

# Witness to the Makeshift Shore: Ecological Practice in *A Littoral Zone*

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## **Abstract**

This essay suggests that Douglas Livingstone's long poem 'A Littoral Zone' (1991), an explicit conversation between his work as an environmental scientist and his work as a poet, makes for a poetic statement that is, in various senses of the word, ecological. The sequence of poems draws extensively on scientific research in the field of bacteriology, is minutely located in 'place', evokes a secular sacramentalism in its representation of ecological interconnectedness, and situates the present moment in the context of deep time. In all, Livingstone's distinctive stance involves a tough, tender negotiation between irony, equanimity, wonder, and a sense of critical environmental urgency. Read twenty years later, his view of the South Coast littoral and of the world in which it is situated, seems prescient.

**Keywords:** Douglas Livingstone, *A Littoral Zone*, eco-criticism, secular sacramentalism, interconnectedness, deep time.

They named it Danger Beach for the currents, Muizenberg for the old mountain, Kalk Bay for the chalky lime they used to whitewash their houses, and St James for the Catholic Church. Before this recent occupation, for a long time there were caves, fish traps, grinding stones and many animals. Before these things, the basin of sea the explorers called False Bay was land – archaeological divers still find million year old handaxes under the water – and before all that, this neighbourhood was sea again, primal and peopled with ancestors, ceaselessly sounding almost forever.

Now in the morning when the tide is out, whelks walk highways in the sand. Snail roads track across a rock. Sea lettuce swims in a standing wave, and continents of sand take form and flow again. Treading in the wash of shells and civilized debris at the wave's edge, the pale beach sequined with fragments of blue mussels, our feet find their path among tiny branching trees, veins, rivers left behind in the sand by the receding tide. Our words drift in the small wind<sup>1</sup>.

Around the time I began rereading Douglas Livingstone's *A Littoral Zone* (1991) to prepare for this paper, screens all over the world were suddenly overtaken with images of a great coastal devastation that swept multitudes of houses, factories, trains, cars, people and fields away like so much flotsam. The tsunami of March 2011 was immediately a catastrophic reminder of the impermanence of this edge we call the shore, the flimsiness of any merely human edifice in the face of really powerful environmental forces, and the tragic folly of civilized heedlessness. The scenes we all watched were spectacular, terrifying, utterly compelling.

Douglas Livingstone's concern is also coastline, that shifting region at the margins of land and sea. But his audience is small, locals mostly, his medium is not international news footage filmed from a helicopter but poetry, things seen from the edge, and the environmental disaster to which he stands witness is quotidian, almost unremarkable. The book is a sequence (ideally read as one long poem, the Author's Notes suggests) written over twenty-five years and published in 1991<sup>2</sup>. In an interview from the same year, Livingstone said that while he started out in life wanting to do medicine, he soon became 'more interested in healing the planet than its prime polluters' (Fazzini 1991: 136), and went on to explain that about thirty years previously he had decided 'to devote [his] few skills to our Mother, the earth, and to making a few poems to entertain, tease, challenge my readers into having some love, some concern, some identification with this beautiful planet' (1991: 140). In *A Littoral Zone*, this orientation makes for an explicit conversation between his work as an environmental scientist and his work as a poet: delighting in the

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Michael Cope for his comments and conversations. As always.

<sup>2</sup> Following Tony Morphet's fine reading of the sequence, I tend to see the book as one long poem.

myriad liveliness of a particular reach of seashore near Durban, and recording the ordinary disaster of industrialised humans' impact on its inhabitants. This devastation over an extended time period is unspectacular, sometimes hardly visible, a case of the sort of environmental destruction that Rob Nixon has called slow violence. That is a kind of violence which, unlike the spectacular devastation wrought by a tsunami, 'occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all' (2011: 2). Struggling to deal with its intractability and pervasiveness, *A Littoral Zone* responds implicitly to one of the key questions Nixon identifies: 'How do we bring home – and bring emotionally to life – threats that take time to wreak their havoc, threats that never materialize in one spectacular, explosive, cinematic scene?' (2011: 14). In this regard, Livingstone's book reflects on a working lifetime of scientific and imaginative practice in a particular location. The result is a poetic statement that is, in various senses of the word, ecological, and now seems prescient<sup>3</sup>.

To begin with, there is the unique association between this volume and Livingstone's day job. As a bacteriologist, he was engaged from 1964 onwards in the microbial measurement of sea pollution off the coast around Durban. This involved regular collection of water samples, their analysis in

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<sup>3</sup> Among the critical scholarship dealing with the ecological priorities in *A Littoral Zone*, Duncan Brown's 'Environment and Identity' (originally published in 2002) is a thoughtful reflection on the volume's contribution to the contemporary South African literature of place and belonging. The most detailed and sustained discussion of Livingstone's poetic treatment of ecological issues appears in Mariss Stevens' unpublished MA thesis (2004). Her project is, explicitly, an 'ecocritical examination' of his *oeuvre*, and she devotes three chapters to analysis of this particular collection. In a series of very detailed close readings, she explores both what she calls (citing Livingstone himself) the 'ecological despair' manifested in the poems (125), and the 'tentative thread of hope' that human creativity might appear to offer (171). In a subsequent essay, Etienne Terblanche (2006) takes Livingstone's ecological concerns in the collection more or less as read, and is primarily interested in locating his exploration of liminality with regard to the work of modernists such as T.S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens and e. e. cummings.

the laboratory, and development of his own interpretive model outlined in a PhD thesis on microbial testing. There are clear analogies between this activity – sampling, analysing, writing up – and the discipline of making poems. And at the same time Livingstone said that he would like the two works to be published as companion texts, with the thesis read as the ‘hard core version’ of the poetry (Brown 2006: 105). As this suggests, *A Littoral Zone* takes much of its shape from reflecting on his role as environmental scientist. The ordering of the poems (together imagined as what he calls in the Notes ‘the record of one daylong mythic sampling run’ (1991: 62)) follows the sequence of sampling stations he regularly visited. The language of the poems assumes some familiarity with scientific registers. And he uses the medium of poetry to reflect (critically, ironically, philosophically) on the effectiveness of his practice as an environmentalist. At the same time, the fact of this volume implicitly embodies the contention that there are certain things (concerning the heart, the imagination, the spirit even, soft core things if you like), that hard science cannot say, and that need, for all our sakes, to be said<sup>4</sup>.

The poetry is also ecological in another sense: its locatedness in ‘place’. This emphasis (which Livingstone shares with environmentally informed writers of ‘place-based’ literature elsewhere in the world,

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<sup>4</sup> Regarding the tentative negotiations between ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ registers in environmental discourse during this period, I am reminded of the concluding section of *Beyond the Limits: Global Collapse or a Sustainable Future*, the influential international study of growth and sustainability that was published the following year as a sequel to the ground-breaking Club of Rome Report of 1972. After extensive analysis of computer-generated projections regarding our common future, the authors introduce ‘five other tools we have found helpful’, while noting that these are tools that they are hesitant to discuss ‘because we are not experts in their use and because they require the use of words that do not come easily from the mouths or word-processors of scientists. They are considered too ‘soft’ to be taken seriously in the cynical public arena. They are: visioning, networking, truth-telling, learning, and loving’. The argument that follows proposes that ‘[t]he transition to a sustainable society might be helped by the simple use of words like these more often, with sincerity and without apology, in the information streams of the world’ (Meadows *et al.* 1992: 223 - 224).

particularly those writing at the time) is made explicit in the maps of the coastline around Durban that frame the collection<sup>5</sup>. All of the long poem is somehow concerned with this particular zone of study which the map at the end of the book charts in terms of a series of ‘stations’ (evocative word, the sites of scientific research oddly resonating with Biblical echoes), twenty-six in all. So whatever insights the speaker offers (about evolution, science, love, philosophy, ecology or poetry), these are nearly always precisely located. The poems have names like ‘An Evolutionary Nod to God Station 4’, ‘Cells at Station 11’, ‘Subjectivities at Station 15’. This instance of deliberate situatedness evokes the ecologist’s recognition that one is always seeing or writing from somewhere, that place matters critically. But for the work with which Livingstone is concerned, place, or our apprehension of it, must always be something fluid, mobile. As the speaker tracks a passage from one station to the next, the focal setting of our attention zooms from the geographic, cartographer’s spatial view of the territory into the minute particulars of the shore. Here he meets particular people, particular animals, particular garbage, sand and rock pools, and nested within them all a multitude of living things visible only when relocated to a microscope slide and observed through a powerful lens.

Visiting these places he encounters varieties of environmental pollution, what one poem calls ‘sullage’, and the disheartening work of engaging with it over twenty-five years. The analysis of sea water pollution which is the subject of Livingstone’s thesis (quite literally, the impact of our shit – *E. Coli* is developed as a key indicator in his study) is attended in the

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<sup>5</sup> In North America in particular, the emphasis on ‘place’ and the ‘local’ has been a key element of environmental literature and of the ecocriticism that has arisen to track it. Recently, this emphasis has been criticized for its potential insularity or parochialism (Rob Nixon explores this in *Slow Violence*, especially in the chapter ‘Environmentalism, Postcolonialism and American Studies’, 2011: 233 - 262), and arguments are being made for bringing place-based models into conversation with contemporary understandings of globalization and postcolonialism. See for example Ursula Heise’s discussion of the need for what she calls an eco-cosmopolitan critical project in *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global* (2008).

poems by a sickened, anguished response to the unremitting pollution of the littoral zone around Durban. Decades before recycling became popular, or the analysis of garbage a key aspect of raising environmental awareness, he reads the contemporary culture by looking at its waste. At Station 1A, he writes ‘the mess on the sand incredible; scraps, vomit and cartons abound’ (12), while at Sunkist, he stoically records paper cups, empty tins, a broken mirror, but summons up the resolution to continue: ‘Among Monday’s debris from Sunday’s crowd, / I try to face the shattered sea uncowed’ (13). In pursuing his scientific research, the speaker inevitably becomes a witness to the cruelty, thoughtlessness, and ignorance that are the symptoms of a heedless civilization out of touch with its environmental basis, bent on sullyng its own nest. His response is complex. He is ironic, sometimes even self-satirical, *and* uncompromisingly devoted to the task in hand. If, in one guise, he is a knight in the service of Mother Gaia (Don Quixote in fact, tilting at windmills much of the time), then this odd quest has become a life’s work:

There’s work ahead: futile  
scientifically delivered blows at sullage,  
against the republics of ignorance and apathy,  
with bust lance, flawed shield,  
lamed steed of action; downhill  
past Country Club to Blue Lagoon  
brown with silt hell-bent for the surf.  
Here is my daily bread’s commencement (10).

While the long poem tracks its way through pollution and waste, it is simultaneously an awed witness to the resilient beauty of the biosphere. The speaker recognizes himself as an inextricable participant in this living system, the child of a long lineage that began in the sea, an animal among other animals. In ‘Darwinian Preface’ his fear of death meets the calming recognition of a certain continuity: ‘Perhaps the sea indeed did suckle you’ (7), he suggests, an idea that is developed in a subsequent poem in which ‘vestiges in me / recall a time I once breathed in its sea’ (18). Since Livingstone’s voice is characteristically tough, gritty and ironic, his ecology that of a scientist with a job of work to be done, the tenderness of such statements is particularly evocative. Against the harsh instrumentalism he

repeatedly witnesses in people's attitudes towards other animals, the poems offer similarly an unsentimental kindness that perseveres in seeing such fellow beings as sentient, and strives to heal, to help, to make amends. The old whaling station is long abandoned, but the place is irrevocably 'blood-flecked', he says, haunted with the memory of harpoons and hackers, the tongues of whales stuck out at death, and his own work of sampling continuing doggedly in the midst, 'checking the surf slimy with reject' (36). In another poem he finds a dolphin beached, and tries to help. But he can't do it on his own, and the fishermen turn away when he calls. As he leaves, he sees them moving towards her, 'one drawing a long and rusted bayonet' (55). And in the extraordinary 'Bad Run at King's Rest' he is faced with a logger-head turtle, mutilated first by a propeller-blade and then by trophy-hunters.' Livingstone's response spares his readers little:

It raised its beak to scream or pant,  
the exhalations making no sound.  
Dumping my bottles on the heaving sand,

I moved – lifelong stand-in for thought –  
avoiding the still dangerous beak,  
asking pardon, cut the leathery throat.

Rinse off queasily. Circle wide,  
back, past that inert, spread-eagled mound.  
Call dumbly on gulls, on incoming tides (37).

Equally extraordinary, I think, is the image of the duiker faun in 'A Visitor at Station 21.' While the speaker is engaged in an internal debate about the existence of God, invoking a variety of complex philosophical positions, his senses become aware of the presence of a delicate duiker doe approaching him on the dune. For all our intellectual culture, there are still times when the immediacy of the living world simply breaks through and touches our skin. This is one such moment:

Stubbing the butt, a movement: small hooves  
tread delicately, pause for each wave-

break. I suspend mentation in view  
of an impending holy event.

She walks, in quick trust, decidedly  
up beside me. Her leaf-stained tongue flicks  
out, licks salt from my wrist. One rust-fringed  
brown eye rolls worriedly at the surf.  
These frail seconds halt the debate.  
She turns, steps unhurriedly away.

The secular sacramentalism Livingstone develops in such encounters evokes the insight into interconnectedness which is another shaping element of the long poem, and a key concept for any sort of ecological thought or practice. Encounters with the inhabitants of the littoral zone (whether large or microscopic) offer a chance to glimpse that, as he put it in the interview, ‘all life is interconnected and ultimately holy; that we are here, temporarily in a temple of life’ (1991: 142). As an ecologist he recognises that the places and beings that the separate poems address are not discrete entities or selves, but patterns or nodes in a network that links from the particular into everything else. So while it is not his concern to write explicitly about global flows or politics or economics, when you look at it closely as a poet scientist, the strip of coast near Durban is a place that opens out into the whole system. Among the fish, kelp, rubbish and myriad beings that populate the seashore, there is also an old couple with memories of Warsaw, as well as Bach and Beethoven, Todd Matshikiza and Can Themba, Darwin, Hildegard of Bingen, a Nazi aviator with stainless-steel teeth, a harbour that links to Byzantium and Samarkand, and a robust young man hopping on his single leg in the surf (“Landmine” he says with laconic élan’ p. 22).

As this suggests, the representation of spatial interconnections in *A Littoral Zone* inevitably evokes the idea of connectedness across time. In this regard, what holds more fascination for Livingstone than recent history are the marks of what may be called deep time, and our accommodation to it. The present moment links us and other life forms, quite physically, through our cells, to a very ancient ancestry. So over the years, his collection of samples on the Durban coastline provides opportunities to place the present dispensation in relation to the great reaches of the past. At Station 17 the

speaker finds a mass of paintings on a cave wall that evoke a much older and apparently more sustainable inhabitation of this site than what the current custodians of the region are up to: 'The stone sides are crammed: blazed / with swarms of symbiotic man about / the business of getting on with the earth' (44). More astonishing perhaps, is the 400 million year old Coelacanth, witness to a myriad changing forms and shores, whom he addresses as a Patrician, and recognizes as an ancestor:

What awes me – fish from long ago –  
is not the muddying of your chaps  
when waves clawed 200 metres up  
or below today's makeshift shores,  
nor your changeless chinless lineage,  
but your fathers squirting on eggs  
to sire everyone I know (24).

And then there is the dead body in the sea at Station 11, and the water sample he scoops from nearby. Will it include 'a cell from that out there?' he asks, and goes on to wonder about the occupation of our bodies by 'Billion year-old invaders / - the silent mitochondria-' (35). This zoom into the microscopic (which holds at once the traces of deep time) is reminiscent of the position he contentiously took at Poetry 74, a conference on South African English poetry at UCT, where he responded to the emphasis on what he called 'polit-lit' with a biological account of human beings' internal cosmology:

Each of us is a walking universe of completely disparate worlds,  
continents and seas, with immense and differing populations, all  
organized together into some sort of functioning coherence with the  
inherent determination (if we are sane) to preserve life and what is  
left of our planet (1976: 143).

Why focus on biology and the biosphere, give science a hearing, as he put it, in the discussion of priorities for poetry? *A Littoral Zone* repeatedly evokes both the long, long reaches of time, and the spatial extension into the whole system. The effect is an implicit suggestion that contemporary humans'

seemingly wilful ignorance of interconnectedness and deep time is a key aspect of our modern delusion and the forms of violence it sanctions. While the speaker avoids collective activism and his pursuits are mostly solitary, in the course of his work as environmental scientist (gathering the data and analytic tools for the assessment of water pollution that activists and decision-makers will need), he simultaneously works with some dedication as a writer to resituate human activity in an ecological network, qualify human hubris, recognize its impact in the slow violence that continues to pollute the earth, and hope for the chance of a fundamentally different sort of engagement.

Or perhaps it's all too late, a fool's errand. In the last poem, Livingstone's ironic critique turns on his own practice, raising a question that holds good for anyone involved in environmental work – whether scientist, writer or activist. Perhaps, he says in the final poem, Gaia does not need her knights. After all, we humans are the ones that are expendable, the 'entropy' that might well be excreted should the current crisis not be averted. The thought is challenging of course, and could well be interpreted as a justification for disengagement, apathy:

A tendency in all that's living is to excrete  
its entropy. The planet counterattacks.  
Its choice is plan: kill or be killed.  
Ours too: symbiosis or death  
at the hands of a bright blue cell  
- the only living thing in known space.  
Perhaps you do not need your knights, Gaia:  
in the end, you have to win (61).

So if Gaia doesn't need us, why bother with any of this? Walking on the False Bay shore, thinking of Livingstone and extinction, and how you can sometimes glimpse it here (pollution, interconnectedness, the liveliness of everything changing into everything else) I am reminded of Rachel Carson. Not *Silent Spring* this time - its implacable warning set like the ancient inscription on a tsunami stone before the tide, 'Do not build your houses beyond this point!' – but a less well-known work, another companion text. The words Carson asked to be read at her funeral were from the ending of *The Edge of Sea*, in which her marine biologist's understanding of the

shifting, elusive intertidal zone is presented in a lyrical, reflective voice for a general audience. 'Contemplating the teeming life of the shore,' she writes in the Epilogue, 'we have an uneasy sense of the communication of some universal truth that lies just beyond our grasp' (1998: 250).

Livingstone might not go so far as to make claims for universality, but the details of the makeshift shore off Durban are instructive in a multitude of ways, and tracking this place over twenty-five years, he does meet some intimations. The first line of the long poem begins with death and the fear of it: 'The crab, the clot, the muzzle or the knife: / patiently, the nocturnal terrorisms / stalk' (7). The last poem ends with a cautious affirmation: 'The pennants flutter. The sound of pounding / hooves drums up the trophy: life?' (61). Within this frame, the crazy knight who is both environmental scientist and poet discovers whatever healing there is to be found in the pursuit of his daily work. Of fear and loss in the face of death he says at the beginning 'There is no help for it. Best buckle to' (7) and at the end of the sequence, 'No other course before such wiles ... but to accept the gage and buckle to' (61). Herein lies Livingstone's response to the paradox of environmentalist agency: though in some big picture Gaia may not really *need* our ecological gestures, working to save the sea is what saves him. Us. Working for others is what blesses us, makes us kind. Studying sullage is oddly healing. As he puts it in the penultimate stanza of the sequence, what rescues the speaker from indifference and disengagement is in fact the sea: 'your old ally against psychic apathy, / who saves your soul from atrophy' (61).

But there's more to it yet, I think. After all, whatever assertions you make at the seashore are always provisional, subject to the tides. Twenty years later, we can recognize (as somewhat eco-conscious readers) that Livingstone's project as scientist poet involves considerably more than his own secular redemption. At the time he was sometimes censured for not being sufficiently politicised<sup>6</sup>, and certainly even his most explicitly environmental poems are not about eco-activism or collective eco-political endeavour. Yet what many of the poems in *A Littoral Zone* are about seems to me something crucially instructive and deeply radical: a view and a

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<sup>6</sup> In this context Dirk Klopper, for example, reflects on what he calls Livingstone's steadfast refusal to 'subserve his poetry to the demands of direct political intervention' (1997: 43).

practice that literally goes to the roots, the waters, the cells, the ancient bacteria, and witnesses in their patterns our common life, its joy and impermanence.

How then to shape in words the shifting, liminal, littoral edges of the world, or wake us up to the forms of human violence that work to pollute them? Livingstone's long poem conducts one such experiment, his distinctive stance a tough, tender negotiation between irony, equanimity, wonder, and a sense of critical environmental urgency. As Gary Snyder, another lifelong practitioner of a similar paradox, has put it: 'Knowing that nothing need be done, is where we begin to move from' (1974: 102).

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