives where agency is distributed amongst humans and other-than-human beings (22). Saul realises that the elephant must have been watching them rest and eat at Skuins Bush for quite some time. Here, the nonhuman possess the quality of gazing upon the human as the Other, that is Saul and Jozef. Wendy Woodward states, in her article "Postcolonial Ecologies and the Gaze of Animals" (2003), that nature is not a passive, idealised site, but "a dynamic space of actions" where inhabitants "engage with and look back at humans" (292).

After recognising Old Foot's watchful presence, Saul turns his full attention to Old Foot's physical presence as he notices the elephant's various corporeal features that tell of the nonhuman's multiple temporal phenomena that constitute his body:

The next moment the elephant was standing in the clearing of the cripplebush. He stood there slowly rocking his trunk to and fro over the seven-week ferns as if he wanted them to have a good look at him. Where the huge, thick tusks bulged from their sockets at the side of his head, they were smooth like butter and yellow. The lower part, right down to the rounded tip, was stained greenish black from many years of digging up roots and tearing off bark. At least a hundred pounds of ivory on each side of his head. Saul knew he had to get in the tree with Jozef, but he could not take his eyes away from the giant elephant. Under the eye that was turned towards him, a wet patch stained the rough, wrinkled skin dark and it looked as if he was weeping. Over his massive rump was a deep trench scored by a bullet years ago and in one ear there was a round bullet hole that had healed too. They said half of one foot had been shot away when he was still a calf, but Saul could not see it, for the huge feet of the animal were hidden in the ferns (Matthee, 2005: 17-18).

When Saul and Old Foot meet in the underbrush, they essentially encounter the various temporalities and phenomena embodied by the two species. Alaimo (2018) explains that transcorporeality approaches all creatures as embodied beings who are intertwined with the lively, material world (435) and she states that this concept “extends towards all species who find themselves at the crossroads of body and place” (437). The transcorporeal subject is unable to separate itself from networks of intra-active material agencies (Karen Barad [2007] as cited in Alaimo, 2018: 436). Old Foot’s corporeal presence is intertwined with the bodies of his ancestral elephant herds of the Stone age and those of 15th-16th century who roamed the Cape Peninsula region before moving inwards to the Outeniqua Mountains as a result of extensive ivory hunting and the proliferating loss of natural habitat. Old Foot now forms part of the remaining herd of approximately five hundred elephants in the Knysna Forest. The elephant’s bullet wounds are direct linkages to the ongoing conflict between the indigenous inhabitants of the Outeniqua region and the colonialists’ drive for infrastructure development and capitalist extraction. Old Foot’s body becomes a site of contamination, since his body has transformed through time as it bears witness to his survival throughout various disturbing human and nonhuman encounters: Old Foot’s stained ivory tusks indicate plentiful hours spent feeding for sustenance while the two bullet wounds tell of his near-death experiences with elephant hunters.

Tsing (2015) states that disturbance is a characteristic feature of landscapes populated by human and nonhuman histories (160). These discordant phenomena help to cultivate heterogeneous landscapes comprised of multispecies agents who live in a precarious condition of life (152, 161). Indeterminate multispecies assemblages show how life among capitalist destruction is possible through collective survival (163). Old Foot’s enduring bodily stains and wounds are markers of the elephant’s survival amidst the disturbed landscape of the Knysna forest. Saul Barnard, on the other hand, embodies the history and heritage of his European Dutch travellers and colonists that settled and traded at Cape Point during the 17th and 18th centuries. In the narrative present, Saul is fourteen years-old when he meets Old Foot, and when his core values are uprooted when he discovers the stubbornness and naivety of his woodcutters’ people who wastefully fell indigenous trees. Fourteen-year-old Saul is also inseparable from the older, disillusioned Saul who is mocked by the town’s people “because all woodcutters are wild and dirty and so are their children” (Matthee, 2005: 170), and who experiences rejection from the woodcutters who believe him to be a traitor. Old Foot and Saul “find themselves at a crossroads between body and place” (Alaimo, 2018: 437) as their physical

bodies make contact with the transcorporeal embeddedness of the multiple temporalities contained in the body who stands opposite them within the disturbed Knysna forest. Multiple historical and contextual temporalities converge when the woodcutter and the elephant meet in the underbrush and these surging forces and entanglements make up the disturbed assemblage wherein the interspecies connection between Saul and Old Foot is able to take shape.

Saul's body is the site of affective response to the temporal intensities generated by Old Foot's presence. At first, Saul is thrown off guard by the elephant's sudden appearance when he has the "fright of his life" upon seeing Old Foot (Matthee, 2005: 17). He accepts the elephant's gaze and returns it by taking notice of the nonhuman's body as a site of divergent temporalities and encounters. The woodcutters' community teach their members to fear "big feet" (1), as they refer to the elephants, and to flee to the nearest tree when seeing one up close. Jozef waits for his younger brother to join him in the tree, but Saul decides to stay on the forest floor, because "he could not take his eyes away from the giant elephant" (17). An interspecies connection links Saul to Old Foot and causes the woodcutter's son to become fixated on the elephant.

#### **2.4 Divergent approaches toward multispecies attunement: Jozef versus Saul**

Jozef struggles to understand his younger brother's response to the elephant meeting as it disrupts the woodcutters' traditional teachings regarding elephants' violent behaviour. Saul embraces the ideological disturbance that transmits from the interspecies encounter and welcomes the contamination that it entails, that is, the transformative power of interspecies encounter (Tsing, 2015). Jozef, on the other hand, shows reluctance towards the tainting disruptions of a world wherein the nonhuman is rendered equal to the human. Jozef chooses not to consider the possibility of disillusionment that this confrontation presents to his existing knowledge of the presumably inactive nonhuman world, and therefore he tries to dismiss the meeting altogether:

'Let's go,' Jozef said. He was uneasy and kept looking in the direction where the elephant had disappeared.

'Maybe he knows of Ma and Sara...' Saul suggested and could not think why. It was just that he could not understand why the elephant had stood there like that.

‘Don’t be silly,’ Jozef said, starting to walk on. ‘If that bigfoot turns back today, we’ll be trampled, I’m telling you! Come on!’ (Matthee, 2005: 18).

Saul links Old Foot’s visitation and enigmatic behaviour with the death of his mother and sister. According to him, one reason for Old Foot’s nonviolence is that he came to give his condolences to the Barnard brothers, acknowledging the Old Foot and the Forest’s capacity to remain attentive to its community members, human or nonhuman. Saul welcomes the idea that Old Foot’s poignant presence connects to the tragedy in his own human life and believes in the nonhuman’s sensitivity towards his own state of fragility as this is part of the ecological system of exchange that favours relationships and interdependency as community ethics. The elephant’s gun wounds and the brother’s grief over their family deaths form common vulnerabilities (Iheka, 2018) that lead to greater intimacy and understanding among human and nonhuman. Yet, Jozef’s response to the interspecies meeting indicates his refusal to accept the disturbance that follows from an interspecies assemblage: he thwarts Saul’s questions about the elephant’s failure to endanger or trample them and he suggests that Old Foot did not ‘see’ them, in that he was not aware of their close proximity or that his poor eyesight played a role in his unusual behaviour. Finally, he ends their conversation by proclaiming that Old Foot should continue to be associated with fear and danger, thereby reinforcing the conventional separation between human and the nonhuman other.

Consequently, the two brothers’ different reactions to their engagement with Old Foot is representative of their divergent approaches to the Forest throughout the rest of the novel. Saul leans into interspecies proximity and recognises multispecies entanglement within the Forest community and its inhabitants. Jozef follows in his father’s footsteps, as he forms part of Joram Barnard’s woodcutting team, whereafter he and his son form their own woodcutting team. Jozef belongs to the Forest woodcutters and the ways of the woodcutting community, as Saul observes that, “Jozef had always been a child of the forest, he never wanted to be anything else” (Matthee, 2005: 19). When referring to “a child of the forest,” Saul refers to Jozef as one that always shows unwavering loyalty toward his *human* Forest family and community, while he fails to extend this sentiment to the nonhuman world. Additionally, the meeting with the Old Foot also foreshadows the conflicting views between Saul and his brother and father. Saul reasons that Jozef and his father, Joram, share a similar roughness and goodheartedness because they are true Barnards “with ironwood under the skin: hard and strong and good. Saul sometimes got the feeling that they even talked to one another without saying a word; about what they should fell, where the tree should fall or not fall...” (19). Saul notices a bond between

his father and elder brother from which he is excluded. Alternatively, Saul describes a relationship that is similar to the one between himself and Old Foot since their interspecies connection also involves speechless communication and transcorporeal understanding. Yet, the relationship between Saul and Old Foot is also different from Jozef and Joram's relationship in that it is not founded on a shared practice, but is based on their identities as outcasts in the Knysna Forest.

## **2.5 Assemblage two: precarity amidst a tree felling**

The next assemblage I look at is the transformative encounters that take place within a team of local woodcutters, an English government official, an Outeniqua Yellowwood tree, Saul, Old Foot, and the collective Forest community. The different groups' discordant agendas lead to a contaminated diversity (Tsing, 2015: 30) that enables multispecies presence (Iheka, 2018) and a multilogue of human and nonhuman voices. The assemblage is underscored by a deep sense of precarity as a series of disruptions pave the way for interspecies encounters to take place. Nonlinear temporalities embodied by Old Foot and an ancient Outeniqua tree challenge the woodcutters' linear conceptions of time. The felled kalander tree is able to live past its physical death by means of its underground fungal network and the animist spirit that transcends its denuded trunk. Traditional human-centred narratives are upended when the distributed agency of humans, nonhumans, and the environment demonstrate their power as agents in the Forest.

When Joram Barnard decides to chop down an age-old Outeniqua Yellowwood tree, referred to as a kalander by the woodcutters, Saul becomes attuned to the tree's ancient spirit whose existence goes beyond any of the human woodcutters planning to chop it down. Saul recognises the social and spiritual existence of the tree when he sees how "the old man's beard moss in its branches hung like thin green hair, waving eerily in the wind... Where it rose from the forest floor its body was as thick as five oxen together" (Matthee, 2005: 56). Saul's animist conception of the Forest recognises the kalander tree's spirit which dwells within the physical space of the kalander tree since Garuba (2003) explains that "the objects are the physical and material manifestations of the gods and spirits" (267). As Saul takes meticulous notice of the kalander trunk's size, he is essentially recognising the tree's mature age since its trunk is made up of its tree or growth rings. The thickness of the kalander's trunk is also emphasised when the woodcutters spend seven days felling "the old tree [which] does not want to give up its hold on life" (Matthee, 2005: 65). Ursula Heise (2022) claims that textual and image representations

of trees offer a different type of temporality that decentres the human and emphasizes the nonhuman component which might offer sustainable alternatives to our past and future world. Heise argues that tree stories enable us to scale up our imagination of the human to get a better sense of our deep history and long future. Aldo Leopold's *A Sand Country Almanac* (1949) serves as a fine example of this:

We sensed that these two piles of sawdust were something more than wood: that they were the integrated transect of a century; that our saw was biting its way, stroke by stroke, decade by decade, into the chronology of a lifetime, written in concentric annual rings of good oak. (Leopold, 1949 cited by Heise, 2022)

Saul's exposure to Old Foot and the multiple temporalities that he embodies enables him to recognise the kalander's independent temporal position to that of the woodcutters' human conception time. The tree's existence challenges a human linear trajectory of time) since the woodcutters speculate that the tree is close to a thousand years old. Saul is moved by the tree's longevity, and he tries to dissuade his father from felling the tree:

'Perhaps he just does not want to go dead, Pa.' Afterwards, he could not think what made him say such a thing. 'What did you say?' 'Uncle Arno says he must be close to a thousand years old. Perhaps he does not want to go dead yet.' 'Since when is he alive?' 'He has grown, then...' He knew he was vexing his father, but he could not stop himself. Since they had started cutting down that tree, a feeling of anger had grown in him that would not lie down any longer. 'He had to live in order to grow that big.' 'What's going on in your head?' 'Nothing, Pa. It's just that something tells me that kalander is alive! If he was dead, he could not have grown and if you live, you can feel and if you can feel you'll be afraid to go dead!' (Matthee, 2005: 60-61).

Saul deploys his interspecies connection to the nonhuman world and his animist understanding of the Forest to engage in a cross-species encounter with the kalander. He shares in the kalander's panic as the woodcutters approach the tree with their axes and when their axes hit "the first blow on the drop side, it [tears] right through Saul" (56) because he partly shares in the nonhuman's suffering.

Joram's woodcutting team spends "seven strange days" (57) felling the kalander. We see a reversal in the Christian seven-day creation story when the death of the kalander is spread across seven consecutive days of felling that causes disruption and death. Instead of seven days of harmonious creation we see seven days of agitation. When Saul is thirteen, he appropriates

the Biblical creation story to his local setting of the Forest: he reasons that the Garden of Eden, where Adam and Eve dwelt, is the same Knysna Forest where he now walks and he:

... even knew which tree the tree of good and evil was. It was the yellowwood tree. Even the elephants knew that. It was the only tree in the whole Forest of which they would not eat a single leaf. Nor tear off a piece of bark. (Matthee,2005: 34)

Saul replaces the human Adam and Eve with the nonhuman elephants of the Forest, who do not eat of the tree of good and evil, in his understanding of creation. Saul disrupts the traditionally human-centred narrative, when in his version of creation, the elephants are agents of the unfolding events, rather than the commonly accepted human subjects. Furthermore, as the ancient Outeniqua Yellowwood tree, a tree Saul regards as holy and untouchable, is cut down over seven days of turbulence, we see how the agitated landscape facilitates a gathering of multiple human and nonhuman species.

During the first day of setting up shelter and felling the tree, the woodcutting team is unable to ignore the “swarms of louries gathered in the trees around them and at times even the sounds of the axes was drowned by the continuous kok-kok-kokking” (57). Old Foot also makes his presence felt when the woodcutters discover his fresh tracks and warm dung right around their shelter the next morning. An uneasy Joram comments on the elephant’s observant presence when he proclaims that the elephant “stood watching us while we slept of course, making up his mind whether to walk us into the ground or not!” (57). It is ironic that the woodcutters assume to have the upper hand with the kalander tree, while Old Foot’s gaze stirs fear and uncertainty among them. The woodcutters’ display a false sense of security in their position as humans within their environment while nonhuman agents like the kalander and Old Foot upend their apparent superiority towards nonhumans. During the course of day two, an English government official, Mostert, and his restless dog, approach Joram’s woodcutting team. Joram and Mostert have an altercation which involves the topic of ownership of the Forest. Mostert has been sent from the wood-depot at George to declare that the Forest is going to be sectioned and numbered to prevent the woodcutters’ incessant felling of indigenous trees (59-60). Joram argues that the forest belongs the woodcutters and that the Government, Queen Victoria, and the newly appointed government official, Mr. Harrison, “sound like a wind trying to blow from two directions at the same time.” The Forest landscape is further contaminated by the discordant agendas of the English government and the local Dutch woodcutters who both claim ownership over the Forest as natural resource. While Mostert and Joram speak, nonhumans

join in as “the small birds added their bit and the dog sniffed in the underbrush” (58). The presence of nonhuman agents continues to permeate human encounters and dialogues that transform into a multilogue of voices and sounds during the seven days of turbulence.

On day three Joram grows tired of Saul’s reluctance to cut down the tree and he forces Saul to fell the tree with his own axe. Joram intends to prove to Saul that the kalander is not alive and does not feel the blow of the axes. Yet, Joram’s lesson accomplishes the opposite effect as Saul’s feelings of shame and shared anguish at the sight of the bruised tree only intensify when he fells the tree:

The smell of green, bruised kalander wood hung in the air, the chippings flew from the gash like white sparks from fire and a single lourie cried out in distress over the Forest. With every blow Saul gave, anger and despair knotted tighter within him... (Matthee, 2005: 63)

Saul’s multispecies attunement allows him to notice the distressing cry of the lourie bird amidst the felling of the tree and his own turbulent feelings. On the fourth day, elephants roam the vicinity of the woodcutters’ shelter. The woodcutting team finds the tracks of a herd of elephants that walked near their shelter the previous night and Saul comes across Old Foot in the underbush while he is out looking for honey.

The fifth and sixth day are characterised by the creaking of the kalander. Saul feels suffocated by this creaking as he hears how “the tree creaked like one in pain” (64). He tries to distract himself from the kalander’s distressing cries, but “the harder he tried to keep his imagination at bay, the more it felt as if every creak went right through his own body”. The tree’s creaking tears through Saul’s body, because the interspecies connection and transcorporeal attunement that link him to the nonhuman, enable pain, as a shared characteristic (Iheka, 2018), to interlink the bodies of Saul and the kalander. The kalander’s creaking relates to the impending death of the tree’s physical form as its nonhuman longevity and unique temporal position is interrupted by the axes of human woodcutters. Yet, amidst this disturbance and apparent death, continued survival takes place in two ways. The first means of survival is made possible through forest tree communication when the kalander’s legacy of longevity and wisdom is passed on to the surrounding plant species. As I indicated in the previous chapter, Suzanne Simard (2021) specialises in forest tree communication and argues that forest trees use complex, symbiotic mycorrhizal networks to communicate and care for each other. Simard found that hub trees or Mother Trees act as central hubs for large underground mycorrhizal networks that help to move

essential products such as water, carbon, and nutrients between and among trees. The kalander can be classified as a hub or mother/father tree as its large size, old age and intricate root system outrank its surrounding trees. Saul notices how:

like a mighty king it stood towering above the white alder and mountain saffron, stinkwood, assegai and hard pear. As if God had planted it there long before the others. Its giant roots anchored it to the ground like giant arms... (Matthee, 2005:56)

According to Simard's research, the older trees send signals to their nearby seedlings and stranger trees when there is incoming danger. When the Mother Trees die,

they pass their wisdom to their kin, generation after generation, sharing the knowledge of what helps and what harms, who is friend or foe, and how to adapt and survive in an ever-changing landscape. (Simard, 2021: 4)

Although not registered by Matthee in the novel, by deploying Simard's research on hub trees, one can assume that the kalander not only sent warning signals to its nearby trees at the start of the seven days of felling and disturbance, but that the danger also initiated its process of nutrient transference to its seedlings and saplings. Simard's research (2021) is relevant to the Matthee's novel in that the nonhuman's ability to survive human disturbance remains prevalent both in the 19th century Knysna Forest as well as in present-day forest networks. When the kalander is finally cut down, the stump remains intact to continue its carbon imports to the mycorrhizal fungal symbionts, its kin, and other species as well (331) and through this, "dying [enables] the living; the aged [fuels] their young" (333).

The second avenue of survival for the kalander involves animist logic as a means of life after physical death. Animist thought perceives an object, such as the kalander tree, as a local habitation for the sentient being that dwells within it (Garuba, 2003: 267). Therefore, when the tree dies, the spirit is not bound to the tree's material death, but it is able to move into the spirit of another nonhuman object. Maska explains this concept, based on his indigenous Outeniqua teachings, to Saul at a later stage in the novel:

The spirit of the stones does not want to lie still for ever, they get too big for the stones and then they move into the things that are growing. The small stones take the small plants, the larger stones the larger plants. The mountain cliffs take for themselves the biggest kalanders and the highest uprights because they have room for larger spirits. (Matthee, 2005: 195)

Saul only fully understands Masksa's animist conception of the spirit and object world once he is older. During the felling of the tree, Saul struggles to grapple with the imminent death of kalander. The Christian creation story is once again invoked and upturned to favour the nonhuman when Saul, in his desperation to put the kalander out of its misery, prays that the tree will fall the next day, the seventh day (65). Whereas God rested on the seventh day after creating the human and nonhuman worlds, Saul wants the kalander to rest from its prolonged suffering caused by human violence.

The seventh day of turbulence reveals the largest nonhuman gathering. We see the distributed agency and presence of nonhuman actors (Iheka, 2018) shown through nature's powerful weather forces while the hidden presence of several species within the underbush emerge at the moment of the kalander's falling. First, the woodcutting team notice that "the air was sultry when they got up the next morning" (Matthee, 2005: 65) while they consider the coming of "heavy weather" and Jozef declares that he already saw "lightening towards the south" (65). As the kalander falls to the ground, it brings several other creatures into disarray:

It swayed slowly at first. Then faster, as the last of the wood between the gashes tore loose and the forest giant fell down, bringing everything in its path crashing to the ground. Birds flew in confusion from the underbush, a bush-buck fled past Jozef and Saul and a pack of wild pigs passed between their father and the stump. (Matthee, 2005: 65)

The turbulence accompanied by the falling kalander facilitates the movement of nonhuman species like birds, wild pigs, and a bushbuck that would otherwise have stayed hidden in the Forest.

The multilogue of sounds stops for a brief moment after the kalander is chopped down and "all was quiet" (65). Yet, the human and nonhuman sounds reverberate once more as the woodcutters congratulate each other on the successful felling, and "to the west of them the first shot of the day rang out" as an elephant shooting takes place. Shortly afterwards, the sound of pouring rain is the final nonhuman voice to join in the multilogue.

## 2.6 Assemblage three: multispecies expressions and discordant subjectivities during Old Foot's death

The Forest is a space in which multiple species work together for the benefit of its inhabitants, and, in turn, the whole; it is a community where shared responsibility enables mutual wellbeing. In *Braiding Sweetgrass* (2013) Robin Wall Kimmerer expands on her work on traditional ecological knowledge as she draws on indigenous Potawatomi wisdom to advocate for alternative economies, modelled after ecological systems, to challenge market capitalism. Kimmerer (2020) argues that in ecological economies such as that of the Serviceberry plant, “the focus is on creating an economy that provides for a just and sustainable future in which both human life and nonhuman life can flourish” (8). Capitalism’s economic system uses scarcity and private accumulation as its units of exchange, whereas the gift economy, a name given to the method of exchange that views the earth’s natural resources as gifts instead of commodities, is based on gratitude, reciprocity, and relationships (4). I use what Kimmerer defines as a gift economy to further understand the overlapping of opposing economies in one historical moment: market capitalism, driven by British colonialism, intersects with the Forest’s regenerative ecological system. I study the novel for moments in which the Forest’s ecological economy operates through interdependent relationships between human and nonhuman inhabitants. The Forest community expresses its appreciation to all inhabitants who suffer pain, death, and loss, through a crying lourie bird, the sighing wind, the shared anguish between Outeniqua tree and woodcutter, and various other moments when community relations are highly valued.

The Knysna Forest continues to be marked by human disturbance as gold diggers shoot Old Foot and cause the elephant King to die a premature death. The troubling incident leads to a multispecies response as the human and nonhuman Forest inhabitants pay their respects to the elephant patriarch’s life. During this moment of mourning, the ecological gift economy (Kimmerer, 2020) is at work as gratitude, reciprocity, and relationships form the units of exchange among community members. L.A. Green (2018) states that in animist thought, the material form of humans, animals, plants and other things is a particular constraint through which the soul or spirit interacts with the world and with other bodies (313). In this passage, the nonhuman inhabitants react in various ways that are characteristic to their material plant or bird form. Saul, on the other hand, is affected by Old Foot’s death as the physicality of their interspecies connection is abruptly ended. Even though his intuitive animist understanding of the world allows him to feel the animal’s lingering spirit, he is frustrated by the constraint of

his human body, which does not permit him to mourn Old Foot together with the herd of elephant cows.

Kimmerer (2020) claims that “the currency in a gift economy is relationships” (4), which is demonstrated through gratitude, interdependence, and reciprocity. When the Forest community collectively responds to Old Foot’s death through different sensory expressions, the currency of kinship circulates among the Forest community. When a second gunshot kills Old Foot, the forest floor “shudders” (Matthee, 2005:286) under the weight of his colossal body. For a moment, the Forest’s multilogue of voices is shocked into silence at the realisation of the elephant’s death:

Not the calling of a bird - not the creaking of a branch - nor a gust of wind - nothing. It is as if the Forest is crying out in shocked silence, lamenting the death of its king hidden in its mysterious depths. (Matthee, 2005: 286)

Whereas the Forest’s lively presence is typically characterised by the birds’ constant singing, calling, or hissing, their silence in this case, indicates their moment of mourning over Old Foot’s death. Thrice Matthee repeats that “not the call of a bird” could be heard following Old Foot’s death, emphasising the strangeness of the birds’ silence within the Forest. The only bird that is heard is a single lourie whose “kok-kok-kok [sounds] like someone weeping” (286). The relationship between Old Foot, the forest plants, and the wind is also remembered when a “scarlet mountain lily hangs like a drop of blood from a crevice” (289). The red hanging lily mimics the blood of the elephant that now drips on the forest floor and its plants. Together with the image of the scarlet lily, there is “the smell of bruised forest plants” that lingers in the air while the “wind sighs lightly through the tree tops” (290). The multitude of species recollect their interdependent relationship with Old Foot and express gratitude toward the elephant’s life. The Forest birds mourn in silence while a single lourie cries a lonesome kok-kok-kok. The Forest’s flora demonstrates its appreciation of the intimate kinship between itself and the elephant through a shuddering forest floor, a drooping mountain lily, and the aroma of forest plants that fills the air alongside the soft sighing wind. Old Foot’s long-standing membership in the Forest community is ultimately honoured and reciprocated when a herd of elephant cows bury their dead patriarch as they cover his dead body with branches and leaves.

Saul is physically affected by Old Foot’s death as his blood runs cold at the sound of the “dreadful trumpeting of an elephant in pain”, the world around him spins violently, and he vomits on the Forest floor before losing consciousness (286). When awareness returns to Saul,

he quickly makes his way down through underbrush to reach Old Foot's body where "in the stillness of the dark green shadows it feels as if something of the giant spirit is still hovering over him" (290). Saul is able to intimately mourn the elephant's death because his animate conception of the world enables him to feel the elephant's spirit even though his body is lifeless. The interspecies connection that joins Saul and Old Foot is not bound to physical contact since it is of transcorporeal nature, but when Saul's hand goes out to touch Old Foot's body for the first time, it feels to him as if he "is touching the untouchable" (290). When Saul's hand rests on Old Foot, he expresses his gratitude to the elephant for his animal-brother companionship as "a lifetime's love for the animal breaks out of him and sadness descends on him like a cloud of darkness" (290). The various temporal positions embodied by Old Foot now hover together with the elephant's spirit, outside its material body, and triggers a sense of distortion within Saul. Their interspecies connection becomes obscured as the spirit slowly departs from the elephant body, bringing about a desolation within Saul "so great and consuming that it swamps all sense of time and reality" (291). At this point, Saul realises that "beside him Old Foot is suddenly irrevocably dead...not even a sense of the once-great spirit, hovering somewhere, is left" (293). Saul walks around the lifeless elephant and contemplates digging an elephant grave, but quickly knows that this thought is "an impotent rebellion against his own insignificance... [as] man is nothing against an animal like this". Saul's human strength and need to bury the animal is rendered trivial when compared to the magnitude of the elephant's body and the herd of elephant cows that come to bury Old Foot. L.A. Green (2018) claims that "giving objects due attention pushes aside the expansive, even excessive demands of humans to control the meaning and shape of the material world" (311). In this passage, the focus on Old Foot, his massive and immovable body, and the unstoppable herd of elephant cows who set about their traditional burial ritual convey Saul's human agenda to be irrelevant. Saul is constrained by his human form which must converse with gold miners and elephant hunters amidst his grieving while he is also unable to partake in the burial ritual with the herd of cows. Maska, embodying the role of an old animist guide in this passage (Durrant, 2021), realises Saul's ostensible preoccupation with wanting to mourn and bury Old Foot while the furious elephant cows quickly approach the elephant's dead body. The aged Outeniqua forcefully pushes Saul out of the way before "the deafening trumpeting of an angry elephant coming up the kloof brings him to his senses" (Matthee, 2005: 293). L.A. Green (2018) explains that animist attunements and connections bring about disparate realities as "the material bodies, though connected by a shared interiority, give rise to divergent subjectivities" (315). When the divergent subjectivities of Saul and the Forest elephants converge, since both share a connection to Old Foot, Saul's

human desire to shape world-making activities within this locality comes second to the nonhuman cows who succeed in their burying ritual. The Forest's gift economy is operative through the cows' burying ritual which allows the elephants to grieve and convey their gratitude to their patriarch's life, thereby strengthening community relations. Mutual flourishing between community members would have been inhibited if it were possible for Saul to place Old Foot's body in a human-dug elephant grave, and thus, withholding the mourning process from the rest of the Forest community.

## 2.7 Conclusion

Dalene Matthee's *Circles in a Forest* (2005) captures interspecies encounters and transcorporeal connections between human and nonhuman inhabitants of the Knysna Forest community. The historical-fictional Outeniqua landscape of the early 19th century is marked by a series of disturbances that facilitate multispecies entanglements that challenge a linear conception of time. Maska's indigenous animist beliefs enable Saul Barnard to form core linkages to the Forest and its nonhuman community members. Saul and Old Foot are animal-human brothers through their recurrent interspecies encounters that join various temporalities embodied by the woodcutter and elephant. An age-old Yellowwood tree becomes a gathering place for an array of humans and nonhumans who bring about contaminated diversity. The discordant subjectivities of the British government and local Dutch woodcutters converge during the felling of the kalander tree. Meanwhile, Saul's spiritual attunement to the Yellowwood tree creates contention among his family of woodcutters. Despite Saul's efforts to stop the felling of the tree, the kalander's animist spirit transcends its physical death and its surrounding seedlings partake of its remaining nutrients through its mycorrhizal network. Old Foot dies an untimely death when gold diggers spark further discord within the Forest as they shoot the elephant patriarch. Saul, Maska, and the nonhuman Forest inhabitants mourn the death of their elephant king whose spirit hovers in the surrounding space before ultimately departing from its material form. Saul's human narrative and physical capacities are thwarted by the elephant cows' burying ritual. Therefore, emphasis is placed on the agency of nonhumans amidst a human disturbed landscape. My reading of the novel explored the collages of multispecies gatherings within the terrestrial Knysna forest, whereas the next chapter expounds on the human and nonhuman connections that are facilitated by the aquatic kelp forest in the nature documentary, *My Octopus Teacher* (2020). The nonhuman octopus

becomes a teacher to Craig Foster, who displays a strong sense of belonging within the littoral worlds of the Cape coastline.

## Chapter 3 –Terrestrial and aquatic kinships in *My Octopus Teacher* (2020)

### 3.1 Introduction

South Africa's first ever Netflix Original nature documentary, *My Octopus Teacher* (2020), directed by Pippa Ehrlich and James Reed, documents the encounters between Craig Foster and a common octopus within a kelp forest near False Bay, located within the South Atlantic Ocean, off the South African coast. The 90-minute-long film is about interspecies friendship between human and octopus. Craig Foster, a local filmmaker, visits the kelp forest for approximately a year in 2010 to recover from professional burnout. Upon meeting the common octopus or octopus *vulgaris* for the first time, he decides to visit the kelp forest daily in an attempt to build a relationship with her and to understand how her life underwater is interwoven with his own. The film starts with Foster explaining what led him to professional burnout and his decision to be in the ocean to find mental and emotional release. Foster is shown free diving in the cold and turbulent Cape of Storms waters, which he manages to do without a wetsuit. Here he discovers the underwater world of the octopus, her kelp forest home, and its many inhabitants. The documentary shows how the octopus and Foster meet and connect on an interspecies level. More specifically, the film illustrates how Foster accepts the octopus' role of a teacher, who through her way of living, offers alternative approaches to making sense of his life's difficulties.

The film was met with great acclaim on various platforms as it won, among several awards, the BAFTA Award for Best Documentary, and the Academy Award for the Best Documentary Feature. The nature documentary has two central filming locations: Foster's beach house where he narrates the film footage taken in and around the kelp forest, which is the second major screening location. This aquatic forest is the home of Foster's octopus teacher and it forms part of South Africa's major "seaforest", which is the focus of the film's conservation efforts through The Sea Change Project – an organisation founded by Craig Foster and Ross Frylink that centres around ocean protection. *My Octopus Teacher* (2020) is only one of the many forms of storytelling that The Sea Change Project uses to promote the long-term protection of South Africa's marine environment and through this, to reach their goal of making the Great African Seaforest (a name given to the country's diverse underwater forest by the organisation) a global icon (2021). The Great African Seaforest refers to the underwater kelp forest that stretches from the Cape Town coastline northwards to the shoreline of Namibia. It is unique

because it is home to the only giant bamboo kelp on earth, growing amidst the shrinking and disappearing of kelp forests across the globe (2021).

In this chapter, I continue to use Cajetan Iheka's work on the aesthetics of proximity (2018) to study the interconnection of human and nonhuman beings, between Foster, his environment, the kelp forest, and the octopus. Iheka's four dimensions to representing proximity remain relevant to the analysis of the film: (1) multispecies presence, (2) interspecies relationship, (3) distributed agency, and (4) indistinction between human and nonhuman (2018) through the related premises of spatiality and similar attributes between species. This chapter looks at two types of relationships that ensue when human and more-than-human species are brought close together, alongside the film's narrative technique which facilitates the kelp forest's magical dimensions. I further draw out Garuba's theorisations of animism (2013), alongside Sam Durrant (2021) and Louise Green's work on new materialism (2018) to understand the ways in which animist logic permeates the interspecies relationships between Foster, the octopus, and the kelp Forest. The connection between Foster and the octopus – and the challenge it poses to anthropocentrism – is the focus of the first relationship. Second, I study the relationship between Foster and the environment that is attentive to the kelp forest's community and its practices of flourishing. I draw on the work done in affect (Stewart, 2007) and affective ecocriticism (Bladow and Ladino, 2018) in reading the film for moments of affective exchanges between Foster and the aquatic environment. The filmmakers' attunement to capturing the kelp forest's supernatural dimension constitutes the final section, prior to the chapter's conclusion.

### **3.2 Foster and his nonhuman teacher**

The first interspecies relationship that I analyse is the one between Foster and the octopus. The kelp forest and its flourishing community provide this relationship with an important contextual framework that resonates with Kimmerer's understanding of a gift economy (2020) which functions through relationships and is expressed through gratitude and interdependence, as previously mentioned. The kelp forest is an assembling point for interactions between human and nonhumans since Foster and the octopus meet and build a relationship that holds true to the community's ethics of reciprocity in this space. Foster allows the octopus to become his teacher while he adopts the role of student in this process of relearning to live sustainably through three life practices embodied by the octopus. Alexis Gumbs' book, *Undrowned*:

*Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals* (2020) focuses on the submersive powers of marine animals, and their ways of mothering and survival, to offer transformative notions of terrestrial and aquatic kinships. By focusing on the lives of whales, dolphins, seals, manatees, and walruses, Gumbs shows how the vulnerable interconnectedness between humans and their ocean relatives is more prevalent than ever. Gumbs' meditative approach to helping humans understand the marine worlds' communal approach to interspecies living links to Foster's ongoing visitations to the aquatic world where he returns day after day to unlearn his desensitised approach to nature. His octopus teacher shows him how to (1) build connection and trust through time spent together and physical contact in their interspecies relationship. Foster is challenged in this relationship to engage in (2) affection that was otherwise lacking from his human connections. She teaches him about her three-fold approach to her surroundings that is thinking-feeling-exploring, which necessitates (3) vulnerability and regeneration. Although Foster and the octopus undergo several changes and challenges during the year spent together – at times, trust is broken, and a nearly fatal injury occurs – their relationship remains intact to affirm the quality of their interspecies connection.

Foster is firstly challenged to form a connection that functions on shared trust between human and nonhuman. Their interspecies connection grows as they familiarise themselves with each other and it is firmly established by physical touch. Foster becomes acquainted with the octopus' environment so that he can understand her better. As he maps out the kelp forest and all the spaces that the octopus has relational connections to, he begins to understand that her world is full of vicious predators that she works hard at deceiving creatively. The octopus also takes a while to become comfortable around Foster and his bulky camera equipment. Both species employ mutual trust when Foster and the octopus make physical contact, and this serves as a visible manifestation of their interspecies connection. Iheka (2018) proposes that interspecies connections and relationship are enabled by the staging of physical closeness. Yet, the interspecies trust is threatened when Foster accidentally drops one of his camera lenses during a time of bonding. This gives the octopus a fright and scares her away so that she relocates from her existing den to find a new shelter within the forest. Foster is disheartened by his clumsy mistake, but he decides to draw from his time spent with the San master trackers of the central Kalahari, to track the octopus for a week in an attempt to reconnect with her. Sam Durrant (2021) identifies a new animist practice of taking seriously the mimetic impulse to follow the example of another, as he explains that new animists follow the ways of old animists

who, themselves, have been taught by their ancestors how to follow and hunt an animal. Durrant argues that new animism employs an act of following and pausing as he explains that:

if we are to follow animists, then, we must learn to follow them ironically, ludically, reflectively, alive to the way in which animism itself is never self-identical, that even for ‘authentic’ indigenous animists, there will always be an irreducible gap between (contemporary) practise and (ancestral) belief, an element of mimesis in the very notions of ancestry and inheritance. Animism is a following of ancestral customs, but there is always a performative, knowing, self-conscious element to this following. (Durrant, 2021: 11-12)

Foster participates in the act of following when he looks to the indigenous San hunters, who follow and mimic their prey when hunting for them, in tracking the octopus. He follows the octopus through conscious acts of searching for her kills and other clues as to where she relocated, stating that he had “to think like an octopus” (*My Octopus Teacher*, 2020). Yet, Foster does not follow the octopus with the intention to hunt, but to find and reconnect with her. As he does this, he is essentially following an animal who, herself, is expert in the act of following, because octopuses have spent years trying to be undiscoverable and perfecting the act of mimicking. She mimics her forest environment, such as reef rocks or floating kelp, so Foster’s task seems nearly impossible. As he tracks the octopus, he studies her environment to find clues as to where she is moving and inhabiting the forest space. The octopus’ interdependence on the forest community helps Foster to track her as signs of her hunts lead Foster to her new den. When Foster finally locates the octopus, after searching for her for a week, renewed trust and deeper connection form between the two friends because of Foster’s resilient pursuit of their relationship after startling the octopus.

The second practice the octopus teaches Foster about is nurturance as a way of engaging with other members of the community since strong kinship results in shared affection. Their interspecies relationship is premised on trust built through consistent time spent together. Foster decides to dive in the kelp forest every day to visit the octopus. When the kinship is strong between Foster and the octopus, they engage in physical contact where affection is shared between each other.<sup>6</sup> At the start of the film, Foster explains that his burnout led to disconnection with his work and family. The octopus confronts Foster’s lack of affection and

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<sup>6</sup> Here I refer to the kinship as the bond between human and nonhuman (Kimmerer, 2020; Haraway, 2016).

inability to nurture when she lies on his chest and urges him to engage with her. During this moment of physical bonding with the octopus, Foster is challenged to show affection as well as to receive love from her. In her article focused on reconsidering the individual and community as based on indigenous cultures, Priscilla Stuckey (2013) studies the Andean peoples of Bolivia, Peru and Ecuador, to understand their community of relatives, comprised of humans, nature beings, and spirits who live together in one area and employ conversation to enable a functioning society (201). This concept is known as “ayllu” (201). Similar to Kimmerer’s economy of abundance (2020), Andean communities prioritise harmonious relationships by way of placing equal value on all its members during decision-making processes (Stuckey, 2013: 202). To relate well with other members in the Andean community, one needs to give as well as receive affection from the community (202). In the Andean society, emphasis is placed on the “pleasure of giving and on allowing oneself to be loved” as nurturance among the entire community is a life-giving source of regeneration to the living earth, referred to as Pachamama, who is the mother of all and the source of nurturance (202). Foster experiences the life-giving source of nurturance when he allows himself to be loved by the octopus who helps him rekindle his disjointed familial relations and to overcome his apathy towards filmmaking. The octopus, on the other hand, receives Foster’s affection and shortly after her last physical contact, she starts her mating process with a male octopus that leads to reproduction. Here, nurturance is quite literally a life-giving source of regeneration as physical contact is linked to the death of the octopus and the beginning of new life through her young. Foster’s regeneration takes another form. Foster also reclaims renewed energy and love for the conservation of the environment through the establishment of the Sea Change Project. Foster learns to nurture his son, Tom, through their shared interest in the environment. Foster also engages with a human community of free divers in False Bay. In this sense, Foster pours his affection onto others which leads to further connections and affections between humans and their environments. Foster and the octopus’ relationship produces acts of reciprocity that closely links to the forest community’s ethics of flourishing.

Additionally, Foster must confront his fear of uncertainty and vulnerability when the octopus teaches him her three-phase approach to her surroundings, which involves risk-taking and vulnerability. The octopus’ entire being is “thinking-feeling-exploring” (My Octopus Teacher, 2020) as she has more than two thousand suckers that she uses independently to taste, smell, and grip onto her surroundings. The octopus combines the thinking-feeling binary and adds a third dimension to this approach: exploring. Cognitive thinking is combined with feeling which

naturally leads to explorative behaviour. The octopus simultaneously uses her suckers to think-feel-explore her way through the forest and to navigate her relationship with the human. Foster tries to understand the octopus' three-fold approach to her surroundings when he asks, "How do you do that? Imagine having two-thousand fingers" (2020). By making this comparison, Foster destabilises the human subject as the embodiment of superior knowledge and experience since Foster cannot truly imagine having as many sensory inputs as two-thousand fingertips and what this would mean for our cognitive and emotional information processing. In his chapter on the aesthetics of proximity, Iheka (2018) seeks to know how African literature reinstates the nonhuman in relation to the human. In the film, the nonhuman octopus teacher is re-established as intricate beyond human comprehension. The film confronts the concept of anthropocentrism since Foster is positioned to learn from the nonhuman other. Foster is dared to redefine the thinking-feeling binary conception of human experience as well as to add the dimension of exploration to his new approach to life, since his previous approach to work and relationships proved unsuccessful:

I went through two years of absolute hell. I had been working hard for a long time and I had just worn myself out. I hadn't slept properly for months. My family was suffering. And I was getting sick from all the pressure. My mind couldn't deal with all that stuff. And I didn't want to see a camera or an edit suite ever again; I couldn't even face it. Your great purpose in life is now just in pieces. And you've got this young child that's growing up, Tom. I just couldn't in that state be a good father to my son. I had to have a radical change. (*My Octopus Teacher*, 2020)

Foster's exhausting work life led him to extreme burnout that permeated his personal life. He observes the octopus's embodied approach of thinking, feeling, and exploring to change his familiar ways of experiencing the world around him, including his career and relationships. A fine example of the octopus's three-fold approach to her environment is during her night hunting expeditions where she uses calculated techniques, in combination with her feeling receptors, to catch her meals. She also explores dangerous territory when she swims in shallow waters to hunt for small fish and crabs at night. Another example of this simultaneous practice of think-feel-explore is when she encounters Foster for the first time. As he approaches her, she acts cautiously by keeping most of her arms securely attached to her den in case of possible danger, but with one tentacle she reaches toward Foster. After a while, curiosity urges her to learn even more about her observer as she gently makes physical contact with Foster's outstretched hand to discover the new texture that is human skin. Taste, texture, smell, and grip

are instantaneously used to explore the unfamiliar forest inhabitant. Foster is challenged to redesign his approach to work and relationships that seemingly comprised only one dimension – the overemphasis on hard work with no flexibility for emotive and explorative inputs and outputs. The octopus’s three-stage method to think, feel, and explore allows for a more diverse approach to her surroundings: hunting becomes a playful experience as she feels and explores her environment while thinking strategically. When she meets a human, it is an encounter that evokes caution, curiosity, and the discovery of new textures. It is important to consider that exploration, as one of the aspects to the octopus’s three-fold process, is closely linked to vulnerability since the risk to learn and discover new things often leads to moments where one will be exposed and vulnerable. Uncertainty and vulnerability are illustrated in the film when the octopus is out of her den, exploring the edge of the kelp forest alongside Foster, when she gets hunted by a shark. Her exploration leads to exposure and frightening uncertainty. She tries hard to escape the pyjama sharks, but one gets hold of her arm and bites it off. She manages to find security in her den where she takes more than three months to mend and regrow the severed arm. During her slow recovery, Foster continues to visit her while experiencing internal turmoil as he grapples with the near-death encounter of his octopus teacher:

I felt very vulnerable, as if somehow what happened to her, happened to me in some strange way. And it almost felt psychologically as if I was going through a type of dismembering. And you start thinking about your own death, your own vulnerability, worried about your family, your child. I hadn’t been a person that was overly sentimental over animals before... I realised I was changing. She was teaching me to become sensitised to the Other, especially wild creatures. (*My Octopus Teacher*, 2020)

Foster’s bond with the octopus results in an interconnectivity that affects him intimately, causing indistinction between human and nonhuman spheres. Iheka (2018) argues that “clear lines of demarcations are obfuscated” (50) in this dimension of proximity. Iheka claims that to focus on similarities is not to ignore difference, but rather to stand against the idea of human exceptionalism and “to encourage a relational disposition toward other beings, who are not always human” (50-51). Foster struggles to understand why he feels, similar to the octopus, vulnerable and dismembered. As he ponders death, mortality, and the state of his loved ones, his interspecies connection to the octopus enables him to empathise with her as well as to reassess his position in relation to humans and nonhumans. His fragmented family bonds and his insensitivity toward nonhumans were changing because of his relationship to the octopus. Foster’s progress and change are dependent on the octopus as Iheka explains that another

notion of proximity lies in the distributed agency between humans and nonhumans. The octopus propels the narrative in an unexpected turn when her physical dismemberment produces a form of emotional dismemberment in her human friend. Foster feels exposed because the octopus' life is under threat and his deep trust and intimate connection with her now make him feel vulnerable. Brene Brown is a researcher on shame and vulnerability who defines vulnerability as uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure in her book, *Daring Greatly* (2012), in which she maintains that courage and vulnerability are closely linked, despite the widely accepted myth that vulnerability is a weakness. Brown argues that by taking risks, we lean into uncertainty, and we feel exposed and vulnerable, but this must be regarded as a strength since being vulnerable requires the courage to feel and let ourselves be seen even when there are no guarantees. Brown argues that although vulnerability might seem like a weakness, it is really truth and courage which is not always comfortable, but it is never a weakness. Foster leaps into the unknown when he builds an interconnected relationship with the octopus and shows courage when doing so, as Brown states that emotional risks are inevitable when we allow ourselves to be vulnerable, but "there is no equation where taking risks, braving uncertainty, and opening ourselves up to emotional exposure equals weakness" (35). Vulnerability pushes Foster into greater uncertainty as his relationships to nonhuman others start to encompass greater sensitivity because of his connection to the octopus, her life's transience, and her interdependence on the forest community. In becoming conscious of other species, Foster also reconsiders his relationships to humans. The octopus, kelp forest community, and its ethics of interconnection and reciprocity impact Foster to bring about change in his human connections. Upon discovering the octopus's ability to regenerate and grow a new miniature arm after its mutilation, Foster is encouraged to reconnect with his human relations and to reassess his work situation that make up the difficulties of his life:

It [the octopus' newly grown arm] gave me a strange sort of confidence that she could get past this incredible difficulty, and I felt in my life I was getting past the difficulties I had. In a strange way our lives were mirroring each other. My relationship with people, with humans, was changing. My son at this stage was very interested in everything under water and everyday I'd tell him the stories. And he'd seen her, he'd met her. I'd taken him so many times.

The arm becomes pretty functional even when it's half-grown. And then slowly as the arm grew, she grew her confidence back. And eventually, about a hundred days later, that arm had fully regrown. It's an amazing feeling, to think that this animal is capable

of that, and can withstand such an attack, and is able to fully recover. (*My Octopus Teacher*, 2020)

When the octopus slowly regrows one of her eight arms, she undergoes physical and mental transformation, because of her thinking and feeling receptors located on the arm. As her arm steadily grows, so her confidence grows too since the shark's attack manages to injure both her physical mobility and her internal confidence as an octopus only having seven arms. Nevertheless, she regenerates up to the point of full recovery. Foster does not undergo corporeal injury, yet the octopus's mental and emotional dismemberment resonates with him. When Foster looks to the octopus for assurance that he can endure life's challenges, he depends on their relationship and discards the human notion of self-sufficiency. The forest community's economy of abundance functions through the relationships of its inhabitants and it is illustrated when Foster draws wealth and security, in the form of confidence and reconnection, from the quality of their kinship. As Foster and the octopus work at overcoming difficulties, emotional and physical, their lives seem to be "mirroring each other" (*My Octopus Teacher*, 2020). This idea links with Durrant's (2021) argument that new animists practice an act of imitation or following when they recognise the spirit or personhood of an animal since this is an act that is "predicated on a creaturely identification" (12) between human and animal. Foster and the octopus's lives are enmeshed because of their shared attributes such as suffering through dismemberment, vulnerability because of uncertainty, impermanence, and regeneration. Iheka (2018) contends that shared attributes between human and nonhuman forms, the second notion of proximity, are particularly shown in the ethic of multispecies entanglement as it focuses on the ways African cultural practices "stage the enmeshment of human and nonhuman lives and the implications of said enmeshment for ecological justice" (23). The nature documentary specifically shows how the lives of Foster and the octopus are characterised by closeness and shared sufferings and through this, it necessitates the idea that "we cannot separate human beings from their environments" (23) and its nonhuman residents.

Foster's son, on the other hand, seems to understand his interconnectivity with his environment when he shows great interest in the natural world from an early age. Foster can reconnect with his son on the basis of their shared interest in the underwater world, whereas previously, Foster struggled to engage in fatherly practices because of his professional and mental burnout. The restoration of Foster's relationships forms part of one of the forest community's practice of flourishing that aims toward the nurturance of the community bonds that enhance mutual well-being. The mend of the father-son connection supports the kelp forest community because the

restoration of one of its members, in this case Foster, means the restoration of all community members since the economic unit of the aquatic forest premises the collective group rather than the individual.

### 3.3 Foster's return to nearshore waters

Meg Samuelson and Charne Lavery offer the notion of the “Oceanic South,” suggesting that the aquatic dimension of the Southern hemisphere is one of its characteristic features (2019). They investigate three literary texts where the contested waters of the Southern Ocean can be read within a framework that premises tempestuous and multidimensional contexts:

This framework brings into agitated contention the extractive economies of the North and the persistent legacies of settler colonialism in the South, along with the questions of intrahuman and more-than-human justice that flow between them. (Samuelson and Lavery, 2019: 1)

By recognising the ever-present role of the invasive capitalism of the North, as well as the South's history of settler colonialism, Samuelson and Lavery find alternative approaches to apprehending its “condition of alterity” that is sensitive to more-than-human materialities (11). The oceanic South, to invoke Samuelson and Lavery's proposed category, is host to the relationships between Foster, the octopus, and her kelp forest home, where moments of turbulence and precarity are constant practices to daily human and aquatic living.

From the outset of the film, viewers are introduced to the relationship between Foster and the littoral world of the False Bay area. Foster's relationship with the ocean is associated with familiarity and nostalgia because his connection to the Cape Peninsula dates to his childhood memories of living on the shore and spending much of his time in the oceanic worlds of the Cape. Sidney Dobrin's *Blue Ecocriticism* (2021) expands on the significant lack of attention paid to the ocean in ecocriticism and draws from his personal experience and longing towards the ocean when he states that “ocean is not an object, a body, a place, a concept, or a way of being I try to get to but is something from which I can never detach” (xi). Dobrin argues that the large volume of ocean-related texts – ranging from books to shows, songs, video games, paintings, and tattoos – shape one's cultural imaginaries in knowing the ocean and which do not merely “evoke or preserve memory; they are memory and augmentations of embodied memory” (xiii). Foster shares a similar inability to dissociate himself from the ever-present

longing towards the sea, causing him to unmoor himself from his land-based exhaustion and dive in Cape waters every day. Foster's closeness to the Southern Ocean is part of his cultural memory archive, therefore when he reaches a point of burnout, his fatigue connects to his neglected relationship with the ocean and the littoral environment. In *Affective Ecocriticism* (2018), Kyle Bladow and Jennifer Ladino argue that important connections can be drawn between affect and our environment. In brief, affect theory approaches affect as a precognitive bodily feeling or a perpetual state of becoming; affect has also been defined as the transpersonal intensities that emerge as bodies affect one another (5). The book stresses the idea that the environment plays a powerful role in shaping our emotional lives and how we process information (2). Affective exchanges and encounters are embedded in a lively material world in which we are intricately enmeshed alongside other beings (8). Bladow and Ladino claim that affect theory upends the notions of embodied selfhood and the static notions of environment as it challenges us to identify the pathways of transcorporeal encounters that are complex and dynamic in nature (8). Foster's emotional and professional rehabilitation tells of the operative energy that is evident in the interconnection between Foster and the environment. Foster slowly reconciles his relationship with the environment of his upbringing by frequently spending time in the ocean and this initiates a process of restoration within his emotional life. He experiences a form of relief when he has energy to return to professional work through his nature photography. The renewed relationship between Foster and the environment enables him to grow deeper connections to the environment as he then decides to swim in the cold Cape waters on a constant basis, even craving the cold after a year's diving:

In the beginning, it's a hard thing to get in the water. It's one of the wildest, most scary places to swim on the planet. The water drops to as low as eight to nine degrees Celsius. The cold takes your breath away. And you just have to relax. And then, you get this beautiful window of about ten to fifteen minutes and suddenly everything feels okay. The cold upgrades the brain because you're getting this flood of chemicals every time you immerse in that cold water. Your whole body comes alive. And then, as your body adapts it just becomes easier and easier. And eventually, after about a year, you start to crave the cold. (*My Octopus Teacher*, 2020)

Foster describes the convergence between his own body and the False Bay waters that impacts him physically and emotionally. On a physical level, the low water temperature changes Foster's breathing, his senses are sharpened, and his brain functionality is upgraded due to a chemical influx. On an emotional level, Foster feels somewhat afraid because of the Cape's

stormy waters and rough waves, but when his bodily senses are awakened, he feels pleased and relieved. On screen, we see how Foster struggles to enter the waters as the turbulent waves keep pushing him back as they crash, roll, and pull against his human body. This encounter between the two bodies – Foster’s human body and the body of water – is one example of a transcorporeal exchange that shows the intricacies of environmental affects that take place when bodies make contact.<sup>7</sup> In her book *Ordinary Affects* (2007), Kathleen Stewart explores affect in short, poetic passages where she states that everyday affect “is a surging, a rubbing, a connection of some kind that has an impact” (128). In both bodies, there is at first resistance of some sort: the waves beat against the human body that tries to enter its strong waters while Foster’s body responds in shock to the ocean’s forceful icy waters. Once the connection is made between Foster and his environment, and the bodies move past the initial shock, space is made for interconnection to take place. Stewart states that affect is less focused on “one person’s feelings becoming another’s but about bodies literally affecting one another and generating intensities” (19). The intensities that are generated between Foster and the ocean body form connecting tendrils that stretch toward, for example, the octopus, the kelp forest, its aquatic inhabitants, False Bay, its human residents, and so continues the myriad of other species forming the web of dynamic interconnectivity. Foster familiarises himself with the False Bay area and learns to identify the setting of a local kelp forest amidst other giant bamboo kelp. As Foster spends more time in the water, he learns to recognise the web of interconnectivity within the regional kelp forest:

People ask me, “Why do you go to the same place every day?” But that’s when you see the subtle difference, and that’s when you get to know the wild. So, there are these thousands of threads going off from the octopus to all the other animals – predator and prey. And then this incredible forest just nurturing all of this... And as I draw all these lines, all these stories are just being thrown up. It’s almost like the forest mind. I really could feel it – that big creature that was thousands of times more awake and intelligent than I am. It’s like a giant underwater brain operating over millions of years. It just keeps everything in balance. (*My Octopus Teacher*, 2020)

Foster’s desire to understand the kelp forest’s multidimensionality is what drives him to revisit the same kelp forest every day. Instead of pursuing a one-dimensional relationship with the natural world, where the environment is a static stage upon which the human story unfolds,

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<sup>7</sup> See Stacey Alaimo’s work on transcorporeality (2018).

Foster seeks to uncover the forest's disparities and differences. Neil Campbell (2018) re-energizes the ideas of Felix Guattari (1989) regarding ecology's three-fold structure, whilst employing Kathleen Stewart's fictocritical writings (2007), in order to argue that the local or regional is "charged and dynamic, working critically across the social, mental, and environmental spheres through the active prism of regionality" (2018: 72). Campbell states that Stewart's writings follow lines, webs, and connections that spin out, and are "thrown together into assemblages of affect as living compositions" (72) drawn from the everyday. Ecological consciousness, according to Campbell (2018), is about developing a gentleness to a world's bodies, rhythms, and ways of being as one follows spheres of different kinds that continue to form and deform across abstract and concrete worlds (83). When Foster searches for the "differences" in the kelp forest, his approach to ecology and environment resonates with Campbell's new gentleness that asks of one to pay careful attention to the variations that are evident in the everyday, the domestic, and the neighbourly. The False Bay kelp forest is one of Foster's everyday spaces because he regularly spends time in these waters and forms part of the forest community that is home to his octopus teacher. Foster is attuned to the threads that run to and from the species in the forest as he accounts for the "thousands of threads", "lines", and "stories" (*My Octopus Teacher*, 2020), within the local kelp forest's web of interconnection. Campbell (2018) argues that through our attention to the small, overlooked things, the often contrary and different "relations, flows, and surprising presences" (75), we are drawn closer to multiple processes that make up our world. Foster's attunement towards the details and disparities of the forest facilitates his sensitivity to various practices of the nonhuman world, for example, the kelp community's ethics of reciprocity (Kimmerer, 2020) and the octopus's teachings on trust and vulnerability. However, this concept can also be discussed from the opposite angle, in that our proximity to the regional world enables us to notice overlooked particularities and connections. As previously mentioned, I deploy what Iheka defines as an "aesthetics of proximity" (2018) to argue that Foster's closeness to his environment allows him to recognise the interconnectivity between himself and other nonhumans. Foster forms intimate connections to the kelp forest and the octopus because of his spatial nearness to them and vice versa.

### 3.4 Kinship in the kelp community

As Foster's connections to the kelp forest and its inhabitants deepen, he is continually reminded of his interdependent relations to the nonhuman world. Rather than using a hierarchical system of ordering to understand the forest, Foster refers to the web of interconnected species to decentre himself as the primary focus of this film. In identifying the body of African literature that employs the aesthetics of proximity, Iheka (2018) considers how these texts reinstate the nonhuman in relation to the human. In the context of the nature documentary, Foster is partially decentralised from the major focus of the film as emphasis is placed on the intricacies of the forest rather than his human conception of it. Foster characterises the forest as a nurturing, conscious, intelligent, and deeply historical being when he states that the forest mind is "a thousand times more awake and intelligent" than him as it is similar to "an underwater brain operating over millions of years" (*My Octopus Teacher*, 2020). He also takes note of the forest's communitarian attributes when he recognises that there are various parts that make up the whole in referring to threads that connect animals to each other. As Foster tries to visualise the forest community, he draws lines from which stories start to emerge. In referring to the affective potential of an ordinary phrase or gesture, Stewart (2007) states this act is an impulse towards a "beginning dense with potential", that contains "stories, substories, tangles of association" (129) which relates to Foster's mental picture of the forest. His map of the forest consists of countless stories and networks of association that link octopus to predator, prey, environment, and so the list continues to extend to the whole enmeshment of species in the community. A fine example of how the forest web empowers one to recognise its connecting tendrils and the stories that arise from each link is when Foster understands "how the helmet shell is connected to the urchin and how the octopus is connected to the helmet shell" (*My Octopus Teacher*, 2020). Foster identifies small connections between predator and prey that do not qualify as an insignificant detail or story, but these detailed lives and stories make up the whole of the forest community.

As I mentioned in chapter one, Kimmerer's research on ecological systems (2015 and 2020), which views resources as gifts rather than objects or property, resonates with the more-than-human economy of the kelp forest. She states that ecological systems, premised on gratitude and relationships, contrast with capitalism's market economy, which functions on accumulation and scarcity. Kimmerer coins this relational approach to ecological services, the "power of gift-thinking," and argues that it challenges our commodity mindset, since "mistreating a gift has emotional and ethical gravity as well as ecological resonance" (2020:

3). I argue that the regional kelp forest community in False Bay partakes in this type of economy where relationships and reciprocity function through the deeply interconnected nature of its network. We see examples of this in the kelp forest's predator and prey dynamics. When the octopus catches a crab, she retreats into her den to finish off the large meal and as she messes some of the prey's bits and pieces in the ocean water, brittle stars approach her to feed on her meal's leftovers. The octopus's abundance of food is shared with others as Kimmerer notes that "in a gift economy, wealth is understood as having enough to share, and the practice for dealing with abundance is to give it away" (4). Additionally, the kelp forest's practice of giving away is also beautifully illustrated through the death of the octopus. The octopus slowly exhausts herself in reproducing and oxygenating her eggs. Foster states that, "she's slowly dying and timing her death exactly for the hatching of those eggs" (*My Octopus Teacher*, 2020). The octopus sacrifices herself for the life of her young and in doing so, she practices the ultimate act of sharing. Her life cycle comes to completion as she gives all of what she has to offer; her last corporeal strength is transferred to her offspring. When the eggs hatch and the exchange between mother and eggs is finished, the octopus' depleted body washes out of her den. Several scavengers and fish come to feed on her colour-drained body until finally, a large shark bites and drags her body away. Although the sight of other fish eating away at her body is "heart-breaking" to Foster and the viewers of the film, the economy of abundance views the body of the octopus as a gift given to the forest community. Her body becomes a feast for the forest inhabitants who partake of her body that represents her life and role in the community. The body of the octopus also transforms into an intimate contact zone for human, sharks, fish, and brittle stars to interact in close proximity with one another. Similar to a funeral, her death simultaneously draws closer those with whom she shared connections in the forest and her body is a site that "allows for the nearness of human beings with other creatures" (Iheka, 2018: 31). It is during this staging of closeness (Iheka, 2018) between human and nonhuman that we see the lures of the market economy, the economy of scarcity, working within Foster. He explains that during the community feasting "a part of [him] just wanted to hold her and chase them away, but [he] didn't do that" (*My Octopus Teacher*, 2020). If Foster acted on this impulse, he would have given in to the practices of the market economy that operates through the accumulation for self-sustenance rather than the interdependency of the forest network. By withholding the octopus's body from the forest members, Foster would have stolen from the octopus's gift to the community and, thereby, have taken away from her status in the community since:

status is determined not by how much one accumulates, but by how much one gives away. The currency in a gift economy is relationship, which is expressed as gratitude, as interdependence and the ongoing cycles of reciprocity. A gift economy nurtures the community bonds that enhance mutual well-being; the economic unit is “we” rather than “I,” as all flourishing is mutual. (Kimmerer, 2020:4)

In this instance, Foster resists the practices of the economy of scarcity that have come to dominate the global markets in human spheres, and by not interfering with the feasting process, he learns to lean into the forest’s economy of abundance. He subscribes to the economic unit Kimmerer calls “we” (2020: 6) instead of preserving the octopus’s body for his own accumulation and possession. The octopus’s gift feeds the community and promotes the wellbeing of all who share in her body and who connect to her life. While forest members feast on the body of the octopus, the currency of relationship is at work as they gratefully enjoy the food that is her body and through this, acknowledge their interdependence on each other. After the octopus’s death, the forest reciprocates her generous gift by taking care of her young in the water column and thus, the cycle of mutual flourishing continues in the kelp forest community.

The gift of the octopus extends to Foster when he realises his value in relation to the forest community. He becomes a member of the forest network and finds himself in an interdependent relationship with the octopus. Foster’s establishment and involvement in the Sea Change Project, a non-profit organisation aimed at the protection and conservation of South Africa’s marine environment, form part of his gift back to the octopus and her community. The Sea Change Project (2021) uses “storytelling for ocean protection” considering that the film forms part of the stories that raise awareness of the interconnectedness of humans and nonhumans. The organisation’s message states:

Our entire wellbeing is dependent on the natural world. For humans to be healthy, the air, oceans, forests, and all the varied and wonderful beings that we share this planet with need to be healthy. The Sea Change Project hopes to convey this message through storytelling based on science and direct, immersive experiences in the Great African Seaforest. We hope our stories, knowledge and love of this environment can play a part in rewarming the human heart to the natural world and motivate action that allows the living planet to thrive and regenerate itself. (Sea Change Project, 2021)

The organisation asserts the affective impacts of the environment on human life as it states that human wellbeing is linked to the wellbeing of the nonhuman world. The message of the Sea

Change Project calls for a world wherein humans take responsibility for the health of the nonhuman world. Priscilla Stuckey (2013) focuses on cultural stories that challenge the modern West while providing alternatives to hyper-individualism and the emphasis it places on survival through competition. Stuckey refers to the creation story of the indigenous people of the Great Plains of America, known as the Cheyenne, to understand a worldview where all beings are co-responsible for the continual work of creation. In this creation story, power is distributed between all creatures, humans and nonhumans, and the collaborative effort of gods, humans, and nonhumans are equally necessitated. Humans take up a position that is “dynamic, creative, and responsive” to the entire nonhuman world (2013: 201). The Sea Change Project similarly draws on the creative abilities of human expression, such as filmmaking, books, research, and education, to take responsibility for its role in the regeneration of the earth. The creators and founders of the organisation, Craig Foster and Ross Frylinck, express their belief in the earth’s regenerative qualities and thereby the agency of the natural world. The organisation’s message and call to action recognises the collaborative effort needed in sustaining the wellbeing of all the human and nonhuman world and through this partnership we see how the “community precedes the individual” (Stuckey, 2013: 201).

The second indigenous group Stuckey draws from is the Raramuri of the Mexican Sierra Madre, who practise sustainable living based on their experience of kinship with the nonhuman world. The Raramuri believe in a concept called “iwigara” (201) that refers to the kinship between people and plants as it joins the creative forces of the universe with the notions of breath and life. The Sea Change Project expresses a similar worldview to the indigenous group of the Raramuri when it states that the health of humans will only be possible when “the air, oceans, forests, and all the varied and wonderful beings that we share this planet with” (Sea Change Project, 2021) are healthy. The organisation’s message speaks to the kinship between humans and nonhumans when it recognises its role in co-creating a healthy shared home. The kinship between human and the environment is also evidenced by the nurturing acts of the Sea Change Project, whose goal is “to contribute to the long-term protection of South Africa’s marine environment” (2021) and through this, we see how “a world where all are kin demands that humans nurture their relatives” (Stuckey, 2013: 201). The octopus and kelp forest community tend to Foster’s exhaustion until his health and confidence are restored. Foster responds to the forest community’s generosity and care by involving the human community in the nurturance of the nonhuman world through the Sea Change Project. Consequently, Foster connects humans to their nonhuman kin through the organisation’s technique of using “direct,

immersive experiences in the Great African Seaforest” (Sea Change Project, 2021) to convey their message of the interconnectedness between the human and nonhuman worlds.

To return to Stuckey’s article, she explains how the Raramuri dig onions or gather pine needles where the “iwi” or kinship is strong, meaning they harvest in places where the plants are “abundant rather than scarce” (2013: 201). They reinforce their kinship with the natural world by practicing conservation principles of growing and consuming food that ensure the source’s enrichment instead of its depletion (201). These sustainable ethics resonate with Kimmerer’s economy of abundance (2020) that draws from the Serviceberry plant in showing us another model of economy, “one based upon reciprocity rather than accumulation, where wealth and security come from the quality of your relationships, not from the illusion of self-sufficiency” (8). The value of Foster’s relationships with the octopus and the forest community is shown through his establishment of – and active involvement in – the Sea Change Project as he reciprocates its culture of abundance. Foster aims to ensure the well-being of the forest community by making the Great African Seaforest a global icon, and thereby, increasing awareness of its community ethics of reciprocal generosity. Foster’s ability to recognise the regional kelp forest amidst other giant bamboo kelp and draw inspiration from it, shows his reliance on the kinship between himself and the natural world as he harvests emotional restoration and professional creativity from a community that functions on abundance rather than scarcity. Contrastingly, Foster harvests international fame and accolades through the production of the film, and thereby, buys into the market economy’s practices of preservation and possession. Foster’s efforts towards the conservation and protection of the kelp forest conflicts with the manner in which the film in itself is a commodity that serves Foster’s capitalist agenda.

The forest community’s abundance is revealed through its dynamic and shifting relationships that exist between species, an example being the predator-prey relationship of shark and octopus. In the film, the octopus is hunted by the shark during an exhilarating chase that ends in the octopus’s dismemberment when the shark succeeds in biting off one of its eight arms. The octopus is nearly overcome by this mutilation, and she takes several months to recover and regenerate a new arm (*My Octopus Teacher*, 2020). After some time, the octopus is once again hunted by a shark, but the thrilling chase between the two species ends in a different way than before. The octopus outsmarts her predator when she builds a shield around her body by covering herself with hundreds of shells. Eventually the shark accepts defeat when it fails to permeate her soft body, and loses interest in the octopus. The relationship between predator

and prey shifts as the octopus learns to adapt to the sharks' hunting tactics, which enables her to gain the upper hand. The forest is actively engaged in relationships that change and adapt to suit the well-being of the community.

### **3.5 Multispecies magic: a focus on the filmic structure and narration**

A background segment shows how Foster came to dive in the False Bay kelp forest for the duration of a year. He explains that his childhood was dominated by three prominent littoral zones of the Cape – the rocky shore, the intertidal, and the kelp forest – as he spent most of his time in his surrounding environment because his family lived on the shore:

We had this little wooden bungalow, literally below the high-water mark. So, when those huge storms used to come in, the ocean used to smash down the doors and fill up the bottom of the house. So, it's incredibly exciting as a child to literally live in the force of that giant Atlantic Ocean. (*My Octopus Teacher*, 2020)

Foster explains that he separated from this life of proximity with nature as an adult. When Foster encountered indigenous San – who he refers to as master trackers from the central Kalahari while shooting a film with his brother about two decades ago – a longing to be within the natural world was reignited in him. He underwent extreme emotional and professional burnout; therefore, he decided to draw inspiration from his childhood and from the master trackers that he had worked with in the Kalahari to initiate a “radical change” in his life (2020). Sam Durrant (2021) states that the old, colonial anthropology described animism as a belief in spirits that was understood to be a mistaken, primitive form of religion, whereas “new animism reverses the Eurocentric logic of modernity, often expressing itself as a desire to follow the animistic ways of indigenous peoples” (8). According to Durrant, the old anthropology functions through an othering gesture towards those who are considered to misguidedly believe in spirits, yet new anthropology attempts to overcome this distance by taking the animist as an exemplary guide to nature and life itself (8-9). Durrant argues that the Cartesian notion of self-certainty and the importance of individual human thought is destabilised when there exists an impulse to follow the teachings of another (9). Foster draws on the animistic practices of the San when he aspires to live in closer proximity to nature in

deciding to free dive in the False Bay waters in search of a life-altering experience.<sup>8</sup> Foster disavows his former way of living “separated from nature” (*My Octopus Teacher*, 2020) that proved unsatisfactory because of his inability to work, parent, or connect with his community, and he turns to the teachings of the San and to his childhood memories of playing in the oceanic spaces of the Cape to guide him in reconnecting with the environment and thereby pursue a more sustainable approach to life. Garuba claims that “animist cultures generate meanings that cast an otherworldly veil over natural phenomena as much as over human activities” (2003: 283). Foster navigates his professional burnout by means of deploying the animistic practices of the San and their approach to nature and nonhumans. His human fatigue is reconfigured through an attunement to animist spirituality and in this way Garuba’s words ring true as animist logic may be seen “as providing avenues for knowing our way around our world and society” (283).

Additionally, *My Octopus Teacher* (2020) embodies a multispecies world as Foster is in constant contact with other-than-human spaces and species while being conscious of the False Bay coastal area and the underwater world of the kelp forest. Iheka (2018) explains that a multispecies world is one where “humans share the environment with nonhumans, a world teeming with various life forms that are as important as the human” (26). Throughout the film, Foster is conscious of the various life forms in his surrounding environment since he acknowledges the different oceanic spaces like the intertidal, the shallow rock pools, and the kelp forests. He takes notice of the powerful force of the waves that makes it difficult to enter the cold Cape waters. He identifies a smaller ecological community demarcated by a specific kelp forest wherein he recognises a pluriverse of creatures and learns to identify different types of forests, algae, and aquatic species. Foster experiences the underwater kelp forest borders between the real and the magical and says that:

you’re in a three-dimensional forest and you can jump off the top and go anywhere you want, you’re flying basically...The animals are exotic and strange. It’s much more extreme than our maddest science fiction. (*My Octopus Teacher*, 2020)

In *My Octopus Teacher* (2020), the multispecies world is associated with the mystical realm that underscores the physical world. The film constructs the undersea as a supernatural space as Foster compares swimming in the kelp forest to the magical experience of flying that is

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<sup>8</sup> This is a popular trope where white men voluntarily encounter spaces and species that seemingly associate with wildness, which I unpack in further detail in chapter four.

typically associated with birds or spirits that fly, but not swimming or moving through any type of forest. Foster's description of navigating the forest by being able to "jump off the top and go anywhere" links to the supernatural world that is characteristically thought of as beyond human realities. Foster's characterisation of the forest as magical brings together the material and transcendental realms due to the blurring of boundaries between the Foster's land-based world and the mystifying sea world of the octopus and her kelp forest home.

Moreover, *My Octopus Teacher* (2020) deviates from the conventional nature documentary because it employs an immersive conversational tone alongside a storytelling approach that involves Craig Foster featuring as a central character, instead of him only partaking in background narration. Nature documentaries are often criticised for deceiving viewers into showing the reality of nature while in truth, "misleading viewers with fake sounds and manipulated scenes" (Lopez, 2017: 2), since David Attenborough also explains the lies involved in nature filmmaking:

There is precious little that is natural [...] in any film. You distort speed if you want to show things like plants growing or look in detail at the way an animal moves. You distort light levels. You distort distribution, in the sense that you see dozens of different species in a jungle within a few minutes, so that the places seem to be teeming with life. You distort size by using close-up lenses. And you distort sound. What the filmmaker is trying to do is to convey a particular experience [...] The viewer has to trust in the good faith of the filmmaker. (David Attenborough, quoted in Burgess, 1984: 103)

*My Octopus Teacher* (2020) employs in-studio and on-field recorded sounds, while the film's music consists of a combination of composed work by Kevin Smuts, as well as Ronan Skillen's unconventional sound work. Skillen uses raw, elemental music and incorporates kelp and water sounds "to create authentic soundscapes in some of the more eerie, ominous scenes", adding layers of textuality to the film's amphibious atmosphere (Sea Change Project, 2022). The film's focus on human and more-than-human entanglement is evidenced by its alternative filmmaking approaches that involve a blend of modern and ecologically inspired music and sound techniques together with Foster's personal narration of the film's plot, which further promotes human and nonhuman diversity.

The film is divided into short segments that form part of directors Ehrlich and Reed's linear narrative technique that showcases the growing interconnection between Foster, his environment, and the octopus in forming the connecting thread that weaves the sections

together. These short segments also compliment the film's message of multispecies entanglement that is achieved through Foster's constant engagement with the nonhuman world of the kelp forest. The establishing shot of the film is a long, panoramic shot of the False Bay area with the height of the frame at a high distance above the ground. The film returns to this image at the start of each segment and therefore, by the third and fourth sections, we recognise this as the film's re-establishing shot. Although the image changes slightly as some re-establishing shots show Foster walking into shallow waters or we see the camera tracking over large sea boulders, the repeated ocean view and horizontal composition of the Cape Town seas and skies remain evident in each shot. The first two minutes of footage are presented in the form of a microcosm to the narrative that follows. This opening section consists of a montage sequence that compresses the theme and plot of the film into brief symbolic images. The first six images of this sequence set the tone for the film's representation of interspecies proximity since it focuses on the relationship between Foster and the octopus and the merging of their human and nonhuman worlds. The film starts with its establishing shot, a serene view of the ocean where cloudy skies are reflected upon the False Bay waters. Next, viewers are shown an underwater shot of huge kelp forming a swaying forest. This is followed by a close-up, low angle shot of the octopus swimming easily through the blue waters. The fourth image is a high angle shot of Foster free diving in the kelp forest. Following this, the filmmakers stage an extreme close-up shot of the octopus's head, its horny skin texture, and the horizontal slit shape of its pupil. Hereafter, Foster and the octopus engage in what seems like a 'hand-holding' action where the octopus's tentacle touches Foster's hand, and, in the next image, his lips. These consecutive images show the growing closeness between the material and the seemingly transcendental worlds of the human and nonhuman species in the film. Iheka (2018) explains that spatiality is "the narrative structure allowing for the blurring of spatial distances in the texts" (22). Ehrlich and Reed use edits that juxtapose the human and nonhuman worlds as we see the establishing shot of the ocean and skies through a typical human perspective which is followed by an underwater shot of the kelp forest, a nonhuman view of a supernatural world. Next, the image of the octopus floating effortlessly in her natural home contrasts with that of Foster who dives in her kelp forest home with the help of large paddle feet. These image juxtapositions speak to the human and nonhuman worlds that have often been thought of as separate, but they form part of the pluriverse – that is the agglomeration of worlds, human and nonhuman (Iheka, 2018: 22) within the film. More importantly, these images are given symbolic meaning when we see the sixth image of Foster and the octopus in close spatial proximity as the terrestrial human world and the aquatic nonhuman world are merged in this

shot. Iheka argues that although humans share their environment with nonhuman forms, the supernatural world is often thought of as the “great beyond” in that it lies beyond the reach of humans (22). Yet, he claims that the texts that employ the aesthetics of proximity tend to “problematize this distance by bringing both material and immaterial worlds closely together” (2018: 22). In *My Octopus Teacher* (2020) a sense of the supernatural, magical, and the spiritual is imbued with the material world.<sup>9</sup> When Foster and the octopus are seen to be “holding hands”, or perhaps more appropriately “holding limbs” since it is a human hand and an octopus tentacle that touch, the separation between terrestrial-human and aquatic-nonhuman is obscured by their close spatial engagement. Moreover, as these images appear on screen, we hear a voice-over of Foster making the following statement: “A lot of people say an octopus is like an alien, but the strange thing is, as you get closer to them, you realise that we’re very similar in a lot of ways” (*My Octopus Teacher*, 2020). Foster’s statement gains valuable meaning as the film progresses, since the shared characteristics between human and octopus – such as trust, affection, vulnerability, and regeneration – reveal the interconnectedness of the terrestrial-human and the aquatic-nonhuman worlds.

### **3.6 Conclusion**

*My Octopus Teacher* (2020) captures the interconnection between humans, nonhumans, and the environment through the portrayal of Craig Foster’s relationship with a common octopus and a local kelp forest community. Foster allows the octopus and her underwater community to teach him to become sensitive to the nonhuman and their shared home. His connection with and sensitivity to the octopus enable him to adopt new approaches to his personal and professional endeavours. Foster overcomes his apathy towards professional photography and filmmaking through free diving for a year in a regional kelp forest. This underwater world introduces Foster to an octopus that contests his one-dimensional view of family relationships. The octopus teaches Foster to build meaningful connections through trust, affection, vulnerability, and regeneration, while her community challenges his human notion of self-sufficiency. In the film, the kelp forest community teaches Foster to consider the well-being of all its members because of their ethics of interdependence and reciprocity. Foster’s proximity to the octopus and the forest community generates opportunities for him to discover the

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<sup>9</sup> My reading of the magical and material dimensions brought about the nonhuman world is inspired by Wendy Woodward’s work on animals and trauma (2017: 232).

common characteristics between himself and the nonhuman world. The multispecies world of the aquatic forest – which often shifts between material and magical worlds – is accurately captured by the film’s alternative structural techniques that often deviate from the conventional standards of nature documentaries. This chapter studied the interspecies connections which obfuscate terrestrial and aquatic boundaries in False Bay’s kelp forest. The next chapter considers several tropes within the novel and film, which transpire from the analyses in chapter two and three, where divergent approaches to political and historical situatedness converge within the concept of the forest, located within the landscape of the Cape.

## **Chapter 4 - Reading for a politics of care towards ecology and community in *Circles in a Forest* and *My Octopus Teacher***

### **4.1 Introduction**

In this chapter I pick up on four concepts that emerge from my reading of Matthee's novel *Circles in a Forest* (2005) and the nature documentary *My Octopus Teacher* (2020) in chapters two and three. The previous two chapters investigate the interspecies encounters between humans and nonhumans in the novel and the film, respectively.

First, the two main human figures, Saul Barnard in the novel, and Craig Foster in the film, interact with wild animals, which calls forth the popular trope of white men who choose to engage with the exotic other. I find that what differentiates Saul Barnard from Craig Foster in this popular trope is their respective relations and dependence on the land-based or oceanic forests.

Next, I examine the integration between urban and natural spaces and how their convergence facilitates and/or restricts the forests' engagement with local communities in the two texts. The focus here is on the convergence of urban and ecological spheres as the novel's Forest functions in close relation to the urban infrastructural developments around the Knysna and George areas. The film, as a cultural text, shows a limited engagement with surrounding urban communities which could be improved to further develop the Sea Change Project's local reach.

Following this, I look at the presence of indigenous cultures and histories that feature in the two texts, set in the landscape of the Cape. The racist and colonial histories of the old Cape Colony form the cultural-historical, socio-political landscapes from which I read the indigenous narratives that feature in the novel and the nature documentary. The novel features descendants of the Outeniqua people, a clan that broke off from the indigenous San. Maska and Old Sanna embody the history of the landscape and practice their ancient knowledges that function as archives of wisdom to the local woodcutters. In the film, Craig Foster is motivated by the San's proximity to nature to start his year-long visits to the cold False Bay waters and to track the *octopus vulgaris* underwater. Patric Mellet's text (2021) situates my reading of the Cape landscape where the indigenous Khoe, San, and the later offshoot Outeniqua clan are represented in both the novel and film. I investigate how their representations in the texts either conform to or upend the conventional tropes that function through cultural erasure and dismissiveness toward their deep histories with the land and oceanic environments.

Finally, I conclude the chapter by returning to the forest, a concept loaded with symbolic and spiritual meaning that conjoins the terrestrial Knysna Forest's mystery and the aquatic kelp forest's unprecedented resilience. Crews (2003) contends that the forest is often associated with many figurative concepts relating to supernatural growth and resilience, the spiritual, and the romantic, while trees are sometimes linked to human shapes and have been found to operate through their own communicative and caring networks (Simard, 2021; The Green Belt Movement). I analyse the range of physical, symbolic, and spiritual characteristics attributed to the forest space of multispecies mystery and belonging within the terrestrial and aquatic forests. The Knysna Forest is home to the Outeniquas and the local woodcutters who experience solace within its natural enfoldment in spite of mystifying natural phenomena like fire and fog. The aquatic kelp forest is the focus of the non-profit organisation, the Sea Change Project, which uses storytelling and ocean visitations for marine protection. In-contact dive tours are combined with creative and educational experiences that form fluid and lively multimodal assemblages that conjoin aquatic and terrestrial spaces and species. By employing Haraway's definition 'sympoieses' or making-with other earth beings, I argue that the Sea Change Project engages in similar if not ground-breaking multi-modal "worlding-with" that ranges from the arts, media, science, conservation, and in-contact experiences, to name a few, in collaging a model of environmentalism that is lively, independent from landscape proximity, and engages in ancient and modern music-making practices.

Throughout the chapter, I draw on several theoretical underpinnings that emphasise multispecies collaborations, historical situatedness (Mellet, 2021), the restoration of ancient indigenous knowledge systems (Muthien and Bam, 2021; Vollenhoven, 2021; Magoqwana, 2021), and the politics of care towards ecology and community (Green, 2020; Haraway, 2016) I investigate to what extent relations of care can be found in the respective texts that lead to reimagined environmentalisms that encourage collective societal support.

#### **4.2 Weighty engagements: white men, animals and political heritages**

In an opinion piece on the nature documentary, Liani Maasdorp and Ian-Malcolm Rijdsdijk (2021) critique Craig Foster's "self-indulgent narration". Maasdorp and Rijdsdijk (2021) argue that the film's theme follows "the well-trodden path of privileged white males documenting and representing the exotic other", despite these flaws presenting no hindrances to the film's popularity. Countless viewers praised the film in showcasing an individual who overcomes

adversary through “meaningful engagements with the natural world” that happen right outside Foster’s doorstep (2021: 3). However, Foster’s proximity to the False Bay area is largely premised on his privileged socio-economic position as a white male within South Africa, since his celebration of untamed wildness of the kelp forests links to the idea that wildness is detached from Western culture. In the “Cult of the Wild”, Louise Green (2020) explains that “the celebration of wildness and animal vitality” developed in response to the industrialisation, the mechanical dullness of modern society, and the increasing commodification of nature wherein:

Africa played a particular role in this conception of nature as a regenerative force and source of authentic experience. African wildlife offered writers such as Ernest Hemingway a form of contact with wildness perceived to be lost to European culture. (L.A. Green, 2020: 103)

L.A. Green (2020) states that the formation of white South African identities has historically been shaped by wildlife, and therefore the concept of wildness operated as part of a discourse of nationalism (109). During the early twentieth century, the media emphasised how wildlife, and contact with wildlife, became a symbol of national collectivity and spiritual regeneration (ibid., 2020: 110). In the nature documentary, Foster’s close contact with oceanic wildlife is directly linked to his emotional regeneration since he attributes his renewed energy for work to his rehabilitation from spending time in the ocean and the lessons he learns from his octopus teacher. The landing page of the Sea Change Project’s website is introduced by the words “Remember You are Wild” with a looped video of slow swaying kelp and ocean waves as a backdrop (Sea Change Project, 2022). The non-profit organisation emphasises the “wildness” that must be discovered inside each individual by connecting with wild or natural places. Instead of advocating for wildness to promote nationalist discourse, the Sea Change Project engages in what has been called ‘rewilding’ as they advocate for wildness in support of marine conservation and raising ecological awareness.<sup>10</sup> L.A. Green (2020: 122) comments on rewilding and its links with the popular twenty-first century trend and fantasy of belonging with wild predators that feature in the nature documentary *Grizzly Man* (2005) and in Geroge Monbiot’s book *Feral* (2013):

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<sup>10</sup> Rewilding refers to the restoration of an area to a natural, uncultivated state and the reintroduction of species that have vanished.

Treadwell, like Monbiot, desires proximity with the bears for emotional reasons. But he enters the domain of the bears as a visitor for a given space of time. Even if the bears provide the meaning for his life, what sustains his life in material terms is elsewhere. He has no need to share the resources of nature with the bears. His act of ceding control, of voluntarily putting his body at risk, is, despite the urgency of his emotion, an act that is superfluous, a display of leisure. Like Monbiot, who returns, after his own urgent and often risky encounters with nature, to his house, the wild is an addition to a life sustained and reproduced elsewhere. (L.A. Green, 2020: 123)

Similarly, Foster's daily visits to the kelp forest are motivated by emotional reasons and not by actual necessity and dependence on the underwater landscape for sustaining resources. L.A. Green describes Treadwell and Monbiot's engagements with the wild as "the voluntary enactment of necessity" that draw attention to the overlooked lives of those who live in genuine proximity to wild animals (123). In contrast to the privilege of engaging with predators are the many post-colonial citizens who live with wild animals that pose a threat to their daily living (123). In their case, vulnerability is a condition of life rather than a choice as in the case of Treadwell and Monbiot (123).

In contrast, although *Circles in a Forest* (Matthee, 2005) also features the trope of a white male, Saul Barnard, interacting with the wild animals and landscape of the Knysna Forest, Saul's dependence on the land and its resources differentiates him to some extent from figures like Foster, Treadwell and Monbiot. Saul forms part of the Dutch settlers that worked in the Knysna forest as woodcutters who mostly lived off the land's natural resources through subsistence farming and hunting. Saul's life is entangled with the natural world of the Knysna Forest on a material and figurative level, because he was "conceived and born and brought up in the Forest" (8) while most of his life decisions are influenced by his emotional and spiritual boundedness to the Forest space. Foster's regular visits to the False Bay waters are the reason for his interspecies encounters, whereas Saul's relations to the Forest resemble a sense of Forest embodiment – Saul is part of the Forest and the Forest is part of Saul. However, because of Saul's resourcefulness, he is privileged with the choice of living outside the Forest space, removed from its natural dangers. When Saul decides to leave the Forest and live in the Knysna town, and later in Swellendam, his local woodcutters' community continue to endure their vulnerable condition of life in the Forest.

Additionally, the two human protagonists navigate different paths in achieving mental and emotional release that closely links to a prodigal return to the environment. Garuba (2003) comments on how West African cultures are frequently embedded with return narratives that feature tropes related to “exile, nostalgia, loss and recuperation” (280). Similar themes permeate the nature documentary and the novel since Saul is exiled from the Forest by his father and suffers loss of belonging during his time away from the forest. Also, Saul becomes fed-up with the increasing destruction of the Forest, either by way of unregulated wood felling or elephant hunting. He travels to the city of Swellendam to escape this turmoil while critically reflecting on his role in the Forest. Yet, the Knysna forest continues to haunt Saul as he finds himself working with the Forest’s felled trees even as a carpenter in Swellendam, and “when he felt the wood under his hands, he wondered in which kloofs the trees were cut, on whose wagons the logs were brought out to the village...” (Matthee, 2005: 271). Saul uses his time away from the Forest to configure his position towards it: his separation from the natural world grows into an “emptiness [that] lay like a thirst in Saul” (ibid., 2005: 273). However, upon returning home, he looks out over Knysna, and a sense of peace returns to him: “he sat there; drinking in the vastness before him until he felt the emptiness within him get better” (ibid., 2005: 274). Saul’s embodied Forest identity is restored once he moves within closer proximity to his ecological and emotional place of belonging – the Knysna Forest.

*My Octopus Teacher* (2020), on the other hand, shows how Craig Foster’s emotional and professional regeneration is dependent on a prodigal return to the Cape Ocean. In the film Foster is filled with nostalgia when he returns to the Cape seas and manages to recuperate his relationship with its littoral environment. Foster’s time away from nature brought about professional burnout and emotional detachment in his family life. L.A. Green (2020) states that a renewed appraisal of wildness and animal vitality appeared during the mid-twentieth century due to the response to the restraining domesticity of a mechanistic and commodified lifestyle (106). Foster breaks away from his mundane work life that caused his state of numbness by becoming sensitised towards nature and recognising his own vulnerability. Foster and the Sea Change Project place particular emphasis on the regenerative capacities within Cape Town’s coastal environment while providing its human members with an immersive encounter with nature’s wildness. Alongside Maasdorp and Rijsdijk’s critique of the film’s trope that shows white males’ engagement with nature, they argue that the broader impact of *My Octopus Teacher* (2020) depends on how well “marginalised South Africans have agency and power in front of and behind the cameras” meaning Foster’s privileged position as a well-established

and well-resourced film-maker does not easily translate to all emerging South African film-makers (2021). The Sea Change Project's multi-modal conservation efforts are somewhat restricted to persons in similarly privileged positions as Foster, since local marginalised community members are excluded from these creative collaborations.

### **4.3 The intersection between urban and ecological spheres**

The nature documentary is centred around the relationship between Foster and the octopus – their connections and encounters with each other in the underwater world of False Bay's regional kelp forest. Apart from the nature and oceanic landscapes such as Boulders Beach, False Bay, and the underwater scenes of the kelp forest, is Craig Foster's seafront beach house that forms the only semi-urban space where Foster narrates the film's unfolding events. Maasdorp and Rijdsdijk (2021) argue that "the film was only possible because Foster is a well-established and well-resourced film-maker living in a particularly scenic part of the South African coast" (3). Foster's costly beach house is far removed from the informal settlements of poorer communities who live on the expanses of the Cape Flats. The beach house, worth approximately more than R20 million, is representative of Cape Town's stark income, resource, and spatial divisions since the wealth of the economy is concentrated in the affluent northern and southern suburbs while poverty and marginality characterise the townships and informal settlements scattered on the Cape Flats and Cape Peninsula (Murry, 2019).<sup>11</sup> Since the film's major aim is to advocate for the protection of the Great African Seaforest, as indicated by the Sea Change Project, it is necessary to ask how the conservation of the Cape's marine life connects to the urban realities of most of the city's citizens. The Sea Change Project lists the major threats to the Great African Seaforest as "overfishing, lack of knowledge and awareness, plastic pollution, ocean mining, chemical waste, climate change, and poaching" (2021). Although the organisation has formed partnerships and collaborations with figures such as internationally renowned cellist Yo-Yo Ma and South African vocalist and artist Zolani Mahola, there appears to be a gap between the Sea Change Projects' numerous conservation efforts and the involvement of local Capetonian communities. Lesley Green's chapter, 'Ocean Regime Shift' (2020), mentioned in chapter one, critiques the city of Cape Town for its ignorance of the obvious connections between marine and infrastructural dilemmas. Green

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<sup>11</sup> Due to a recent fire that broke out in the Murdock Valley, Simonstown, reports circulated about Foster's "£1 million luxury seafront mansion" which was engulfed in the fire (Daily Mail, 2022; Daily Maverick, 2022).

takes careful note of eight instances, from the 1980s to the present-day realities of the city of Cape Town, where the neat borders between the city's urban and environmental realities become obfuscated. She argues for an environmental and science scholarship that works integratively, one that "becomes active in building alliances and partnerships with communities" that span across ecology, economy, and society (186-187). Green contends that caring approaches within the sciences hold key solutions to addressing environmental and human-inflicted crises:

Cape Town can no longer afford to be a city that does not care about the sewage it sends to sea, has huge shack settlements without the dignity of sewage management, and has peri-urban farms that use the kinds of fertilisers that foster harmful algal blooms. Each one of those situations is premised on the absence of care. Restoring care to science, as Abalobi has done, holds out the possibility for reimagining environmentalism in a way that restores the relationships that were broken by the advent of what Cesaire described as "thingification" under colonialism and modernist thought.<sup>12</sup> (Green, 2020: 199)

By focusing primarily on science-based research and renowned societal figures, the Sea Change Projects fails to engage the immediate local community, which holds perhaps the most useful contribution to raising awareness and bringing ecological change. In this way, there is limited intersection between the Sea Change Project's focus on marine life and the urban realities of Cape Town citizens due to their failure to engage in connections of care and involving communities who are most directly engaged and affected by the Cape's oceanic landscapes on a daily basis. As a cultural text, the film portrays a reciprocal multispecies community that shows the world outside Craig Foster's backyard – the bamboo kelp forest and his interactions with nonhumans in this aquatic environment. The cultural information that is excluded from the film, such as one of the most disparate cities in the world, speaks to the intentions of the directors and producers to create an award-winning nature documentary that shows South Africa's pristine wildness, instead of the stark inequalities that South Africans face daily.

Contrary to the film, *Circles in a Forest* (Matthee, 2005) portrays the politically complex relationship between the ecology of the forest and the rapid expansion of urban spaces in the

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<sup>12</sup> Abalobi is South Africa's first community-supported fishery, which stands for "fully traceable, premium quality, local seafood harvested responsibly by small-scale fisherfolk using low-impact fishing methods" with the aim to uplift coastal communities whilst contributing to a sustainable food system (Abalobi, 2020).

Knysna region. The infrastructure of urban areas like George, the Cape, and more specifically Knysna, has a direct impact on the terrestrial Forest since urban development, requires wood for the building of sail ships and property constructions. Several human groups are involved in this intersection between landscape ecology and urban development such as the indigenous Outeniquas, the local Dutch woodcutters, the European settlers who operate as business and tradespersons, and the British government who own the land. As the novel is narrated from the perspective of a woodcutter, Saul Barnard, it portrays the confusion of the local woodcutters who struggle to keep up with two conflicting agendas: the large amounts of wood demanded by the towns' wood buyers and the government's strict forest regulations assumedly aimed at indigenous forest conservation. Also, the short-lived gold rush that took place in the Millwood goldfields, driven by imperial agendas, destroyed much of the Forest landscape due to the development, and later the abandonment, of a small village within the Knysna Forest (Knysna Museums, 2022). Alongside the issue of proliferating wood felling and forest protection are the elephant shootings caused by the escalating demand for ivory trading. When European settlers travel to Southern Africa to hunt the largest land mammal, the woodcutters refrain from interfering with this rapid extermination since most of the woodcutters are irritated by the constant presence of elephant herds that endanger their lives and trample their homegrown crops – all but Saul and the Outeniqua, Maska, who display a deep respect for the elephants.<sup>13</sup>

As Maska and Saul converse about the constant changes taking place in the Forest, Maska states that the Forest is angry, and the elephants are restless because “strangers are taking him over...because all kinds of strangers want to stand boss over him and we are dragged to court with words we don't even understand” (195). Maska refers to the government that claims ownership over the Forest and the state officials who constantly take local woodcutters to court for cutting in non-allocated spaces. Maska and Saul display relations of care, as described by Green (2020: 186), towards the Forest that is exploited by the economy-driven imperialists who invade their natural home. Matthee concludes her novel, although with much open-endedness, by providing an avenue that potentially intersects, if not partners with, the local ecology, economy, and society of the woodcutters. Saul decides to use his carpentry skills, which he learnt during his time spent in Swellendam, to start a furniture business in Knysna where he will only buy wood from the local woodcutters. He plans to free the woodcutters from

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<sup>13</sup> Elephant hunting is still considered as “one of the most spectacular experiences” (Hunt in Africa, n.d.).

the exploits of the unfair wood buyer, MacDonald, and restore the work and pride of the forester or woodcutter through his carpentry business. Green argues that:

... attending to justice and histories of injustice and attending to the challenges of restoring relationships between people, species, oceans, and landforms, will yield a transformative environmentalism capable of being supported by a board-based public. (Green, 2020: 199-200)

Even though not all communities are accounted for in Matthee's resolution, Saul's prospective carpentry business, centred around the workmanship of local people, aims to bring justice to the exploited woodcutters' community. By returning to Knysna, and involving himself in local business, Saul attends to his fragmented relationships with the Forest, his brother Jozef, and the woodcutters' community. Although Jozef is reluctant to work for Saul in his furniture business, he accepts his brother's offer to do business with him while paying off his debts to MacDonald. Saul's decision to "stay with the trouble", to borrow Haraway's term, of Knysna's environmental and economic crises, rather fleeing to the Cape or boarding the Pictor ship, speaks to his insistence on re-establishing a politics of care into desensitised approaches to ecology.

#### **4.4 Indigenous narratives haunting the Cape landscape**

The troubled history of the Cape is interwoven with South Africa's racist and colonial pasts; meanwhile poverty, inequality, socioeconomic disadvantage, and environmental exploitation make up but a few of its current realities. The two texts under study take place within the Western Province of South Africa, which is ensnared in settler and exploitative histories. As referred to in chapter one, Patric Mellet's text (2020) aims to challenge the colonial narrative that continues to govern past and present narratives. Mellet claims that South Africa's racist and xenophobic outbursts stem from a nation that is mediated by European national borders. According to Mellet, many of the country's ethnic groups were coined under the terms Coloured, black, Khoe, and San, to name but a few, yet they derived from colonial constructs that are based on racist ethnographies. Mellet claims that the postdemocratic government failed to address the cultural and historical erasure of groups who were racially categorised under apartheid. He argues that the many materialisations of the living culture of San and Khoe do not require "a 7th- or 17th-century interpretation for authenticity" since this outdated view is based on colonial texts that must be questioned and perhaps seen as an insult to surviving ethnic

communities (5). In both the novel and the film, the presence and practices of indigenous San and Khoe people play a major part in the white males' understanding of, and connection to, the nonhuman environment. Craig Foster is inspired by the San in the central Kalahari who seem to "be inside the natural world" (*My Octopus Teacher*, 2020) and he draws from their ancient tracking techniques to locate his octopus friend and teacher underwater. In Matthee's novel (2005), the local woodcutters live and work alongside the remaining indigenous Outeniquas, like Maska and Old Sanna, in the Knysna Forest.

The nature documentary takes place in present-day South Africa in the False Bay area that is situated on the South side of the Cape Peninsula. It is necessary to understand Cape Town's history of racial exclusion, social inequality, and spatial segregation in order to relate the film to the realities of its modern-day setting. Cape Town's social landscape and fragmented spatial composition bear witness to its colonial and apartheid legacies (Turok, Visage and Scheba, 2021: 71). The Cape was organised to favour the privileged white minority while the indigenous majority faced discrimination and spatial dislocation for approximately three centuries (71). The Apartheid regime forced all ethnic groups other than whites to reside in allocated areas on the city's periphery, with little to no infrastructure. The aim of the separate development policy that enforced racial segregation was to prevent inter-racial contact alongside the many other national laws disadvantaging non-whites in economic, societal, and environmental spheres. Race was synonymous with socio-economic status or class since whites were systematically favoured while non-whites, including African, Coloured, Indian, and Asian citizens were subjugated as the 'other' race. Although South Africa became a democratic nation in 1994, the far-reaching effects of structural and emotional damage continue to haunt those having to integrate into a predominantly European-privileging nation. Urban inequalities pose great challenges to the economic growth and state-sponsored affirmative action that attempts to erase social and spatial divisions (71). In view of Cape Town's history and politics of sanitation and waste, Jackson and Robins (2018) argue that technology and modernisation shape the collective sense of citizenship of a nation. South Africa's post-colonial setting is of a fragile nature due to the imbalance of democratisation and technological modernisation since:

... "there is an order to the development of democracy: certain infrastructural conditions must be met for democracy, and for a felt sense of citizenship, to flourish" [Rubenstein, 2010:16 as cited by Jackson and Robins, 2018: 71]. The developmental order to which Rubenstein refers implies modernisation and democratisation must

occur together, but in many places they are radically separate and move in separate trajectories. (Jackson and Robins, 2018: 71).

South Africa was well on its way towards technological modernisation when it became a democratic state in 1994. Therefore, the property and capital that closely follow modernisation's upward trajectory were already consolidated to its white minority group while the collective rights of citizenship and equality were only recently established for previously disadvantaged groups (71). Jackson and Robins contend that Cape Town's sanitation infrastructure plays an essential role through which rights to the city and civil society can either be negotiated or denied as seen by the city's "toilet war" (84). The incomplete promises of the post-independent South African state, such as the failure to provide adequate sanitation, permeate the political situatedness of the nature documentary that centres on the life of a privileged white male, Craig Foster, which I discuss in more depth in the following section of this chapter.

In the film, Foster deals with his professional burnout by making a radical change in his life when he decides to dive in the Cape Ocean waters every day. Foster states that this decision was motivated by his childhood spent in the Cape waters and the "master trackers [he'd] worked with in the Kalahari" about a decade earlier (*My Octopus Teacher*, 2020). Short clips from the film, *The Great Dance: A Hunter's Story* (2000), directed by brothers, Craig and Damon Foster, show footage of San hunters, Craig Foster behind the camera, and the animals and landscapes of the central Kalahari, South Africa. Foster deploys assumptions about the indigenous Khoe and San's proximity to nature, or what he calls their ability to be "inside the natural world" (*My Octopus Teacher*, 2020), to develop a closeness to the water-based setting of the False Bay kelp forest. Later in the film, Foster draws upon the San's tracking techniques to locate the octopus over the course of a week's searching.

Ancestral heritage connections join the San, filmed in central Kalahari, and the Cape landscape of *My Octopus Teacher* (2020). The San consisted of three main branches of which one branch migrated towards Namibia and Botswana about 140 000 years ago (Mellet, 2021: 34). When Foster accesses the tracking knowledge and practices of the San to interact with the octopus, he becomes a present-day transporter of the San's ancient proximity with the nonhuman world – from the Kalahari Desert to the aquatic environment of the False Bay kelp forest. This is not to assume that the contemporary San's practices are estranged from the Cape landscape, but to recognise that a form of cultural mobility continues to permeate the Cape landscape with the

life practices of the San. Hannam, Sheller, and Urry (2006) argue that the concept of mobility encompasses both large-scale movements of people, objects, and information across the globe, and regional processes of frequent movement (1). Present-day and historical mobilities form part of the diverse interacting systems of mobility producing a networked social world that functions through proximity and connectivity (2). Migration, tourism, and travel are important aspects to mobilities research that focuses on theorising nomadism, deterritorialization, dislocation, and displacement in the world today (10). Physical movement is closely linked to upward and downward social mobility as obligatory and voluntary forms of travel enable complex connections between the “fast and slow lanes of social life” (10-11). Foster’s travels to and from the central Kalahari for work, and his return to his house located in Murdock Valley, Simonstown, where much of the 2020 film footage is taken, contrasts with the San’s history of obligatory mobility. The San’s history of deterritorialization at the Cape caused by the ‘divide and conquer’ strategy of the Dutch settlers led to the steady inward migration of San clans towards areas such as Botswana and the central Kalahari (Mellet, 2021: 130). Moreover, the San’s hunting and tracking traditions show an ability to perform (1) memory-, (2) imaginative-, and (3) informational mobility (Hannam, Sheller, and Urry, 2006: 15) when Foster applies these indigenous San practices to his underwater setting in False Bay. First, Foster’s memory of the Kalahari travels is what ignites his decision to develop an intimacy towards nature. This is also represented in the film through the display and decoration with indigenous San hunting objects, collected during his time spent in the Kalahari, in Foster’s house. Second, Foster can imagine himself – similar to how he perceives the San people – being “inside the natural world” (*My Octopus Teacher*, 2020) of the Cape waters, specifically, the regional kelp forest, as he decides to dedicate his time and apply San knowledge to this coastal setting. Third, once the octopus relocates from her initial den, Foster draws on the San’s tracking techniques to follow and locate her by means of underwater tracks that present themselves as past kills and hunting movements on the seafloor.

Additionally, in *Circles in a Forest* (Matthee, 2005), Maska and Old Sanna are represented as descendants of the indigenous Khoenke people, who lived in and traversed the Outeniqua Mountains long before the arrival of colonists in the 17th century. The Outeniquas formed part of the nine Cape Khoenke community formations that resided around the Cape Peninsula as successful sheep and cattle farmers during the early 17th century (Mellet, 2021: 60). Alongside the Outeniqua clan were the Hessequa, Attaqua, Chautauqua, Gouriqua, Cochoqua, Goringhaiqua, Gorachouqua, Chariguriqua, and other smaller offshoot clans of these (Mellet,

2021: 60). In chapter two, I expanded on how Saul relies on Maska's understanding of the Forest's spiritual realm and his indigenous animist beliefs to make sense of his transcorporeal connection to the landscape, its trees, and Old Foot, an outcast elephant. My reading of Old Sanna is sensitive to the fact that she is mediated by Dalene Matthee, a white woman, and therefore her character cannot truly be taken at face value. My analysis of Old Sanna is based on the little information that is given about her in the novel and the deep indigenous history of the Outeniqua people with the land. Old Sanna is somewhat of a mystery to Saul since she is someone who was never bound to a specific place, but she provides him with important historical information about the event of the Great Fire of 1869 and is thus a source of knowledge. Bernedette Muthien and June Bam (2021) express the necessity of rethinking and rewriting the knowledge production and understanding of the precolonial past and its ongoing presence from an indigenous feminist perspective in South Africa (11). Bam and Muthien (2021), alongside several female contributors to their edited book, highlight the limitations of Western-based research methods in acknowledging the attempted violent erasures and marginalisation of indigenous knowledge and beliefs of the people of the old Cape colony. The contributors to this book draw on feminist indigenous scholarship and seek to redress the colonial trope of the "static and frozen in time 'Peaceful Bushman'" that predominates contemporary writings on indigenous peoples (6). The book aims to navigate new pathways for critical decolonial scholarship by using different historical lenses, philosophies, epistemologies, and interpretations which challenge the accepted histories of "how we came to understand the African past" (13). I consider two contributors' work in particular to further understand the only female Outeniqua character in Matthee's novel, Old Sanna. Babalwa Magoqwana (2021) argues for *ukubuyiswa* - the return to the spirits of our ancestors in accessing their archives of maternal wisdom. Magoqwana (2021) writes on the need to engage in the process of *ukubuyiswa*, meaning the return or integration with the spirits of maternal grandmothers, for the sake of accessing maternal heritage and ontological knowledge foundations to make sense of current feminist struggles and its negotiation of power (91-92):

It is through our grandmothers (ooMakhulu), aunts (rakgadi), mothers (ooMama) that our intellectual foundations of knowledge are shaped. These well-established knowledge foundations are sometimes neglected, 'invisibilised' and disregarded by patriarchal societies and, by extension, academics that seek to create a sense of shame and non-belonging for the younger generation today. (Magoqwana, 2021: 90)

Old Sanna is the only living maternal figure in the novel whom Saul describes as a peculiar character considering that she “was one of the odd people of the Forest and she liked going where there was death in a house. She was a Veltmas Roader and had always been rather simple” (Matthee, 2005: 19). Saul’s limited knowledge of Old Sanna and her descent is a result of the woodcutters’ patriarchal society that regards indigenous maternal figures of the Forest with dismissiveness. Despite Saul’s disregard towards Old Sanna, he draws upon her knowledge of the Forest and asks her to tell him about the great fire that swept through the Knysna region in 1886. Saul gains insight into historic events through encountering Old Sanna’s maternal archive of knowledge. As Old Sanna recollects the events of the fire and the elephants’ mysterious ability to escape its flames, she becomes a maternal archive of knowledge (Magoqwana, 2021) to Saul, who accesses the Forest’s history through her verbal and recollective archive. Upon visiting Old Sanna during Saul’s return to the Forest, Saul declares that “a person must know when he was born” (Matthee, 2005: 49), and he asks whether she has something with which he can write down her birth year. She objects to this, stating that she does not own a pencil and that she has “been getting along all these years without knowing” her age (49). Saul’s insistence on writing down Old Sanna’s age in a European language – as he obtained literacy and numeracy skills while living in the predominantly English Knysna town – links to the well-known phenomena of Western disciplinary approaches that patronise and regulate the long-standing practices of indigenous people. Old Sanna has lived her entire life without knowing her age and is under no impression that a numerical value will add any purposeful meaning to her life. This indifference towards knowing her age also indicates Old Sanna’s unattachment to the physical realm. Despite the limited information given about Old Sanna in the novel, one can conclude that she is drawn towards the deceased and the spiritual and shows little boundedness to her current lifetime. She easily recalls the past when she recollects the events of the great fire and transports herself from the present to the past when, upon narrating the events of the fire to Saul, she “suddenly stops and stares out in front of her like one seeing many things” (51). Sylvia Vollenhoven, another contributor to Muthien and Bam’s book, expounds on the necessity of “Writing ourselves back into history” (2021) through African storytelling that is unbound to non-linear perceptions of time:

Globally there is an awakening to a new way of thinking, a new way of seeing ourselves in the landscape of the past. With this awareness, neat timelines give way to a non-linear, interrelated reality. (Vollenhoven, 2016: 4, as cited by Vollenhoven 2021: 22)

For Old Sanna, the Knysna Forest's landscape is loaded with past memories that are woven into present realities as she retells and relives the events of the great fire. Old Sanna displays a particular attunement towards the supernatural when she nearly mistakes Saul for a ghost when he unexpectedly arrives at her doorstep. Sanna associates Saul's sudden appearance in the Forest with a ghostly haunting that is not far removed from the reality of Saul's return to the Forest.

When Saul reluctantly returns to the Forest to prevent Old Foot from being shot by ivory hunters, he remains divided in his intentions and thoughts towards the Forest space: on the one hand, he wants to be rid of the Forest and its people who continue to brand him as a traitor, and he desires to escape the proliferating destruction of the trees and the landscape. On the other hand, Saul struggles to deny his boundedness to the nonhuman world of the Knysna Forest, his need to make peace with his woodcutters' community, and finally, his interspecies connection to Old Foot that ultimately urges him to get off the Pictor sail ship and re-enter the Forest. Saul is troubled by events from his past that flood his memories while he searches for Old Foot in the Forest. The jumps between the present timeline and Saul's childhood and adolescent flashbacks are what make up the novel's disjointed narrative structure, and in turn, display the relentless haunting, and in-betweenness within Saul. He calls himself a "double-being: one good, one evil" because he struggles to differentiate between what is right and wrong: whether to put past torments to rest and focus only on the present task of finding his elephant-brother, or to make peace with his woodcutters' community and abandon his obsession with Old Foot. When Old Sanna asks Saul, "is it you in the flesh or is it your ghost?" (Matthee, 2005: 48), she perceives his inner wrestling between good and evil, between past and present, as an unearthly presence that masks his corporeal appearance.

South Africa's past is riddled with pre-colonial and settler colonial histories that manifest through material socio-economic disparities alongside dealing with the repercussions of Apartheid's spatial segregation in the present day. In the film, Craig Foster employs the indigenous cultural beliefs of the San to engage with the common octopus in the False Bay kelp forest through a transcendental three-fold cultural mobility. In the novel, on the other hand, Old Sanna embodies a maternal archive of cultural knowledge and transcends linear timelines when she vividly recollects past events and shows spiritual insight into Saul's haunted sense of self.

#### 4.5 Returning to the Forest: a material and mystical space for multispecies belonging

The concept and space of the forest is loaded with symbolic, spiritual, and material meaning to human and nonhuman societies over many centuries. Judith Crews (2003) elaborates on the figurative meanings of forests and trees in folklore and contends that forests have often been associated with the divine because of their ability to endure loss and regrowth through the cycles of seasons (37). Transcendental attributes such as courage and immortality have been associated with forests since they are often viewed as indestructible life forces (37). Trees have often been identified with the human form because of their shape that holds a central trunk, arm-like branches, and bark that relates to the skin (39). The comparison between the human and tree form emerges in Biblical tales and Greek mythology where the human body is either compared to a tree or transforms into a tree as a form of escape (39). Additionally, trees have been associated with fertility rites as well as being vessels for souls or spirits (Crews, 2003: 40; Garuba, 2003). The tree of life motif, that binds together heaven and earth, is a concept well-known to many human societies who perceive the human condition in relation to the sacred or supernatural realm (Crews, 2003: 41). The forest has also been viewed as an archetypal Romance landscape that links not only to darkness and danger, but to adventure, love, and spiritual vision especially in Medieval Romance (Saunders, 1993).<sup>14</sup> The work of Wangari Maathai and her establishment of a non-governmental organisation, the Green Belt Movement in Kenya, has also situated the forest as a space that intersects environmental conservation, community empowerment, and women's rights (The Green Belt Movement, 2022). Much research has gone into the role and detailed lives of trees and forests (Simard, 2021; Wohlleben, 2015), yet Indian environmental journalist Swati Thiyagarajan expands on the understated importance of aquatic forests, arguing that underwater kelp forests are the actual lungs of the earth since more than half of the earth's oxygen is supplied by the earth's oceans.

*Circles in a Forest* (2005) forms part of Matthee's four forest novels that showcase the author's "enchantment with the Outeniqua forest" (Dalene Matthee, 2022). The forest is a contact zone (Iheka, 2018), a central setting and meeting place, for almost all human and nonhuman characters in the novel. Wenzel (2011) explains that the "forest is a self-consciously cultural space that has regularly been populated by lovers, misfits, and fantastic creatures" (140). For Saul Barnard, the local Knysna Forest remains a place where he feels at home and at rest within himself. The Forest is home to Saul as an outcast, who neither fits in with the local woodcutters,

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<sup>14</sup> See Corinne J. Saunders, *The Forest of Medieval Romance*, (1993).

nor with the sophisticated Knysna townspeople. Saul escapes the rejection of the woodcutters' community and the mockery of the townspeople and flees to a nearby town, Swellendam, for two years. Here, he finds partial fulfilment in this job as a carpenter, but he continues to be haunted by a restlessness as it "still felt as if only half of him is alive" (Matthee, 2005: 266) since his other half is bound to the Knysna Forest. The local woodcutters share a similar attachment to the Forest since they are irritable and uncomfortable when having to visit town for basic supplies. When Saul visits Knysna for the first time, he feels exposed without the covering of the Forest:

One moment the Forest was still around and above them, the next moment it started thinning out, getting lighter... more sun and then suddenly the world was lying open. Naked. Like someone without a hat. Without a roof. He wanted to turn around and run back to the shady shelter of the Forest... (Matthee, 2005: 38)

Only when Saul experiences the great openness where there is "too much sun and too much light" (39), does he realise the comfort he finds in the Forest's enclosure that enfolds him from all directions. This contrasts with foreign visitors who experience the Forest's envelopment as suffocation and smothering. Gold prospector Patterson admits his fear to Saul when he explains that "the Forest presses down on me and smothers me. There are times when I get the feeling that we're trapped in this terrible lushness - does this primeval hell have an end somewhere?" (125). Saul and the members of the Forest community find solace in the Forest space whereas those unaccustomed to the landscape suffer because of its lushness.

The most prominent feature of the Knysna Forest relates to the magical and the "fantastic," as Wenzel (2011) puts it, since "the Forest always had a way of knowing things" (Matthee, 2005: 21) that is described by Matthee as its "*verborgenheid*" in Afrikaans, meaning its abstruseness or "mystery" (100). The Forest's mystery is both majestic and terrifying considering the wonder and fear it instils in its community members. Throughout the novel, Saul constantly ponders over the impenetrability of the Forest's character, simply because:

...the Forest never gives up its secrets. You can be born in it, you can live in it every day, sleep in it every night, you can fell its trees, shoot its animals, burn it down, kill it – but the unknown will die with it. (Matthee, 2005:100)

Saul refers to the series of disruptions, such as felled trees, animal deaths, and forest fires, which attempt to unravel the Forest's mystery. Yet these disturbances are unsuccessful because the Forest's magic remains a mystery. To define this mystery is to lean into the non-verbal

communication between species and the environment, the louries' continuous hissing and kok-kok-kok when an elephant is near, and the elephants' soundless movement in the underbrush, the wind that either indicates the direction of the elephant or the changing weather. The Forest's fearsome ambiguity is perhaps most beautifully portrayed through two environmental phenomena: fire and fog. These are in fact not merely environmental phenomena, but the fire and fog appear to have lives and magical powers of their own. When the fog is chased into the Forest by the South-Eastern wind, the Forest transforms into an enthralling and fearsome enclosure due to the fog's presence that:

bewitched everything: The whole world became quieter, narrower, smaller, more scary. The trees became tall, dark ghosts in a thick, white wall and disappeared together with the underbrush right in front of your eyes. When you tried to walk fast, it looked like as though the trees came out of the fog towards you and the fear you felt was a nice kind of fear. (Matthee, 2005: 37)

The fog instils a fear that is captivating to Saul, but suffocating to one who is unfamiliar with the Forest's existing presence of envelopment. Patterson feels as if he is being "smothered to death" when the fog stares back at him and Saul like a thick, white wall (133). The fog bewitches the Forest and heightens the intensity of the Forest's enclosed space, simultaneously causing the disappearing act of trees and the underbrush within the white fog wall and the illusion of ghostly walking trees.

The Great Fire of 1869 was an "intensely hot hurricane" that came from a "berg wind" and destroyed the world between Riversdale and Uitenhage in the George-Knysna area (George Herald, 2017). In Matthee's text, Old Sanna narrates the events from years ago when she was one of many forest dwellers who had to flee the fire for survival. She describes the horrific events as "Judgement Day" in that everything went up in flames:

...it felt as if the fire was licking at our heels...and the air was so hot, it scorched your lungs! Then the wind came. Vicious. Hot. I tell you. Vicious... Everything that lived was fleeing, bushbucks, grys bucks, gallheads, wild pigs; they passed us like raving mad things... And when it got dark that night it didn't get dark, it got red! The flames cracked like whips in the kloofs... (Matthee, 2005: 51).

Garuba (2003) argues that the animist unconscious persistently re-enchants the world as "the rational and scientific are appropriated and transformed into the mystical and magical" (267). Keeping in mind that the animist unconscious is rooted in a "religious consciousness of the

material world” (266) and is ultimately a “form of collective subjectivity that structures being and consciousness in predominantly animist societies” (269), Old Sanna’s description of the Forest fire takes on an animistic life and is not merely an extended metaphor. Old Sanna pays careful attention to the material details of the fire that could lick its scurrying victims and whose flames were like cracking whips. To Old Sanna, the fire was, and continues to be, alive in her archive of past events.

Moreover, misfit relationships find belonging in the Forest space. The terrestrial and aquatic forests are places of escape where strange connections find expression of love between the childhood sweethearts Saul and Kate, as well as the animal-human love affair between Foster and the octopus. The love relationship in the novel is complicated because Kate is the daughter of the cruel wood buyer MacDonald, who exploits the woodcutters and forbids Saul from seeing his daughter. However, Saul and Kate escape to the Forest and confess their love to each other in the safety and solitude of the Forest. Saul leaves for Swellendam and indirectly cuts ties with Kate, but upon returning to Knysna, Saul and Kate reunite in the Forest. The film, on the other hand, shows how the romantic relations between Foster and the octopus are ignited by Foster’s visits to the kelp forest. Craig Foster and the common octopus engage in a non-conventional love affair as Foster admits that:

...it became a bit of an obsession. I can’t wait to get out in the water. What goes through her mind? What is she thinking? Does she dream? What does she dream about? (*My Octopus Teacher*, 2020).

The barriers between aquatic and land-based species dissolve when Foster and the octopus engage in physical touch throughout the film. Foster incessantly meditates on the whereabouts of the octopus while at his coastal beach house, but as he visits her underwater, their love relationship is materialised in the aquatic forest space.<sup>15</sup>

The nature documentary features a regional aquatic kelp forest situated in False Bay. On the website of the Sea Change Project, it states that South African kelp forests make up the Great African Seaforest which is the focus of the organisation’s conservation efforts (Sea Change Project, 2021). Thiyagarajan, who is also a member of the Sea Change project team, states that the kelp of the Great African Seaforest form “a giant golden-green ecosystem” that requires its own identity because of its unusual growth and resilience (2020). What differentiates this kelp

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<sup>15</sup> Zakes Mda’s *The Whale Caller* (2005) is another fine example that exhibits a romantic interrelationship between ocean and land, between aquatic and terrestrial species (Iheka, 2018: 34).

forest from other kelp is its unique system of nutrient upwelling that is provided for by the convergence of the cold Benguela current and the warm Agulhas current (2020). Thiagarajan (2020) comments on the hugely understated role of the ocean and its marine ecosystems that feed the greater health of the ocean, and which control climate systems over the world. She claims that the oceans are the true lungs of the planet, instead of the popularly thought of terrestrial forests, as already stated earlier (2020). According to the Sea Change Project (2021) website, the giant floating bamboo kelp that is indigenous to the southern Atlantic coast of Africa, *Ecklonia maxima*, is considered a foundation species and a three-dimensional ecosystem engineer because it provides home, shelter, nursing, and feeding grounds for a multitude of species. Kelp forests have also been discovered as vital ecosystems for regenerating the earth's ocean by reducing the CO<sub>2</sub> in the water and through the protection of coastlines (2022). Kelp forests form a barrier between the coastline and storm surges and rising seas, diminishing the impact of coastal erosion (2022). Additionally, the organisers of the Sea Change Project (2021) argue that a kelp forest is a "wild space for people to visit and connect to, reminding us that we are part of the natural world".

In the previous chapter, I explore the extent to which proximity to the underwater forest space facilitates interspecies encounters between human and nonhuman as well as multispecies entanglements between the environment and its inhabitants. In *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (2016) Donna Haraway argues for the possibility of intimacy between human and nonhuman worlds without proximity (79). Haraway's text offers new pathways to reconfigure humans' relations to our animal kin and the environment by means of what she terms "sympoiesis," or making-with, other-than-human beings (58). Haraway claims that "staying with the trouble requires making oddkin; that is, we require each other in unexpected collaborations and combinations, in hot compost piles" (4). In the chapter entitled, "Sympoiesis: Symbiogenesis and the Lively Arts of Staying with the Trouble", Haraway (2016) looks at four exemplary models that draw on ordinary stories of oddkin involvement that propose ways to stay with the trouble on a damaged planet.<sup>16</sup> One of these models is the Crochet Coral Reef inspired by Christine and Maraget Wertheim which consists of making evocative models of coral reef ecosystems from various materials such as wool, cotton, plastic, and yarn, to name but a few (78). This collaborative art project weaves together mathematics, marine biology, environmental activism, and women's handicrafts as they practice

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<sup>16</sup> When referring to oddkin, Haraway means other-than-conventional biogenetic or blood relatives with whom humans choose to share company (2016: 283).

multispecies sympoiesis (78). Haraway expands on the idea of intimacy with the natural world without the necessity of engaging in physical closeness:

Intimacy without proximity is not “virtual” presence; it is “real” presence, but in loopy materialities. The abstractions of the mathematics of crocheting are a kind of lure to an affective cognitive ecology stitched in fiber arts. The crochet reef is a practice of caring without the neediness of touching by camera or hand in yet another voyage of discovery. (Haraway, 2016: 76)

The Sea Change Project engages in similar techniques of creating multispecies assemblages where “making-with” and “worlding-with” oddkin is employed in its efforts towards raising ecological consciousness surrounding South Africa’s diverse marine life. The organisation’s message – the interconnectedness of humans and the natural world – is conveyed in two ways: through direct, immersive encounters with the Great African Seaforest [proximity] and through storytelling [nonproximity]. By utilising nonproximity in relation to the underwater world, the organisation can reach individuals that would otherwise be excluded from its collaboration, since only those privileged enough or in close proximity with this specific natural world would be able to partake in the diving tours. The Sea Change Project uses the feature film *My Octopus Teacher* (2020) as the foundation of their educational outreach campaign that tentacles into a community film tour, social media tools and action guides, a Seaforest Alliance consisting of a global community of partners, and a nature-science photography book, *Underwater Wild* (2021), as well as a children’s photography book, *A Journey Under the Sea* (2022). These multi-media and in-contact collaborations are aimed at creating a “learning environment around the importance of the Great African Seaforest, indigenous knowledge, and the interconnectedness of humans and nature” (Sea Change Project, 2021). The Sea Change Project depends on storytelling – through several communicative modes still expanding – to nurture the capacity to respond within its organisation’s community members.<sup>17</sup> Despite their failure to involve local Capetonian community members such as small-scale fishers or those living in informal settlements scattered on the Cape Peninsula – an issue which I discuss in greater depth at a later stage in this chapter – the Sea Change Project attempts to build an archive of multimodal, intergenerational knowledges that mediate South Africa’s diverse marine life through storytelling.

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<sup>17</sup> The Sea Change Project is currently busy with a film project in collaboration with South African vocalist, Zolani Mahola.

On their website, they feature several “Stories of the Great African Seaforest”, one of which is the “Song of the Silent Forest” (Ehrlich, 2020). This story tells of the journey undertaken by some of the organisation’s members to “invoke the spirit of the seaforest” through the ancient indigenous practice of song catching which is the “process of receiving music directly from elements in nature” (3). For the Sea Change Project team, this entailed an audio-visual search for instruments from the underwater landscape that otherwise appears silent to an earthbound listener since, “the sounds of the seaforest have remained a secret” to the terrestrial world (4). Over several months, the song, *My Amphibious Soul*, resounded among the collective team of song catchers comprised of conservationists, journalists, South African vocalist, Zolani Mohola, and world-renowned cellist, Yo-Yo Ma. The aquatic world of the Cape oceanic landscape and its kelp forest orchestra is captured through unconventional nature-sourced instruments that remain alive to the landscape: shakers made from shark egg cases, a string instrument made from an abalone shell, giant mussel shells, kelp flutes, musical turbo shells, a traditional woer-woer made with a cetacean bone, a five ton boulder used as a rock drum, and a whale ear bone played in an underwater cave (2020). Pippa Ehrlich describes the day of the song’s performance as a:

...montage of opposites, ancient culture juxtaposed with modern, deep sadness juxtaposed with incredible joy, human technology working with organic nature and in spite of the duality, everything seemed to fit together. (Ehrlich, 2020: 17)

The team of song-catchers engages in the detailed, often overlooked lives and capacities of underwater oddkin. The compositional process and final product of *My Amphibious Soul* offer ways of making sense of our country’s indigenous historical-cultural losses through using both modern and ancient techniques of music-making.<sup>18</sup> Haraway brings attention “to stories told in otherwise muted registers”, where “the creative, improvisational and fleeting practices” of nonhuman involvement in human lives is premised (Hustak and Myers, 2012: 77, as cited by Haraway, 2016: 69). The “Song of the Silent Forest” (Ehrlich, 2020) belongs with similar models that practice sympoiesis, or worlding-with nonhumans, considering that it constitutes the creative, transient, and audible entanglements between multiple terrestrial and aquatic species through the collaborative project of ancient song catching infused with modern strands of music production.

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<sup>18</sup> This project is yet to be fully released via a short film that tells the musical creation story of *My Amphibious Soul* (Ehrlich, 2020).

It is interesting to study these two texts together because of their similarities and differences: both the film and the novel engage with content relating to multispecies communities and interspecies kinships in a South African context. Although many factors distinguish the two texts, the film and novel were produced in very different historical moments. Matthee's novel has enjoyed prolonged popularity, since its publication in 1984 at the height of the country's civil unrest in late Apartheid. One of the novel's major themes, message of nature conservation and awareness and the ongoing destruction of environmental biodiversity, remains a relevant issue to the context of South African. The film similarly advocates for environmental protection and awareness, but the film's portrayal of a sustainable community is substantially more limited in comparison to Matthee's fictional Knysna forest.

#### **4.6 Conclusion**

This chapter investigated the forest as a space that hosts the mystical and the romantic, the community and the outcast, the ancient and the modern, as well as those belonging to the terrestrial and the aquatic worlds. I analysed the complicated roles of Saul Barnard and Craig Foster as privileged white males who voluntarily engage with the wild animals within their nearby natural landscapes. Foster's engagements with the kelp forest can be seen as voluntary acts of rewilding and sensitising himself towards the natural world, a necessary step in gaining emotional release from his professional burnout, even though he is not dependent on the aquatic landscape for physical survival. Contrastingly, Barnard's sense of Forest embodiment, as well as the woodcutter community's reliance on the landscape, acts as material attachments between himself and the nonhuman world. Following this, I focused on the failed or achieved intersections between ecological spheres and urban infrastructure in the two texts. The film's associated Sea Change Project shows limited outreach and involvement of local communities in their conservation work, whereas in the novel, the woodcutters' community is accounted for on local, urban, and ecological spheres through Saul's carpentry business. The land-based and underwater forests are hosts to the presence and practices of indigenous people in the respective texts. Foster engages with the ancient tracking techniques of the San from the central Kalahari to set off his aquatic journey within the False Bay kelp forest. The San's connection to the Cape landscape displays an unbounded cultural mobility when Foster employs their practices, taken from the Kalahari, in the oceanic setting of False Bay. In Matthee's text, Old Sanna and Maska belong to the Outeniqua clan members who are historically and culturally dismissed among local woodcutters. Saul, however, engages with both Outeniquas when he realises their vast

indigenous archives of knowledge contain valuable secrets to the Forest's spiritual realm. Additionally, the texts under investigation present the forest as a space of solace and belonging. The novel shows how local woodcutters find safety within lush enfoldments of the Knysna forest, while the natural occurrences of fire and fog ignite the Forest's dangerous mystique. Contrastingly, those unfamiliar with the dense enclosure of Knysna Forest undergo suffocation and entrapment within its perimeters. The Sea Change Project attempts to capture the song of the seaforest as a place that carries deep cultural histories and unprecedented regeneration by way of collaborative music-making techniques.

## Chapter 5 – Conclusion

The Forest always had a way of knowing things.

– *Circles in a Forest* (2005), Dalene Matthee

The questions and the ever-evolving answers around ecological and cultural sustainability continue to dominate conversations concerning climate change and livable futures. Kimmerer questions the nature of the ecological framework that governs the perspectives of General Ecology students who have little reference to positive interactions between humans and the environment (2013: 7). When humans share a negative sentiment towards the mix of humans and nature, it results in relationships that lack care. This study has explored the ways in which the forest space extends and adds to the conversation around sustainable ecology through reciprocal communities. These communities emerge from two forest spaces, the terrestrial Knysna Forest and the aquatic bamboo kelp forest, which are host to relationships between human inhabitants and the more-than-human beings who model responsibility, vulnerability, and a sensitivity toward those who are dissimilar from their own kin – oddkin. Haraway (2016) expounds on the importance of making oddkin within creative, multispecies collaborations where interspecies encounters are not premised upon proximity. Iheka (2018), on the other hand, stipulates that proximity with more-than-humans – in the form of spatial nearness and shared characteristics – is necessary in challenging the decolonizing project that focuses primarily on the human, through recognizing “nonhumans as companions in a precarious world” (5). This study has proposed the space of the forest, in its terrestrial and aquatic form, as a fruitful site for understanding multispecies encounters and communications within landscapes of disturbance.

The epigraph at the beginning of this chapter is taken from Dalene Matthee’s first forest novel, *Circles in a Forest* (2005), that narrates the intricate and often turbulent relationships between humans and more-than-human beings within the landscape of the Knysna Forest, as discussed in Chapter two. The Knysna Forest has survived series of human and nonhuman impacts that shape its resilient character, and thus, Matthee’s words ring true in that the Forest’s “way of knowing things” (56) presents a valuable model for regenerative community practices. Matthee populates the Forest landscape with fictional characters and events inspired by the Forest’s history. The novel features Outeniqua figures, an indigenous off-shoot clan from the Khoe,

who share a deep attunement with the land and its spiritual dimensions. Maska's animist logic guides local woodcutter and outcast, Saul Barnard, in understanding his transcorporeal connection to the Forest and its legendary elephant, Old Foot. Garuba's work (2003 & 2013) on animist belief systems informs my reading of the Outeniquas indigenous knowledge. According to Garuba (2003), Western science and logic are challenged when animism attributes spiritual qualities to material objects. Maska's animist perception of the landscape imbues the forest's stones, plants, trees, and mountains with a life of their own, while the elephants' spirits are distinct from these. Old Foot connects with Saul's human spirit, forming a soul-bound brotherhood between man and elephant. A similar transcendental connection joins Saul to an age-old Yellowwood tree, whose nonhuman conception of time upsets human understanding and linear timelines. This project considered recent scholarship on trees, their communicative nature (Simard, 2021), and their textual representations in literary texts (Heise, 2022), to understand the turbulent assemblage wherein local woodcutters fell a kalandar tree over a week-long period. The kalandar's creaking, alongside a multitude of nonhuman outcries, points towards unwanted suffering and the death of the tree. These multispecies expressions – which I also refer to as the Forest's multilogue – are magnified during Old Foot's unexpected death as a collective silence reverberates throughout the landscape via its floor, ferns, birds, and the sighing wind. I draw on Stewart's research (2007) on affect, as well as work in the field of affective ecocriticism (Bladow and Ladino, 2020), to analyse Saul's body as a site of affective response during the three lively interspecies gatherings where Saul's reactions range from anxiety to nausea due to his spiritual connection to the nonhuman world.

In a similar vein, *My Octopus Teacher* (2020) captures Craig Foster's response to the cold Cape ocean which affects his neural and corporeal senses when he dives in the False Bay waters in search of emotional release. Chapter three analyses the popular Netflix Original nature documentary which tells the personal story of Foster's year-long visits to a local kelp forest that is home to a common octopus who becomes his friend and teacher. During these underwater visitations, Foster must unlearn his desensitised approach to life and relationships by embracing three transformative principles that emerge from his encounters with the octopus. First, Foster is taught to build trust and meaningful connections with the octopus and her kelp forest community through regular visitations. After the octopus relocates to a new den, Foster sets out to track her underwater by drawing on the indigenous San's master tracking techniques he learns from the central Kalahari. Foster's relentless pursuit of the octopus resonates with the animistic "act of following", described by Durrant (2021) who states that new and old animism

“seeks a mimetic, non-objectifying relation to the world” (1). Second, Foster’s frequent visitations lead to physical touch between himself and the octopus, which challenges him to engage in affection with his nonhuman friend. The octopus’s tentacular approach to the underwater kelp forest teaches Foster a third principle – to embrace vulnerability as a valuable tool during life-threatening situations. The two interspecies friends’ lives seem to be mirroring each other when physical and emotional dismemberment, slow rehabilitation, and an overarching precarious mode of life, feature as shared tropes within their aquatic and terrestrial lives. Their relationship produces acts of reciprocity that closely link to the forest community’s ethics of flourishing, which are well illustrated through the death of the octopus. The collective kelp forest community feast on the gift that is the octopus’s depleted body after she uses all her energy in the process of oxygenating her eggs. Foster resists the temptation of self-centered accumulation when he allows his octopus friend and teacher to be eaten away by sharks, fish, and brittle stars. Kimmerer argues that capitalism’s system of scarcity operates on accumulation rather than the shared gift-giving among ecological networks of exchange (2020). Here, the octopus’s weariness and death contrast with Foster’s professional burnout mentioned at the beginning of the film, since Foster’s work fatigue is premised on self-sufficiency, whereas the nonhuman’s exhaustion translates into an act of giving that emphasizes the interconnectedness of the forest network. The Sea Change Project bases its organisation’s message upon the interdependence of human and nonhuman worlds, as it advocates for the well-being of the entire ecosystem through the “long-term protection of South Africa’s marine environment” (2021). The film directors, James Reed and Pippa Ehrlich, convey the theme of multispecies entanglement through short narrative segments that capture the intermingling of terrestrial and aquatic worlds.

Chapter four consists of a comparative analysis between the four nodes that emerge from my analysis of the film and novel in the previous two chapters. I draw on Maasdorp and Rijdsdijk’s critique of the film (2021) to analyse how Craig Foster negotiates his role as a privileged white male who engages with nature’s wildness. Foster shifts between the untamed waters of the Cape ocean and his luxury residential beachfront house in participating in the interspecies relationship, which draws clear distinctions between the lives of people whose vulnerable position towards wild animals are disregarded. In the novel, Saul Barnard’s material connection to the Knysna Forest places him in an intermediate position, since his community and childhood upbringing link him to the landscape, yet he shows occupational independence when he works in Swellendam as a profitable carpenter. Additionally, the novel and the nature

documentary show disparate approaches towards the intersections between urban and ecological spaces: Matthee's novel shows the direct impacts that infrastructural expansion such as gold mining, cargo and merchant trade ships, and urban development, yield on the environmental landscape of the Knysna forest, since the human and nonhuman inhabitants are threatened by the ever-increasing imperialist invasion. Saul's local carpentry business shows promising prospects for the partnership of the local economy, the Forest, and the woodcutters' community. In the film, the Sea Change Project fails to connect its marine conservation efforts to Capetonian citizens who are dependent on the ocean's resources for their livelihood. Green (2020) draws on the local Cape Town-based Abalobi fishery as a model for the successful integration of business-related and ecological spheres that function according to a politics of care. I study the film's relational position to Cape Town's history of racial segregation and social inequality to find that the indigenous culture of the San influences Foster's material and psychological life. Foster's beach house is decorated with indigenous tracking artifacts, while his encounters with the octopus are mediated by his conception of the San's tracking techniques. In the novel, Saul treats the maternal Outeniqua figure, Old Sanna, with a mixture of patriarchal disregard alongside a partial notion of respect when he recognises her useful archive of knowledge based on the landscape. The feminist decolonial work done by Bam and Muthien (2021) informs my reading of Old Sanna, an indigenous character mediated by Matthee, a white female author. Old Sanna's understated, yet significant female role in *Circles in a Forest* (2005), is shown by her seamless shifts between the material and spiritual dimensions, as well as her precious verbal and recollective archive of past events.

Although the novel and the nature documentary show limited consideration towards the landscape's deep human-based historical and cultural pasts, the nonhuman inhabitants draw untethered linkages between the land and oceanic histories. These pasts are finely exemplified during the multispecies collective gatherings between humans and nonhumans: in the novel, this is shown through the multilogue of forest voices that recognises the deaths and sufferings of its community members, such as the diseased Barnard women, the felled kalander tree, and Old Foot's shooting. Similarly, the death of the octopus and the shared feasting over her exhausted body draw together the aquatic kelp forest community. Also, the Sea Change Project's ancient song catching collaboration represents the coming together of ancient and modern, of human and nonhuman subjectivities. I circle back to Matthee's words in linking sustainable ecologies to the positive approaches modeled by terrestrial and aquatic forests. The

forest's "way of knowing", understanding, and drawing together human and nonhuman communities, holds alternative possibilities to green and blue futures.

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