

*Bushman Letters: Interpreting /Xam Narratives*

Michael Wessels

Johannesburg: Wits University Press

2010, 330 pp.

ISBN: 978-1-86814-506-5

Reviewed by Dan Wylie

Department of English

Rhodes University

*Bushman Letters* may not be the most important monograph yet written about the Bleek-Lloyd archive of /Xam testimonies, but it is certainly the most important study of *other* studies concerned with the Bleek-Lloyd archive. As Anne Solomon has recently pointed out, literary readings of these now outrageously popular sources of /Xam ‘Bushman’ memories, stories, narratives, performances – collectively, *kukummi* – are highlighting ‘common ground for debate amongst researchers who, despite diverse disciplinary interests, face the same hermeneutical task’ (2009: 26). The hermeneutical task is ultimately to discern, or decide, just what these testimonies of a vanished people *mean* to ‘us’ in contemporary South Africa. Wessels’ purpose is not so much to understand /Xam society, as this is, in his view, to fall into the old anthropological trap of essentialising some static, folkloric, pre-colonial society. His aim is rather to understand why his predecessor commentators, from Wilhelm Bleek himself through to (particularly) Roger Hewitt and anthropologist Matthias Guenther, have read the archive the way they have, and what an analysis of their work tells us about how meaning is generated at all. *Bushman Letters* is, in short, a deconstruction of the main reconstructions of the /Xam presence in contemporary scholarly culture.

Many such reconstructions have been fielded. They started with Dorothea Bleek’s own *Specimens of Bushman Folklore*, migrated through Laurens van der Post (bypassed by Wessels) and Gideon von Weilligh, and have recently exploded into numerous narrative and poetic ‘versions’ by, amongst others, Jack Cope, David Lewis-Williams, Alan James, Stephen

## *Book Reviews*

Watson and Antjie Krog (the ‘plagiarism’ spat between the last two is the subject of Wessels’ last chapter). In addition there have been two collections of excellent essays edited by Pippa Skotnes, historical and intellectual studies by Nigel Pennington, Neil Bennun, Andrew Banks and Shane Moran, applications of the archive to rock-art studies by Lewis-Williams and other archaeologists, and various popularised productions such as Craig Foster’s coffee-table *My Heart Stands in the Hill*. In sum, the Bleek-Lloyd material has rapidly become the site of almost frenzied attention from (unavoidably, white) scholars, presumably eager to forge some recharged sense of what it means to *belong* in South Africa. It is apposite, then, that attention should be drawn to the ways in which such senses of understanding and belonging have been textually constructed, with what consequences – and we are fortunate to have Wessels’ study in thoroughness, intelligence and judiciousness.

The character and range of Wessels’ approach is perhaps most succinctly expressed in an endnote:

This debate [over interpretation] has taken several forms over the centuries, including the mediaeval battle between nominalists and scholastics and the ‘nineteenth-century controversies about idealism and realism’ (Hynes and Doty 1993:5). Historically, they argue, the natural sciences have been associated with the particular and the humanities with the general approach to knowledge. I locate the premises of the debate differently .... I believe that the difference emerges from the contrast between an approach embedded in a metaphysics of presence and one that concedes to narrative its textuality and to language its materiality. (118)

The phrase ‘metaphysics of presence’ is from Jacques Derrida, whose critique of Rousseau and Levi-Strauss in *Of Grammatology* is one of Wessels’ primary tools (along with touches of Foucault, Spivak and Bourdieu). The Western intellectual tradition (there is only one?), Derrida and Wessels argue, fundamentally denigrates or idealises the ‘other’ only in order to delineate and bolster its own ethnocentric identity. Bleek’s adherence to Darwinist principles and contemporary ethnographic hierarchies; Roger Hewitt’s pursuit, in his influential *Structure, Meaning and Ritual*, of Vladimir Propp-like structural patterns in the *kukummi*; Guenther’s

comparative approach to so-called ‘trickster’ archetypes; and Lewis-Williams’ interpretation of rock art as manifestations of a neurologically-based shamanism, all manifest in various ways this Western, ethnocentric, but falsely universalising ‘metaphysics of presence’, with, in Wessels’ view, variously skewed consequences for our understanding of the /Xam narratives. All such approaches have value (Wessels is unfailingly even-handed and polite towards his predecessors), but tend to ‘impose a meaning on the text in order to illustrate a theory ... rather than allow the narrative to signify on its own terms’ (86).

After chapters exploring the substantial contributions and problems of the publications by Banks, Hewitt, and Guenther, then, Wessels embarks on extensive readings of a small selection of the /Xam narratives. The technique is Derridean in nature: it denies any severe division between oral and written (a premise of Guenther’s); it eschews comparisons with similar stories, such as ‘origin myths’, from other cultures (a foundational principle of Hewitt’s structuralism); it avoids any sharp distinction between the present and the so-called ‘First Order’ of some allegedly mythic past; and it denies any ‘hidden truth’ behind the narratives, ‘riddles to be deciphered’ (146). Rather, the narratives are all surface; it is in the signifying power of the surface details (so far almost ignored by commentators) that *meaning* is generated. Wessels thus looks for an ‘intertextual’ manner of reading, by assessing relationships between elements within a narrative, and by pursuing references across the assembled *kukummi* to, say, ‘shoe’, or ‘lion’.

Here I think Wessels runs into some trouble. On one hand he wants to avoid the (impossible) cultural exclusivity of reading purely from a /Xam ‘frame of reference’ (149); but he has to admit that his reading is hamstrung by ‘distance’ from the impenetrable ‘logic’ of a /Xam worldview (206). Further, such a frame is ‘known’ only through the very materials he is exploring, and the materials are already fragmented by Bleek and Lloyd’s selectivity, translation issues, and manner of collecting them. Wessels correctly notes all this, and therefore asserts that the ‘narratives themselves produce ambiguity and openness and invite interpretations; these are properties of their discursiveness’ (206). This may be true in practice; but it also means that a certain circularity is introduced, and that the ‘Derridean’ glosses, themselves rhetorically essentialising, ‘mean’ no more to me than the bizarre stories themselves. The ‘openness’ of the texts means simply that

*Book Reviews*

our best cross-cultural efforts notwithstanding, ‘we’ still don’t know what’s ‘going on’ in them; but if we are to escape *all* controlling or communal paradigms and liberate ourselves into the sheer relativity of individual readers’ interpretations, we would have nothing to discuss: and Wessels therefore can’t help sneaking in a little idealism here and there.

Never mind: the mysteriousness is essential to our fascination with /Xam culture and the Bleek-Lloyd archive itself, and Wessels has done scholarship a huge service with this measured, subtle, and penetrating study.

