

'By What Authority?' Presentations of the Khoisan in South African English Poetry

Annie Gagiano

A quotation especially useful to this essay is found in Megan Bieseles recent study of the Kalahari Ju'hoan people's oral art. She writes:

There is a kind of cultural rumination endlessly going on there, a milling process that brings the unseen into harmony with the seen, the old with the new; all aspects of the ongoing life of society are its grist. In the region of 'special realities' lies a huge reservoir of adaptive potential for our species *since images of reality ... can encompass immense change* (Bieseles 1993:192f, e.a.).

This is reminiscent of the simpler Achebean reference to 'Art ... in the service of man' (Achebe 1975:19). If Bieseles comment is meant to explain, in the first place, the unique integration of the practical and the spiritual in a living San or Bushman community, it would seem to mediate *also* towards the type of use a society much in need of mending (like our own) might make of the records, retentions and art of the KhoiSan people who lived here for so long before the present-day South Africans; both in our social and political strategies and in the art-work we in turn produce. This would be the benign, the imaginatively hopeful response. That there is another pole to this interplay of cultures, a severe danger of misuse and exploitation, has often been noted.

How extremely taxing and baffling a problem 'cultural encounters' present (both ethically and historically) is registered in the frequency and range of expressions of cautionary criticism amongst those who study the South African First People(s)¹.

¹ See, for example, Stuart Douglas (1995:74n1): 'I caution against the call to "recuperate the San"; to view "bushman" as a bridge between the past and the future is to potentially enter the realm of "dangerous diluted sewerage poison".'

Chris Ballantine² (1995:135), for example, asks the following urgent questions:

In a post-colonial world *by what authority* do we confer upon ourselves the right to speak about other cultures? What does such speaking, or writing *mean*? How much does this speaking and writing 'really' tell us about other cultures, and how much—unwittingly—about ourselves?

Edwin Wilmsen (1996:186) writes that:

Nostalgia for 'Bushmen', both as existential presence and as available prose, arises from the European conception of the 'naturalness' of small-scale societies as opposed to the 'artificiality' of industrial society, often expressed in the fear that wherever 'civilisation' materialises the 'primitive' in people is attenuated.

A general point about what one might call the benign or apparently benign dictatorship of English in the African literary sphere is (also) relevant here. Since what is to be examined in this essay are evocations and representations *in English* of people who spoke their own San and Khoikhoi languages, the question of how adequately this presently dominant language can render their largely extinct and silenced presence to us, today, inevitably arises. For the arrival and construction of South African literature in English on the cultural landscape has had the consequence of dislocating and disrupting the indigenous literatures in African languages ... (Masilela 1987:50). Tony Voss (1990:60) comments dryly: 'This desire to identify with the San represents an ideological claim to a status other than intruder'³. The archaeologist Martin Hall (1996:118) makes the general point in a slightly different context, warning that

² See too: Wilmsen (1995:1-27) who has written an illuminating and demythologising study of the way Laurens van der Post represents the San, while Rob Gordon's writing has been prominent in debunking sentimentalisations and exploitations of 'The Bushman mystique'. See also my own short review of Watson's *Return of the Moon* ... (Gagiano1992:78).

³ Compare Carli Coetzee's (1988:114) observation: 'In current versions of [the Khoikhoi woman] Krotoä's life, she is being constructed [by 'whites'] as the mother of us all', as well as Ward and Worden's (1998:209) reminder that 'In place of slave ancestry, a popular claim in the 1980s was [for "coloured" South Africans to assume, instead] descent from the indigenous Khoikhoi and San'.

If such artistic production is to be revelatory ... then the dialectic of object and context, of body and landscape, is crucial. For if icons are allowed to float free they will attract like magnets those master narratives that are so deeply embedded in contemporary culture.

The present popularity or commodification (often 'kitchification') of KhoiSan images (on anything from playing cards to Olympic logos—see e.g. Tomaselli 1995:i-xxi) is of course to be contrasted with the cruder sort of racial and imperial power-play of earlier times, when the taking-over (or deliberate, attempted obliteration) of the KhoiSan presence was cheerfully undertaken. In our own time we need to bear a more paradoxical and difficult relationship with the past and with 'original inhabitants' in mind:

There is now no Native past without the Stranger, no Stranger without the Native. No one can hope to be mediator or interlocutor in that opposition of Native and Stranger, because no one is gazing at it untouched by the power that is in it. Nor can anyone speak just for the one, just for the other. There is no escape from the politics of our knowledge, but that politics is not in the past. That politics is in the present (Dening 1992:178-179)⁴.

All these ironies swirl around the poems considered in the course of this essay, *and* around the discussions themselves. As much as the poems reflect perspectives and political choices of the periods in which they were composed, so do present reassessments of their worth and function. In the (generally chronological) discussion following, nothing more authoritative than interpretations of interpretations can be claimed. Yet an interplay, on 'internal conversation' can be structured. South Africans are necessarily widely engaged, at present, in rereadings of local history⁵. Setting up an exhibition (as in this essay) of the ways in which the KhoiSan presence has been verbally registered or mediated by members of other South African cultures perhaps leads chiefly to self-interrogation (healthy or narcissistic). Yet the whiff of that 'past presence' is inextinguishable and precious. Every one of the cited poems documents political (in other words, *power*) realities. So does each reference and preference expressed here. If all humans are descendants of a KhoiSan foremother, we are the siblings, quarrelling over the family inheritance: our battles themselves becoming 'history'.

⁴ Pippa Skotnes uses this ironic and wise comment to head her 'Introduction' to the volume *Miscast*, edited by herself (Skotnes 1996:15).

⁵ See, for instance, the collection of essays edited by Nuttall and Coetzee (*Negotiating the past*) which appeared in 1998.

The earliest South African English reference to the KhoiSan in this paper comes from 1812 and states in fierce and unashamed contempt:

Scarce human form the squalid figures boast,
Filth is their ornament, their cov'ring grease!

—though with nauseating condescension ‘observing’ that somehow (usefully to the missionary position), *even*

The thoughtful savage ...
... points to Him that rules beyond the sky (Van Wyk 15).

This kind of writing (by one George Marshall, from his ‘Cynthio to Leonora’) prefigures the vision of the imperialist’s duty of taking charge of the world’s ‘inferior’ peoples expressed nearly a century later in Kipling’s poem ‘The White Man’s Burden’ (Van Wyk 198-199), though at Marshall’s earlier stage the disdain seems to function to reassure Englishmen like himself, comfortingly, of their indubitable, cleanly godliness, as they advance like a tide of detergent over the ‘dark’ continent⁶.

In 1825 was published what may be the earliest scathing ‘rainbow nation’ reference, in Frederic Brooks’s sneering, crassly satirical ‘South African Grins’:

A rainbow ball, take it all in all,
Is a blithsome place to make a call;
For there you may see female blacks,
With nothing black upon their backs;
But, all drest in white, black, red, and green,
Each looking like a *Hottentot* queen! (Van Wyk 28).

How does one pinpoint the racial contempt that seems implicit here? Brooks provides an early instance of white South Africans’ ‘colour’ preoccupation:

And groups of pedestrians of all hues,
From pure white to the colour of shoes;
In short, so strange and motley a crew,

⁶ See Anne McClintock’s brilliant analysis of the coincidence of the British imperialist project with the cult of hygiene and cleansing agents (McClintock 1995:207-36) and, indeed, of the major contribution the commercial enterprise made, both monetarily and ideologically, to the global extension of British rule.

'Pon no *British* race-course can you view (Van Wyk 30).

It is a relief to come to Thomas Pringle's 'Song of the Wild Bushman' with its *counter*-contempt towards the 'proud white man' and his sedentary opulence, the 'Bushman' speaker expressing a refusal to 'crouch beneath the Christian's hand'; the poem ending with the icon of the 'brown Serpent of the Rocks' (Chapman 1986:35-36) whose sting threatens the invaders' advance. The Scottish Pringle's verse thus long prefigures a University of the Western Cape lecturer's impassioned appeal, at a 1994 Johannesburg conference on 'The Politics of Representing the Bushman People of Southern Africa', that the 'new representation of the San ... should ... acknowledge the 'active, ... rationally driven ... and effective ... part these people played ... as resistance fighters' (Guenther 1995:113). The conference was called 'People, Politics and Power. The Politics of Representing the Bushman People of Southern Africa' and held at the University of the Witwatersrand and Johannesburg Art Gallery, 4-7 August, 1994. In 1997, an important conference was held in Cape Town, aiming 'to save [the] heritage of South Africa's first people' (*Cape Times*, July 11, 1997, p. 9) where, according to the chief organiser, Prof. J. Bredekamp, 'for the first time [!] the people being researched [would] form an integral part of the conference ... in charting ways to preserve their culture and history'. Guenther's report on the earlier (1994) conference refers (in embarrassment or indignation?) to the merely 'mute and marginal' presence of 'the Bushman conference delegates' on that earlier occasion (Guenther 1995:110). The benign intention and the inevitable absurdity sign posted by this statement irresistibly recall Pringle's well-known verse lines: 'Afar in the desert I love to ride/With the *silent* Bush-boy alone by my side' (Chapman 33-35, e.a.)⁷.

About thirty years after Pringle (in 1864) Bleek published his *Hottentot Fables and Tales*⁸ in one of which (1864:69-73) the comforting message of enduring life is brought from the moon by the mantis (associated especially with the San people, their trickster god or Prometheus figure). But the mantis is outwitted and has his message of lasting life distorted and inverted by the hare, bringing the doom of death on man—the hare getting his lip split as a punishment (Chapman 1982:20-21). Could one now read into this image of disruption an unintended evocation of the

⁷ Stephen Gray's 'reply' to Pringle, 'Afar in the Desert/(Bush-boy speaks)' (in his *Hottentot Venus and Other Poems*, 1979) is not particularly successful, in contrast with the far more impressive title poem of this collection (1997:12), discussed later in this essay.

⁸ The full title is *Reynard the Fox in South Africa: Hottentot Fables and Tales*. See 'How death came' (Cope 1968:252 - which is probably the source of the Chapman: 1982 version).

future imperial advances by whites into these territories? The hare's malice is unexplained, but he is certainly the type of power figure who wants and manages to 'take over' and who displays his force by controlling the words which determine and rule the future.

Pringle and Bleek's attempts to ventriloquise the KhoiSan voices (expressive of political protest and self-sufficient culture) can be classed with W.C. Scully's 'The Bushman's Cave' (Van Wyk: 81-82), published in 1886. The gestures of cultural respect in this poem, combined with its awed sense of the loss of 'the vanished Bushman', are well caught in the metaphor describing the now empty cave as a 'casket with a rocky lid' (l. 7), since the speaker proceeds to imagine a community filling this cave with domestic, social and artistic life and value. The poem seems a response to the traces, in rock paintings, of that life; the 'strange, harmless, limning art' producing a momentary trance even in this modern observer. Predictably, there are touches of cultural condescension in the poem and its two concluding stanzas 'solve' the mystery of the Bushman's living and passing in a tidily social Darwinesque-cum-Christian explanation (their race failed *because* they lacked the divine 'light whereby/All men must walk'—ll. 65-66), yet the main impression of the poem is a sense of wondering recognition of the poignant and utterly recognisable humanity of the San⁹.

Much of the writing in English about the KhoiSan people of South Africa is rooted—directly or indirectly—in the work of

an extended family of /Xam San from the north-western Cape, some of whom had been arrested for stock theft and had been sent to the Breakwater prison in Cape Town for the duration of their sentences. The patriarch was Jantje Tooren or //Kabbo, his son-in-law Klein Jantje or /Han=kass'o,

⁹ Compare the indignant and evidently - to judge by the appended editorial response of the time - uncomfortably accusatory poem in Afrikaans-Dutch, M.H. Nesper's 'Di Klaaglied van di Laaste Boesman' (Van Wyk 126-128, the title meaning 'The lament of the last Bushman'), published ten years later than Scully's poem (i.e. in 1896). Cyril Meredith's 'The Home of the Alien' of 1905 implicitly protests the 'invasion' of South Africa by 'the Wandering Jew'; 'The puny Chow'; 'the Indian from Bombay'. 'the gay Assyrian' and 'Stalwart Iberians', and already uses the term 'Democrat' with a sneer, yet he seems not to have noticed a single indigenous person or group (Van Wyk: 205-206) *or* to have thought of white European settlers as invaders. [The 1909 and 1910 poems by two stalwarts of the Afrikaans literary establishment, D.F. Malherbe and Jan F.E. Cilliers, form an interesting contrast with each other, paralleling the poles in the English poems I have been describing (Van Wyk: 214-215).]

//Kabbo's nephew, Dawid Husar or Diä!kwain, and Diä!kwain's sister Griet or !Kweiten ta //ken and her husband Klaas Katkop or =Kásin and their three small children ...[They] were a very small sample of the descendants of the tens of thousands of Southern San who lived throughout Southern Africa at the time of European contact (Deacon 1996:93).

These 'six /Xam-speaking people ... taught their language' to 'a German immigrant and philologist Dr Wilhelm Bleek' and his unmarried sister-in-law Lucy Lloyd, who transcribed and translated the testimony of these witnesses (quotations above all from Deacon 1996:93). This body of material became a cultural and linguistic testament. Despite the inevitable and analysable ironies and compromises involved in this encounter (see for example the astute commentary by M. Guenther 1996), this work remains the main and invaluable source of a *verbal* San presence from the past.

Bleek and Lloyd's *Specimens of Bushman Folklore* appeared in 1911. From it, the onomatopoeic 'songs' of two birds, 'The Song of the Blue Crane' and 'The Song of the Bustard' (or 'Kwa-Kwara') (Van Wyk 1-4) are delightfully evocative, partly because the translators *don't* translate everything, but leave the English tongue to struggle with the 'Rrrru rrra' (spelt with 4 r's and 3r's respectively, to drive the point home) and 'Wára khau ...A wa, a wa, a wa, a wa!' sounds, with whatever uninhibitedness it can muster.

To remind us that the colonial encounter had—more often—an uglier face than this sort of ecological delicacy and social sensitivity takes no more than a quotation like the reference, in Francis Carey Slater's *The Karroo* (1924), to 'Scattered and wandering pygmies, hideous, filthy, and squat; ... Hating all that was human with blind and inveterate hate' (1947:97). Even uglier (and, considering the *enactment* of this ethos, more threatening) is Owen R. Thompson's 'The Bushman':

You pygmies lived in dust and filth,
The earth with lepers sowing,
and man, though gaining by your past,
Is better for your going (1930:80).

This is rather worse than Marlow's disquieting thought (in *Heart of Darkness*) of possible remote kinship with dancing African 'savages'!

But the oscillation continues. Schapera in 1930 in his *The Khoisan Peoples of South Africa* published some beautiful 'San ...' and 'Khoi songs' (Van Wyk 5-7). The San song ('Ho, my hand is this') is self-affirmative, yet also a poignant invocation showing hunger, need and touching anxiety. In contrast with most of the San statements chosen much later by Watson (1991) from Bleek and Lloyd's transcriptions, the sense of the *body* is very real and robust here. A similar

combination of vitality and convincingly real hunger for food turns to piety in the Khoi 'Hymn to Tsui-xgoa' (Schapera still). The slightly Victorian 'Thou's' of 'The Hymn of the Thunder' work well in this context¹⁰, along with the satisfyingly deep '!Guru!' (spelt with exclamation marks on both sides) for the thunder-peals.

The self-chosen linguistic boundary of this text is here transgressed in order to bring in a central document which appeared in 1937, in Afrikaans: Eugène Marais's *Dwaalstories*—tales which had been told to the writer (years earlier than this publication date) by a very old Bushman who is identified by the Afrikaans name of 'Hendrik'. No less an authority than N.P. Van Wyk Louw, the leading Afrikaans poet, felt that Marais never produced anything else as magnificent as these tales (Gilfillan 1996), narrations of a culture convincingly evoked in the full health and density of its social, religious and natural life. The vivid portrayal of the beauty, humour, complexity, harshness and *livingness* of an intact, different, but recognisable culture evoked here (despite the probable impossibility of anyone's establishing how 'authentic', in scientific terms, these four tales are—and the very deep irony of that displacement) immeasurably enriches the scanty available literature representing the life of the San—that is, in distinction from their own rock paintings. From these *Dwaalstories* (perhaps translatable as both *wandering* and *wanderers'* tales) I offer a tentative translation of the opening and closing lines of the poem which concludes one of the tales, viz. 'Die Dans van die Reën'¹¹:

First she peeps slyly over the mountain-top
And her eyes are shy;
She laughs softly.
From far off she beckons with one hand.
Her bracelets shimmer and her necklaces shine,
She calls softly.
She tells the winds of the dance
And she invites them, for the yard is wide and the wedding grand,
....
She spreads open the grey kaross with both her hands;
The wind catches its breath.

¹⁰ Despite the criticism of such Victorianisms, e.g. by Watson commenting on the Bleek-Lloyd translations (Watson 14).

¹¹ The meaning of the title should be obvious: 'The Song/Dance of the Rain'. The poem concludes a story about great need and expectation of rain, and the arduous task of making it come. The poem I have part-translated occurs on pp. 18-19 of the 1964 printing of the Human & Rousseau separate edition of the *Dwaalstories*, in which the full story takes up pp. 12-19. See also the essay by Gilfillan (1996).

O, the dance of our Sister! (18-19).

Considerably later, in 1959, T.W. Barron published a poetry collection titled *The Captive Bushman*. The title poem (Van Wyk 406-407) is overwhelmingly sympathetic to the man in the dock for a murder committed in defence of his people and territory; the captive still manages to intimidate his captors, 'Like wild-cat filled with wrath' (*l.* 17), and eludes white 'justice' by taking 'A Bushman opiate' (last line).

The available date for the evocative poem¹² by Jack Cope, 'Rock Painting' (Chapman 1986:138-139) is 1960. Even if his versions of KhoiSan poems from Bleek and others had never been published, this item would testify to Cope's profoundly empathetic sense of San life, especially that of the San artist. The poem delicately, ramblingly, but deftly weaves a sense of the dreaming painter:

A leather-skinned wrinkled old man
old hunter yellow as the stones
from the rock he hears the rain talk
hyena cracking bones (*ll.* 1-4).

This is the first stanza, which draws the reader insidiously from the outsider's (say archaeologist's/anthropologist's) perspective into the dreaming, vividly felt ruminations of the San artist. The poem affirms that 'the [probably painted] story is a hunter returning/who does not come alone' (*ll.* 23-24), but this sense of a culture presenting a lasting power and resource is balanced finely by the melancholic final stanza—

His trail is through the stars forever
white ash thrown in the sky

¹² Sidney Clouts's poem 'Firebowl' from a 1966 collection (1984:106) is comparable to Cope's for using similarly modernist 'free association' techniques, but Cope's is the more dense, assured and moving of the two. A considerably later poem, Michael Picardie's 'Trance dance for the Cape KhoiSan' (Van Wyk: 818) seems likewise comparable to Cope's and Clouts's in that it also attempts to imagine premonitions of extinction from within a KhoiSan speaker (like Cope's) and uses the suggestion of 'flashes of awareness' (as do Clouts and Cope). As in Cope's poem, one can trace in Picardie's verse some of the Bleek and Lloyd material. There is something of a violation of the speaker's 'world view', though, in line 22 ('Stars are made of dynamite with which God blasts') and the concluding line has a rather false and pompous ring.

They know, the fire and the dancers,
do they know he will die? (ll. 25-28).

-which combines the sense of individual and cultural extinction.

In 1965 R. Griffiths wrote a poem in which the speaker tells bluntly and wryly how his 'Grandpa shot the last three Bushmen in our district' (Van Wyk 470—'The last three Bushmen'). Yet the now deserted, painted rock dwelling of the San becomes a shrine to the speaker for its 'living line and glowing colours' (l. 31). The poem embeds both poles of settlers' responses to the 'first people' without (it seems) confronting that contradiction. Considerably more powerful and delicate are two lyrics ('Conquest' and 'The Conquered') by the exiled poet Timothy Holmes (Pieterse 1971:79-80), communicating a deeper sense of the tragedy of devastation. Holmes imagines the poignant awareness, among 'The Conquered', of their 'Leaving [merely] small shadows of [themselves and their] chattels/painted upon [rock walls]. For others' (1971:80)¹³.

In 1968 Jack Cope, with Uys Krige, published *The Penguin Book of South African Verse*. In this collection Cope's pioneering poetic versions of the Bleek and Lloyd translations appeared, the best known of which is undoubtedly the 'Prayer to the Hunting Star, Canopus', which when printed elsewhere does not always acknowledge Bleek's role clearly enough—nor Cope's. Cope himself is commendably scrupulous about acknowledging sources—first the Bushman narrator/poet X-nanni and then the European transcriber—and admirably modest about his own role¹⁴. In both these respects he can be contrasted with Stephen Watson (who, incidentally, never mentions Cope as a predecessor in versifying the Bleek and Lloyd translations—Watson 1991:7-20).

Like Schapera's 'Ho, my hand is this', X-nanni's 'Prayer to the Young Moon' (Cope 245) sounds young and fierce and bossy: 'Small moon/Hai! Young moon/hai hai!' (ll. 1-3), demanding the divine aid so urgently needed by the speaker in order to catch food. The vitality of rhythm is the most vivid element here. The

¹³ Considerations of space prevent more than cursory mention of Peter Strauss's interesting sequence, 'Photographs of Bushmen', with its explorations of perspectival issues (1974:3-10). A weaker poem is 'Rock Paintings, Drakensberg' by Alan Ross, for which one source is the 1979 Butler and Mann collection, though it is likely that the poem had an earlier first publication (Butler 1979:155-156).

¹⁴ He follows the title of the poem ('Prayer to ... Canopus') with the name of the San speaker/poet (said by 'X-nanni') while at the bottom of the poem one reads (in small print) 'C after W.H.I. Bleek'.

well-known 'Prayer to ... Canopus' (246)¹⁵ is more melancholic in imploring the star's aid in hunting. Cope's selection also contains a lovely, delicately ambiguous 'Star Song of the Bushman Women' of only four lines (246), a welcome female presence in a rather male-orientated collection (here *and* in other editions). Wonderfully robust and aptly shaped is 'The Wind and the Bird' (247), which whirls up and subsides like its subject.

The Wind and the Bird
(*Naron Bushman Song*)

The Wind is a man and goes out from his hut.
As a bird, Xgauwa goes with the Wind:
one with two names are they, Xgauwa and Hise.
The Wind has the bird with him and he walks a little way
but no more: from the earth he rises,
into the sky he shoots up, he soars
and he takes the grass and whirls it far
scatters it so it falls a great distance.
The magician sees the one walking with the Wind,
it is Xgauwa, and the bird speaks to him saying
'I am he who arouses the Wind' (after W.H.I. Bleek; Cope 1968:247).
(Compared with this, the rhythm of the second stanza of Watson's 'The
Wind is one with the Man'—Watson: 54—seems somewhat somnolent,
rather than incantatory.)

The two next Cope versions from Bleek and Lloyd can be directly compared with Watson's. I would contend that in both cases Cope's versifications are superior to Watson's more recent and much acclaimed evocations of San life in his employment of the poetic qualities of rhythm, tautness and sound—however far from or close to the San originals, through Bleek and Lloyd's mediation, the poems may be. (I refer to Cope's and Watson's versions of Diä!Kwain's telling of the prayer to the new moon and to both poets' versions of 'The broken string'.) Cope's version opens with 'Young moon, take my face up yonder,/give back to me your face up there, take away this pain' (247). Watson's has a semi-sentimental and stilted opening with 'Moon now risen, returning new,/take my face, this life, with you,/give me back the young face, yours,/the living face, new-made, rising' and later 'be for me as you once were/That I may be as you'—Watson: 25. Cope's 'The Broken String' (248) has

¹⁵ This poem appears also in Chapman's two collections, without evident credit being given to either Bleek and Lloyd or to Cope (as 'mediators').

weaknesses, but overall a more 'authentic' irregularity ('For/everything feels as if it stood open before me/empty, and I hear no sound/ ...and the old places are not sweet any more/for what they did'—248) than Watson's ('Because/the string is broken, the country feels/as if it lay/empty before me, our country seems/as if it lay/both empty before me./and dead before me'—Watson: 59). Of course the essay-writer's—or any reader's—preferences raise the large but necessary questions of authority and of 'authenticity', which this discussion attempts to highlight, but cannot 'answer'.

Cope's collection in addition contains a children's scare-song¹⁶; a lullaby¹⁷; and (from Hahn) Khoikhoi songs like the 'Song of the Thunder'. In his short collection he includes a greater variety than Watson does in his more recent and influential publication (Watson 1991). Cope includes a 'Dance-Song of the Lightning'; the story 'How Death Came' from Bleek and Lloyd, a 'Hunter's Prayer' and the 'Hymn to Tsui-Xgoa' from Hahn, as well as a number of animal sketches, some of which are delightfully vivid (Cope 249-256). Overall there is also considerably greater variation of form and style in Cope's group of KhoiSan poems, compared with Watson's formally somewhat 'homogenised' presentations of the San speakers' thoughts.

An item which must be mentioned in a discussion like this is Stephen Gray's title poem from his *Hottentot Venus and Other Poems* (1979:1-2), to my knowledge one of the earliest expressions of indignation at the commodification and grotesque 'museumization' of this San woman known by the Afrikaans name of 'Saartjie Baartman', the process of her European exhibition and humiliation made possible by an utterly crass racism fiercely exposed in Gray's eloquent verse. There is great health in the poet's sarcastic evocation of the vulgarity of this woman's reduction to the role of 'a classy peepshow ... a special voluptuary a squealing passion' (ll. 307). Movingly describing her lonely (but unremittingly *observed*) death, the poem itself 'throw[s] another stone in [her] memory' on the 'cairns' in her motherland (ll. 22-23). Especially powerful is the sardonic equivocation in line 35: 'they mounted me without beads or skins or quivers' (2). But in the concluding lines of the poem, the speaker attributes to Saartjie's shade enough power to overturn the world. It would (yet) be a moot point whether, such a triumphalist suggestion glorifies or falsifies the starkness of this 'symbolic' life¹⁸.

¹⁶ 'The Song of Nu-Numma-Kwiten' (Cope 249-50).

¹⁷ 'Song of the Springbok Does' (250). The latter poem has the postscript 'after W.H.I Bleek', which perhaps applies also to the preceding poem (no other source is given for it).

¹⁸ See Carli Coetzee's chapter ('Krotoä remembered: a mother of unity, a mother of sorrows?'—*Negotiating the Past* 112-19) on the ironies and political implications of the use of another such Khoikoi 'icon'.

In 1982 Michael Chapman's anthology *Voices from Within: Black Poetry from Southern Africa* was published, in which Don Mattera's 'A Protest from a Bushman' appears under a pseudonym (157-159)¹⁹. The most memorable lines, 'My land is gone/Life is tremulous like/A drop of water on a mophani leaf' (159), are used as a refrain, achieving that difficult blend of melancholy and cherishing which so many poets seem to find appropriate to the subject. A striking poem, 'Khoikhoi-son-of-Man' by Modikwe Dikobe, appeared in 1983. Dikobe's poem describes the eye-opening discovery (by the 'black' speaker) of an unsuspected KhoiSan ancestor. This Khoikhoi ancestor, after escaping from his enslavement to Boer Trekkers, announces himself to a group of Batswana people as 'A tribesman, hunter, chief's servant and messenger' (Van Wyk 750), a delightful and impressive re-entitlement, mirroring the speaker's own redefinition of his supposed 'Pedigree muntu' identity (l. 2). Addressing as it does the ancient Bantu/KhoiSan fissure in the South African socioscape, the poem has an important relevance to the present South African 'identity' struggles.

One of the most distinguished of South African English poetry collections also appeared in 1983: Jeremy Cronin's *Inside*. Besides its famous, tentative 'counter-(national) anthem', 'To learn how to speak', which refers clearly to the KhoiSan in the lines 'To catch in the ... tongue's knot/A sense of the stoneness of these stones' (1983:58), the collection contains also the poem 'The River that Flows Through Our Land' (57). The river is said to be, KhoiSan-style, 'Clicking in its palate like the flaking of stone tools'. Especially beautiful are two other poems untitled and 'paired', the one beginning 'Our land holds' evoking 'The wind [which] tongues/Its gom-gom, frets a gorah' and 'sounds The names of decimated Khoikhoin tribes': 'Hessequa/Hacumqua .../ ... Cochoqua'. In this poem Cronin evokes the stubborn, heroic pride *and* the pathos of Khoikhoin 'warriors .../Charging zig-zag into musket fire', expressing the recognition that these

warriors ... left behind
Their fallen spears that our land
Like a peach its pip
Holds now:
This unfinished task (1983:50).

That 'task' links up with Dikobe's act of 'recognition'. Cronin's poem itself attempts both to enact and to promote the laborious process it envisages.

¹⁹ The actual name/identity of the author is revealed in one of the Tony Voss articles (1990:67n2).

In the next poem by Cronin, 'If you're asking: Whose land?' (51), the speaker proposes the deep-down answer to that opening question—that it is to be found in 'the earth', 'among the bones', among

Grain's seed, grass, shrub's roots
Where the men's bones [lie] with their snuff pouches,
Women's bones with their porridge sticks, ask
There where lineage on lineage sits
Tucked in this earth (51, final stanza).

Such poems as these by Cronin are a tribute, an evocation *and* an exhortation and are among the finest of those inspired by the remembered presence of the KhoiSan.

Mark Swift's poem 'South African Museum, Cape Town' (Van Wyk 759) also appeared in 1983. In this poem, 'all attest to extinction'; 'The Bushman [is] stripped to the bone' by those who mounted these exhibits, by the colonial rape, by the gaze of the speaker. It is a fine poem, both ironic, melancholic and sensitively empathetic. Juxtaposed with Cronin's, though, the latter's greater richness of meaning and feeling are confirmed. The melancholia of extermination is there, in the Cronin lyrics, but both 'Our land holds ...' and 'If you're asking ...' (Cronin 1983:50-51). enrich the vision of the Khoikhoin—they are not seen as mere, inevitable, pathetic victims, but as the aristocratic ancestry ('warriors'—50; 'lineage'—51) and true owners (51) of the 'land' itself—a term here suggesting both the country and the earth on which it is built. Moreover, in both poems Cronin sees the Khoikhoin as being in the safekeeping of the earth ('Like a peach its pip/Holds now'—50; 'sits ... Tucked in this earth'—51); treasured rather than obliterated, exactly as the poems themselves cherish and revive the Khoikhoin. His poems illuminate for his reader a sense of the truly *first* people of this land.

The ironies of the politically awkward 'placing' of the KhoiSan in present-day Southern Africa are made scathingly evident in Dorian Haarhoff's 'San Song' of 1987 (Van Wyk 851). Depicting one of the degraded San communities of Namibia, formerly employed as trackers for the South African Defence Force, Haarhoff juxtaposes them in a tableau with 'Father Christmas, white bearded', in a military camp where they are kept in a (straggling) queue by 'the private's shout' and gawked at by journalists 'prais[ing]/ the primitive pre-cursor/grunter-gatherer, pristine man' (ll. 15-17).

But the speaker's sarcasm, wit and searing anger give way to a poignant sadness in the final, 'fade-out' stanza:

in no man's land, any December
this close knit kin sing

in more than eleven clicks and grunts
their North East South West song.

My difficulties and dissatisfactions with Watson's *Return of the Moon: Versions from the /Xam* (1991), despite its undoubted importance, result from a persistent sense of the contemporary poet's self-foregrounding, most overtly in the cover design, in the 'Introduction' (1983:7-20) in which the poet persistently refers to what he has done in this collection as 'translation' (which suppresses the extent to which his work rests on what Bleek and Lloyd achieved) and in such details as the effacement of the San poets'/speakers' names from the pages on which Watson's versions of their utterances appear. In Bleek and Lloyd's publication (1911) the parallel text format continually ensures the reader's recognition that s/he is reading transcriptions from sayings by individuals with their own 'strange' but complex and intact language, whereas Watson's unilingual and 'streamlined' presentations typographically as well as rhythmically erase individual and cultural differences. Compare, for instance, the naturally rambling, naturally 'poetic' and nostalgic telling of '//Kabbo's Intended Return Home' (Bleek & Lloyd 1911:219-317) with Watson's title poem 'Return of the Moon' (1991:71-73), which 'poeticizes' and regularises the irregularities and repetitions and asides of a confiding and endearing conversation which we as readers are allowed (through Bleek & Lloyd) to 'overhear'. Wanting from Watson's 'Versions' are not only the witnesses' names (tucked away at the back of the volume: 74), but also the precise sources in the Bleek and Lloyd documents, information which one would have expected an academic as generally scrupulous as Watson to supply²⁰. Chiefly, though, the rhythms chosen are mostly so flat and monotonous (a kind of pseudo-iambic) that many poems effectively 'banalize' rather than vividly evoke the lives of the San as they seem to intend doing. It is hard to escape the sense that the well-known Watsonian predilection for a melancholic sense of (his) life's bleakness has coloured the emotional tone of these poems. What seems largely absent is that impression of taut vitality, of complex humour and unsentimentality so well caught in Marais's *Dwaalstories* and in a few other of the

²⁰ In her essay 'Producing Discourse: The Ethnographer's Dilemma' Elsie Cloete writes: 'Working on someone else's story entertains even greater selectivity of material and is done so in terms of all kinds of western criteria: a knowledge of what is more likely to sell, a ruthless editing, an experience of monetary economy and a need to place oneself academically on the map' (1996:95). Cloete nevertheless uncritically admires Watson's work (1996:89) and does not seem to see the above ironies as applying to his *Return of the Moon/Versions ...*, as I do. For another evaluation (somewhat critical, but mainly approving) of Watson's work, see Van Vuuren's essay (1994:68-69).

poems discussed. It should be acknowledged, though, that almost every other review of/commentary on Watson's 'Versions' has been favourable: this commentator's view is definitely a minority opinion.

The most recent evocation of the KhoiSan presence which this essay can encompass occurs in Tatamkhulu Afrika's poem 'Dancing in My City' (1992:53-55), in which the speaker's both dreary and frightening sense (while on a political march) of the persistence of old power forms (in the unsympathetic 'audience') suddenly lightens when the rhythm turns to lilting:

But then I see her:
the little, yellow, dancing woman,
the rapt yet graven, shrivelled features,
generous San buttocks rolling
with a gentle, rhythmic, effortless abandon,
small feet skittering,
lightly as a water-bug on dust-glazed water,
along the crowd-crushed, dead macadam.

And my feet move on again, knowing
that under them,
lies still a soil forever Africa,
and it is not I that am the alien,
but they that stand here, streetside,
watching me
dancing in my city (1992:54-55).

The poem hence becomes a triumphant image of reclamation, perhaps a fit point to conclude the gamut of perspectives examined in this essay. Open, *itself*, to all the ironies of doubtful 'authority' and questionable validity which have been raised in the course of the discussion, this essay has treated poetry as a type of social index. The material brought together in the end combines into a sociohistory of 'South Africa', a matter too large for this format, but providing a kind of small symphony in which dominant tones and lyrical, ghostly echoes can be heard. The essay writer has assumed the authority to judge on the issues of aesthetic and even ethical 'adequacy' in the portrayals and evocations of the South African KhoiSan peoples in (mainly English) poetry. The all too evident subjectivities of this method must be simply acknowledged with the plea in mitigation of the enormous interest and importance of the questions raised. It is to be noted that even the early, blatantly racist (poetic) denunciations of the KhoiSan could not manage to erase the humanness of the first South African people, even as these writers attempt to deny any kinship with the

KhoiSan by their brutalising comments. On the other hand, the evocations, appropriations (of) and tributes to the Khoikhoi and San by those who now write of or 'for' them, however sympathetically or empathetically, are seldom free of other limitations of vision. That the *enigma* of encounters between cultures and peoples is inescapable and persistent, is so pertinently expressed by Dening (1992:178-179) that his words bear quoting a second time:

There is now no Native past without the Stranger, no Stranger without the Native. No one can hope to be mediator or interlocutor in that opposition of Native and Stranger, because no one is gazing at it untouched by the power that is in it. Nor can anyone speak just for the one, just for the other. There is no escape from the politics of our knowledge, but that politics is not in the past. That politics is in the present.

A deeper irony is confirmed by the dry, sad comment made by Mr Mathambo Ngaeaja, speaking as delegate at the international 'KhoiSan Identities and Cultural Heritage' conference in Cape Town (July 12-17 1997): 'We must be some of the best studied people in the world, but our socio-economic position is declining in spite of all the research'²¹. As Sylvia Plath wrote, even words that '[ring]' 'like axes' can become 'dry and riderless'²², *signifying* nothing, passively gazing on 'history' and 'progress' proceeding in their obliterating course.

Department of English
University of Stellenbosch

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²¹ Reported in *The Cape Times* of 16/07/1997, p. 9.

²² The quotations are from one of her last poems, 'Words' (Plath 1981:270).

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