

PRISON AND GARDEN

CAPE TOWN, NATURAL HISTORY AND THE LITERARY IMAGINATION

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...their talk, their excessive talk about how they love South Africa has consistently been directed towards *the land*, that is, towards what is least likely to respond to love: mountains and deserts, birds and animals and flowers.

J. M. Coetzee, Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech, (1987).

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Abstract

This work considers literary treatments of the colonial encounter at the Cape of Good Hope, adopting a local focus on the Peninsula itself to explore the relationship between specific archives – the records of the Dutch East India Company, travel and natural history writing, the Bleek and Lloyd Collection – and the contemporary fictions and poetics of writers like André Brink, Breyten Breytenbach, Jeremy Cronin, Antjie Krog, Dan Sleigh, Stephen Watson, Zoë Wicomb and, in particular, J. M. Coetzee. Although it would hardly claim to be a literary history of Cape Town, it begins by asking what it might mean to read a history of the city through its literature.

Yet moving beyond an initial enquiry into how (and at what cost) imaginative literature brings historical records into the public domain, it is ever more concerned with the writing *in* and *of* a specific topography: with the dynamics of rendering in words a landscape celebrated for its beauty and biodiversity, and with the wider social dimensions implied (or obscured) by the phrase ‘natural history’.

It intends to question the received wisdom that attention to the landscape, flora and fauna of the subcontinent conceals an unwillingness to deal with social and political realities, probing the limits of this now well-trodden critical model to explore the limits of what Coetzee called ‘dream topographies’: ways of imagining contested ground that have shaped writing here, and the forms in which these persist today. Throughout I hope to suggest productive rather than antagonistic relations between what might broadly be termed ‘postcolonial’ and ‘ecocritical’ ways of reading, and to ask what, if anything, a ‘sense of place’ could mean in a spatially distorted, linguistically divided city of the global South.

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PROLOGUE

The Castle seems too grand a name for the building near the minibus taxi rank at the edge of central Cape Town: a squat, five-pointed garrison made to watch over the entrance from both land and sea, once known to the peninsular Khoikhoi as *kuikeip*, 'place of stones'.¹ When it was built in the late seventeenth century, the shoreline of Table Bay reached up to where Strand Street runs today, before topsoil washed down from the rapidly deforested slopes above changed the shape of the coastline and modern planning schemes pushed the ocean even further from the city. On the earliest maps of the settlement, a road curves wide around the base of Devil's Peak to travel on gentler gradients, then divides in two. Towards the east is the ancient cattle track used by the Khoikhoi herders as they moved inland and back again with the seasons. To the south runs the *wagen pad* cut by Company servants and slave parties bringing timber from the mountain gorges for lime kilns and palisades, ship repairs and the jetties which had to be constantly extended as the coastline receded.

The Castle is now dwarfed by the buildings of the CBD, but for a hundred years a small watchtower on its western battlement remained the highest man-made structure at the Cape. Six flags flying there provide a quick historical summary of a place (as Kipling put it) 'Snatched and bartered oft from hand to hand':² Dutch East India Company (VOC) rule from 1652; the first British occupation in 1795; a brief window of remote control by the Batavian Republic from 1803 to 1806; the British Empire proper during the nineteenth century, the old South Africa during the twentieth and now the colourful, abstract Ndebele patterns which seem to break with the heavily representative symbols of successive colonial powers.

'Thus from the ground a wall of stone is raised', the second Commander of the Dutch station, Zacharias Wagenaer, orated at the laying of the foundation stone in 1666, 'On which the thundering brass can no impression make': '*Soo doet men uijtter aerd een steene wall oprechten / Daer't donderend metael seer weijnigh can ophechten*'.³ Composed for the occasion by an unnamed member of the garrison and preserved in the records of the colony, these belligerent rhyming couplets make up the first poem known to have been written at the

¹ The term is noted by Lieutenant-General Robert Jacob Gordon, commander of the VOC garrison at the end of the eighteenth century: 'het casteel hiet kuikeip of klip kraal' [1791]. See G. S. Nienaber and P. E. Raper, *Toponymica Hottentotica* (Pretoria: Raad vir Geesteswetenskaplike Navorsing, 1977), who give the contemporary spelling as /Uil!khaeb, and assert that this was the 'ou naam van die Kasteel en ook van Kaapstad self' (796).

² Rudyard Kipling, 'The Song of the Cities' (1893), *Rudyard Kipling's Verse: Definitive Edition*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1940), 177.

³ 'Ampliatie', Dagregister en Briewe van Zacharias Wagenaer 1662-1666: Suid-Afrikaanse Argiefstukke: Belangrikse Kaapse Dokumente, Deel II (Pretoria, 1973), 238. The translation is by H. C. V. Leibbrandt, included in his *Precis of the Archives of the Cape of Good Hope: Zacharias Wagenaer, Journal, 1662-1670*, (Cape Town: W. A. Richards and Sons, 1901) and reprinted as 'The First Stone of the New Castle' in Stephen Gray ed., *The Penguin Book of Southern African Verse*, (London: Penguin, 1989), 27-28.

Cape, a fragment preserved by generations of archivists, antiquarians and anthologists concerned more with literary heritage than literary merit:

For Hottentots the walls are always earthen
But now we come with stone to boast before all men,
And terrify not only Europeans, but also
Asians, Americans and savage Africans.
Thus holy Christendom is glorified,
Establishing its seats amidst the savage heathens.
We praise the great Director and say with one another,
Augustus' dominion nor conquering Alexander,
Nor Caesars's mighty genius has ever had the glory
To lay a cornerstone at earth's extremest end!

Nonetheless, the rhetorical bluster aimed at all comers captures something of the mixture of embattled isolation and imminent globalisation as it impinged on a place which still appears in most historical sketches as a 'refreshment station' for European shipping en route to the East. The *Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie* was perhaps the world's first true multinational, according to a millennial survey by *The Economist*, and one matched only by the companies of Henry Ford and Bill Gates for its influence on the planet.⁴

Just as its monogram was delicately traced onto the porcelain now displayed upstairs in the William Fehr Collection, branded onto the bodies of prisoners and horses, etched on ships, sea chests and cannons across a vast geographical area, so too the ravelins of Cape Castle [Fig. 1] took a similar shape to those laid down amid the swamps of Batavia (present-day Djakarta) where the real interests of the Company lay. Unlike Batavia or most European towns, though, the *Kaapsche Vlek* lacked outer walls; despite its tollgates and defensive hedges, the boundaries were shifting and porous as it expanded along the Liesbeeck River, and so within the Castle's five battlements were concentrated a whole range of activities, a colony in microcosm. Hospital and bakeries coexisted with dungeons and *wapenkamers*; there was both Orphan Chamber and torture chamber, and before 1679 a Slave Lodge, later moved next to the Company Gardens but doubling all the while as a sailors' brothel.

'Blue sky, brown earth'

'A colonial culture is one which has no memory', wrote Dan Jacobson in his 1971 introduction to a work that was once claimed as a very different point of literary origin in

⁴ *The Economist*, Millenium Special Edition, December 1999. Cited in Hermann Giliomee, *The Afrikaners: Biography of a People*, (London: Hurst & Company, 2003), 3.

South Africa, Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* (1883).⁵ This is all but inevitable, given the discontinuities of colonial experience which emerge in stark relief at the Cape of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries:

A political entity brought into existence by the actions of an external power; a population consisting of the descendants of conquerors, of slaves and indentured labourers, and of dispossessed aboriginals: a language in the courts and schools which has been imported like an item of heavy machinery; a prolonged economic and psychological subservience to a metropolitan centre a great distance away... (115)

Yet, he goes on, this is not to say that such an absence of memory means a forgetting of historical enmities. Rather, as violent beginnings are glossed over, mythologised and recast, such divisions tend to be regarded as so many given, unalterable facts: 'phenomena of nature, as little open to human change or question as the growth of leaves in spring or the movement of clouds across the sky' (115). In another context, he deepens this meditation, personalising and bringing it into the twentieth century:

Though my latest return to South Africa happened to coincide (quite unintentionally) with the Sharpeville crisis, my single overwhelming impression of South Africa, when I look back now, is not political. What I chiefly remember of the country are its spaces, simply: all the empty unused landscapes of a country that still seems bereft of any human past, untouched by its own history. Blue sky, brown earth, and people who live unaccommodated between: that is the abiding image of South Africa.⁶

The drift of Jacobson's similes here – from political discontinuity and trauma to leaves, passing seasons, skies and empty spaces – signals the major, interlocking concerns of this work: the recovery of the colonial past and the representation of the natural world. The first chapters consider the attempts of modern writers and other cultural archaeologists to dislodge the myth of a brooding African promontory become Cape Dutch idyll. The work of André Brink, J. M. Coetzee, Dan Sleigh and others reveal a place that was for much of its existence hardly an assured European beachhead but rather a violent slave port and backwater where the garden metaphor of succour and pastoral sufficiency would never properly take root. Leading into the nineteenth century, the narratives of Enlightenment travellers, the failed attempts of Rudyard Kipling to write South Africa as a guest of Cecil Rhodes and the transcribed words of Diä!kwain, //Kabbo and other 'givers of native literature' accomplished by Lucy Lloyd and Wilhelm Bleek provide very different inflections of

⁵ Dan Jacobson, 'Olive Schreiner' rep. in *Adult Pleasures: Essays on Writers and Readers*, (London: André Deutsch, 1988), 115.

⁶ Dan Jacobson, 'South Africa: Explanations and Speculations', *Time of Arrival and Other Essays*, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1962), 79.

the Cape as a seat of high Empire.⁷ In the final sections, the close proximity of prison and garden (beginning in the geography of the early colony and resurfacing throughout the literature) is explored in a reading of the lyric forms which emerged from the apartheid jail, while an account of the contested, controversial afterlife of the /Xam records reaches into the new millennium.

Despite following a roughly chronological order in terms of both historical matter and literary adaptation, however, the journey undertaken here is not meant to suggest a progression where increasingly self-aware novelistic or poetic techniques from the 1960s to the present are judged more adept and sophisticated mediators of earlier Cape texts. Instead, each chapter forms a case study in how a certain writerly strategy interacts with a specific cache of source material, in some instances producing an all too easily usable past, at other moments more able to acknowledge a resistance offered by historical materials to the designs of the present. The kind of history, or rather historicity, which I hope to explore through the weave of these varied texts then is, as Achille Mbembe writes in his millennial *Notes provisoires* on the postcolony, not a simple sequence 'in which each moment effaces, annuls, and replaces those that preceded it'.⁸ Instead it is 'an *interlocking* of presents, pasts, and futures that retain their depths of other presents, pasts, and futures, each age bearing, altering, and maintaining the previous ones' (16).

Yet moving beyond an initial enquiry into the role of imaginative literature in bringing historical records into the public domain – and provoked by Jacobson's passage on the 'empty unused landscapes of a country...untouched by its own history' – this study asks a more pointed, more local question. What are the consequences for such literature in a specific, delimited locale (the Cape Peninsula) known for its natural beauty and biodiversity, but also for historical trauma and blatant, ongoing social inequity? It explores how writers in recent decades have sought to reveal the stories which people agree to tell each other about the past as anything but natural; equally it grants that even the most self-evident versions of nature can be revealed as silently, stubbornly determined by history. Introducing an anthology of South African love poems, P. R. Anderson concedes that 'even the literature of our landscape and of the extraordinary zoology of the subcontinent is really historical in its evasions and blind eyes, its depopulations and vacuums, for it is all about contested ground'.⁹

⁷ W. H. I. Bleek and L. C. Lloyd, Preface to *Specimens of Bushman Folklore*, (London; George Allen and Company, 1911), x.

⁸ Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, trans. A. M. Berrett, J. Roitman and M. Last, (London and California: University of California Press, 2001), 16.

⁹ P. R. Anderson, Introduction, *In the Country of the Heart: Love Poems from South Africa*, (Bellevue: Jacana, 2004), 4.

As such I draw on a substantial body of criticism which has traced the vexed attempts of naturalists and nationalists, novelists and poets to 'read' and write themselves into the South African landscape. It is a persistent, perhaps even obsessive area of literary enquiry in this part of the world, yet one which has in a sense rarely moved beyond the insights of one of its earliest texts, J. M. Coetzee's *White Writing*. In this 1988 essay collection, the novelist and critic suggests that even the most accomplished English and Afrikaans literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Schreiner's liberal, anti-colonial *African Farm* included) betrays an inability or unwillingness to imagine a peopled landscape. It is marked by a 'failure of the historical imagination' that expresses itself, he suggests, in two rival 'dream topographies' which recur throughout the literature.¹⁰

The first is the familiar trope of settler-colonial writing: a 'network of boundaries, crisscrossing the surface of the earth, marking off thousands of farms' in gesture of heroic self-making. The second is more subtle, more tenacious and more easily shrouded by poetry:

South Africa as a vast, empty, silent space, older than man, older than the dinosaurs whose bones lie bedded in its rocks, and destined to be vast, empty, and unchanged long after man has passed from its face. (7)

It is a social dreamwork which could easily shade into complicity with the colonial and apartheid historiography which suggested that, until the nineteenth century, the interior of what is now called South Africa was largely unpeopled. Both *topoi*, though, are likely to result in an aesthetic mystification of flora, fauna, landforms and the non-human: 'a strange, antisocial displacement of affection' that inheres in the complex relations between territorial possession, social exclusion and a literary fascination with an unforgiving African landscape.¹¹ In his Jerusalem prize acceptance speech of 1987, Coetzee talks in less guarded terms about love: misdirected, ineffectual, suspect love of mountains, deserts, birds, animals, flowers and all those things least likely to return love. The challenges and confinements of that address inform every aspect of this work. Coetzee's *oeuvre* emerges, to adapt Eliot on Joyce, as one to which Cape writers are all indebted, and which none of us

¹⁰ J. M. Coetzee, *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 6-7. In his introduction, Coetzee explains that the phrase *white writing* does not refer necessarily or narrowly to writing by white people: 'Nor does the phrase...imply the existence of a body of writing different in nature from black writing. White writing is white only insofar as it is generated by the concerns of people no longer European, not yet African' (11).

¹¹ Rita Barnard, *Apartheid and Beyond: South African Writers and the Politics of Place*, (Oxford University Press, 2007), 83.

can escape (and indeed, the reader might well feel that this is a work concerned primarily with his writing, approached indirectly, and in the guise of something else).¹²

The projection of private mental worlds onto inanimate surroundings; the longing for pure aesthetic sensation within the inert materiality of land formations; the desire to 'lose oneself' in the supposed indifference of nature – as captured in the title of Nadine Gordimer's 1974 novel *The Conservationist*, in twentieth-century, (white) South African culture, all of these have so often become implicated in a political conservatism that was little more than self-interested desire to retain power. Yet as the chapters to follow develop different readings of the iconic natural history of the Peninsula, I hope to contrast the scepticism which sees the political uses in claiming a close fit between land and language with the powerful litanies of place that characterise so much Cape poetry and prison writing, as well as a self-aware, post-apartheid tradition which assumes the confidence to name the land in a hard-won gesture of belonging. While remaining acutely aware of how each half of the phrase 'natural history' tends to obscure, mystify or betray the other (and how thoroughly each has been dissolved and deconstructed in the academy), I try to find ways of drawing out all of its possible implications: of treating and reading these as distinct for as long as possible rather than automatically collapsing nature into culture.

As a poet and essayist who has often returned both to the matter of a literary identity for the Cape and the absence of an adequate critical language with which to speak about writing the natural world, Stephen Watson looks to the Albert Camus of Mediterranean Algiers for the epigraph to his first collection:

Yes there is beauty and there are the humiliated. Whatever may be the difficulties of the undertaking I should like never to be unfaithful either to the second or the first.¹³

In another context, his personal, working definition of postmodernism suggests how a certain kind of writer yearns for a physical world rarely admitted by the text-based metaphors of literary criticism as it is practised in the academy:

[T]he moment in history when the word is no longer connected to the earth, when the word has left the world behind, when the immemorial marriage (and the myth of that marriage) between language and the organic is severed for good. (And now that severance celebrated as a higher form of wisdom, a liberation.)¹⁴

So too, this is an enquiry borne partly of an impatience at the predictability (even the complacency) with which much late twentieth-century literary theory would reduce any

¹² T. S. Eliot, 'Ulysses, Order and Myth', in *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), 175.

¹³ Stephen Watson, *In this City*, (Cape Town: David Philip, 1986). The lines are taken from the essay 'Return to Tipasa' in *L'Été* [1954] rep. in *Selected Essays and Notebooks*, trans. and introd. Philip Thody, (London: Penguin, 1970), 153.

¹⁴ Stephen Watson, *A Writer's Diary*, (Cape Town: Quellerie, 1997), 33.

instance of nature to an index of human representation. It responds instead to those writings which carry the sense of having been tempered and buffeted by outdoor conditions; it seeks a critical language shaped and thickened by the landmass to which it refers, complicated by its textures, made more subtle by its gradations. Yet equally, it remains aware that the case of southern Africa provides a unique test for any attempt to bring into dialogue what might be called the 'postcolonial' and the 'ecocritical'.

'Forgotten corners and angles between the fences'

'A man looking at a mountain: why does it have to be so complicated, they want to complain?'¹⁵ So muses the protagonist of Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999), author of an unremarkable monograph on *Wordsworth and the Burden of the Past*, guessing what his bored undergraduates must be thinking when confronted with the famous crossing of the Alps in Book Six of *The Prelude*. But while none of David Lurie's books 'has caused a stir, or even a ripple' (4), Alan Liu's similarly named *Wordsworth: The Sense of History* (1989) is described by Jonathan Bate as the culmination of a decade of scholarship in the Western academy which set out to deconstruct 'the so-called Romantic ideology': to imply that its poetics entailed a flight from the material world, from history and society.¹⁶

Writing against this in *Romantic Ecology*, the 1991 work often regarded as having established ecocriticism as an important aspect of contemporary literary studies, Bate begins by considering Liu's accusation that 'nature is the name under which we use the nonhuman to validate the human, to interpose a mediation able to make humanity more easy with itself'.¹⁷ While this Marxian critique is, he concedes, in one sense an accurate characterisation of much Romantic poetry, it becomes dangerous when allied to the statement that 'There is no nature', or transformed into the idea that nature is 'nothing more than an anthropomorphic construct created by Wordsworth and the rest for their own purposes' (171). He goes on to evolve a kind of manifesto calling for a shift from 'red' to 'green' in the humanities:

The polemical desire to reject any casual recourse to 'nature' as panacea for social ills has the unfortunate consequence of occluding any consideration of the whole question of human society's stewardship of 'the features and products of the earth itself, as contrasted with those of human civilization' (*OED's* thirteenth sense of the word). Nature is a term that needs to be contested, not rejected. It is profoundly unhelpful to say 'There is no nature' at a time when our most urgent need is to address and redress the consequences of human civilization's

¹⁵ J. M. Coetzee, *Disgrace* [1999], (London: Vintage, 2000), 21.

¹⁶ Jonathan Bate, *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition*, (London: Routledge, 1991), 40.

¹⁷ Alan Liu, *Wordsworth: The Sense of History* (Stanford University Press, 1989), 38.

insatiable desire to consume the products of the earth. We are confronted for the first time in history with the possibility of there being no part of the earth left untouched by man (171).

Any account written on this subject at the beginning of the twenty-first century must of course be influenced at every turn by an awareness of worldwide, possibly irreversible environmental degradation. And if the language of ecological preservation is revealed as an alibi for strategies of possession and exclusion in a novel like *The Conservationist*,¹⁸ then the intersections between them can only become more urgent as (to put it crudely) 'global warming' encounters 'global apartheid': as the discourses surrounding environmental crisis encounter those concerned with social justice across an ever wider geographical area. In paying attention to varied ways of writing nature at the Cape, this account replaces the automatic scepticism adopted toward scientific rationalism by postcolonial methodologies with an awareness that ecocriticism is unique amongst contemporary literary and cultural theories because of its close relationship with the hard science of ecology.¹⁹ It must accept or appeal to the claims of oceanography or forestry, climate change or evolutionary biology, before it can contest, question and extend them.

The aim of this work, though, is not to replace one political imperative with another. Nor does it intend to rehearse in a different form the long-standing debates about commitment and the private imagination in South African literary culture, debates characterised by what one critic has called 'the rhetoric of urgency' in which discussion of what people *are* writing has tended to slip inevitably into what they *ought to be* writing.²⁰ Much of this rhetoric was concerned – necessarily, valuably, inescapably – with the construction of an imagined, as yet unrealised national community as part of the project of political liberation; and as several critics have noted, it was in the realm of the literary where this received some of its earliest, most powerful realisations. 'The journey linking the prison with the expanse of the land (and vice versa) is, I would venture, the most compelling national pilgrimage of apartheid South Africa', writes Barnard in discussing the work of Jeremy Cronin, Athol Fugard and Mtutuzeli Matshoba: 'Its various literary expressions...involve the imaginative construction of a new national map'.²¹

¹⁸ See Barnard, *Apartheid and Beyond*, 173. For a trenchant, comparative account of the links between nineteenth-century colonial conservation policy and social control, see Richard Grove, 'Colonial Conservation, Ecological Hegemony and Popular Resistance: Towards a Global Synthesis' in John MacKenzie ed., *Imperialism and the Natural World*, (Manchester University Press, 1990), 15-50.

¹⁹ See Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism: the New Critical Idiom*, (Oxford: Routledge, 2004).

²⁰ Louise Bethlehem, "'A Primary Need as Strong as Hunger": The Rhetoric of Urgency in South African Literary Culture under Apartheid', *Poetics Today* 22:2, South Africa in the Global Imaginary, (Summer 2001), 365-381.

²¹ Rita Barnard, 'Speaking Places: Prison, Poetry and the South African Nation', *Research in African Literatures*, Austin: 32:3 (Fall 2001), 155-79.

This account, however, concerns itself less with the national than the regional, less with maps than the territory.²² Begun at a distance of ten years from South Africa's first democratic elections, it seeks to counterpoint the well-known narratives of solidarity and community (or absence thereof) with the reminder that there remains a very different kind of literary impulse: a poetics shaped not in mind of communal affirmation but rather by isolation, self-sufficiency and solitude. It finds perhaps its most moving local incarnation in the silent protagonist of Coetzee's novel *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983), the municipal gardener who shelters during a time of indeterminate civil unrest in what were once the plots laid out by the VOC to grow fresh produce. Moving erratically between internment camps and deserted farms, prisons and vegetable gardens, Michael K lures this enquiry onward through difficult conceptual terrain.

For even as Coetzee's writing voices the strong, almost unanswerable version of the critique concerning land and language, so too I suggest that it discloses a fictional economy of thrift and meagre subsistence that has yet to come into its full significance. Leaving the city to make an obscure pilgrimage through the Cape hinterland, walking in great loops around the fenced 'miles of silence', K wonders if there are still some 'forgotten corners and angles between the fences, land that belonged to no one as yet'.²³ Even when this is revealed as impossible he elects to remain in hiding rather than join the guerrillas:

Enough men had gone off to war saying the time for gardening was when the war was over; whereas there must be men to stay behind and keep gardening alive, or at least the idea of gardening; because once that cord was broken, the earth would grow hard and forget her children. (150)

In reading across various English and Afrikaans literary traditions and wondering how they might comprise a very different kind of natural history for this part of the world, I keep in mind the threatened, transitory 'patch of earth' where K begins his life as a cultivator, as well as a distinction made by Bate in his more recent, wide-ranging and more subtle work, *The Song of the Earth* (2000). Comparing the 'hectoring eco-pieties' of Gary Snyder with Elizabeth Bishop's finely worked meditations on apprehending the non-human, he discriminates between texts which adopt ecological themes, and those which *do ecological work*.²⁴ Those in the first category merely dramatise a pre-existing political programme; the latter seek out ever more radical and imaginative ways of conceiving the relation between culture and nature, language and land, writer and place. Following this astute reader of Shakespeare, Wordsworth, John Clare, Adorno and Heidegger, I hope to ask with respect to

²² The semanticist Albert Korzybski's famous premise that 'The map is not the territory' was reproduced on the wall of the November 2000 to April 2001 exhibition at the Iziko South African National Gallery in Cape Town, entitled 'Hoerikwaggo: Images of Table Mountain'.

²³ J. M. Coetzee, *Life & Times of Michael K*, (London: Secker & Warburg, 1983), 64.

²⁴ Jonathan Bate, *The Song of the Earth*, [2000], (London: Picador, 2001), 199.

a range of more recent Cape writing some of the questions which ecologists ask of biological organisms – ‘How are they influenced by climate? In what kind of landscape do they flourish? What are their modes of creating shelter, their relations with other species?’²⁵ – while at the same time wondering to what extent an eco-poetics shaped in such close dialogue with the European canon can survive transplantation to a very different part of the world.

Prison, island, garden

In his 1995 work, *Green Imperialism*, Richard Grove charts a comparable shift within the realms of environmental thought, suggesting that any attempt to understand the foundations of Western environmental concerns ‘actually involves writing a history of the human responses to nature that have developed at the periphery of an expanding European system’.²⁶ This periphery – in particular the isolated colonial outposts of St Helena, Mauritius and the Cape of Good Hope where mariners impinged on closed ecosystems – ‘became central to the formulation of Western environmental ideas’, and remains crucial when constructing ‘an historical anthropology of global environmental awareness’:

When we do this, two symbolic (or even totemic) forms seem to have proved central to the task of giving a meaning and an epistemology to the natural world and to Western interactions with it. These were the physical or textual garden and the island. The significant point is that both were capable of providing global analogues, one, possibly a narrower one, in terms of species, and the other offering a whole set of different analogues: of society, of the world, of climate, of economy. (12-13)

Yet, as I hope to ask here, what happens when garden, island and prison are the same thing; when they come, quite literally, to occupy the same space? And how can one trace the emergence of what Raymond Williams called a ‘green language’ in their textual analogues while never averting one’s gaze from the material fact of imprisonment?²⁷

In foregrounding the Cape as one of many penal colonies, this approach draws too on Paul Carter’s *The Road to Botany Bay* (1987), an ‘Essay in Spatial History’ about a place which, in its colonial, cultural and topographical affinities with the Cape, emerges as a far more relevant ground for comparison than the Lake District, the Alps or the American West. Following Carter’s path-breaking account of the transformation of space into place in colonial Australia, this work writes against the notion of the non-human world as a passive backdrop

²⁵ Bate, *The Song of the Earth*, x.

²⁶ Richard Grove, *Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens and the Origins of Environmentalism, 1600-1800*, (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 12.

²⁷ Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* [1973], (London: Hogarth Press, 1985), 32. The phrase is adapted from a line by John Clare: ‘A language that is ever green’.

or diorama against which the human drama of history unfolds. Instead it tries to remain similarly open to 'a prehistory of places, a history of footprints, trails of dust and foaming wakes. Within its domain fall the flight of birds, the direction of smoke, the lie of the land'.²⁸ At the same time it concedes that the notion of a 'spatial history' can easily become a vague and unmanageable one. As one critic remarks of his attempt to map the contours of landscape in European poetry, 'the subject tends alarmingly to enormity and amorphousness, veering simultaneously towards trackless continents of cultural immensity and into the finest tissues of subjective inwardness'.²⁹

In an attempt, then, to ground the nature of the cultural history I am attempting, this account also draws on those approaches – among them 'new historicism', 'thick description', 'microhistory' – which proceed by reading and dwelling on resonant details which are then embedded in larger structures of historical complexity. Writing in appreciation of Clifford Geertz's fine-grained 1973 work *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Stephen Greenblatt describes the analytic, almost literary attention to carefully chosen cultural fragments, 'small bits of symbolic behaviour which he could "widen out" into larger social worlds'.³⁰ One of the guiding principles here is an attempt to retrieve details from writers, diarists, travellers, journalists, poets and prisoners and that may once have been deemed irrelevant, or those too fragile to survive in a time of acute political tension. I hope to excavate delicate insights that were understandably submerged during the political struggles of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and even to broach the potentially radical question: what does it mean to read such literature purely for pleasure?

The most basic literary pleasures, perhaps, are those of recognition: of matching a known environment to its verbal approximation on the page. Yet immediately this begs the further question: whose pleasure exactly? The literature of the Cape considered here, so often penned by visitors, passers-by or else a literate minority 'no longer European, not yet African',³¹ suggests again and again how the urge to read or write one's natural surrounds so often signals a certain disconnection from them, an ill fit or 'unhomeliness' which the very act of writing tries to assuage. In an important sense this is an account of literary failure, the repeated failure of writers to give Cape Town a credible literary identity. At a further remove, it asks what such a sense of place could possibly mean in a linguistically divided, spatially distorted city of the global South at the turn of the millenium.

²⁸ Paul Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay: an Essay in Spatial History*, (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1987) xxi-xxii.

²⁹ Chris Fitter, *Poetry, Space, Landscape: Toward a New Theory*. (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 1.

³⁰ Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism*, (University of Chicago Press, 2000), 26. Clifford Geertz, 'Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture', *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* [1973], (London: Fontana Press, 1993).

³¹ Coetzee, *White Writing*, 11.

As such, it is the final incarnation of a project which began as an attempt to write a literary history of the city, yet soon risked becoming little more than an exercise in cultural tourism,³² hampered throughout by what Coetzee once called ‘the insidious pressures faced by South African writers to simplify and explain for a foreign audience’.³³ The different expectations of local and international readerships emerged as such powerful determinants of writing here that they demanded to be lifted out and treated explicitly, rather than passed over. Nonetheless, the traces of that earlier project remain – a mixture of guided tour, literary biography and psychogeography – particularly in the attention paid to the literal proximity of prisons and gardens dotted along the mountain chain, and the way that each chapter tends to dwell on a visitable site.³⁴ So too, in avoiding the usual tale of two cities (the colonial outpost and the literary metropole of London, or indeed industrial Johannesburg versus liberal Cape Town), I hope to sketch in the preliminaries of a broader comparative approach to the colonial and postcolonial urban space, where the ghostly traces of other written places are inevitably superimposed on the Cape.

Displaced, dreamlike visions of the Indian metropolis are embedded within Kipling’s failed attempt to evoke the Peninsula; the imperial vision of a Cape to Cairo axis is troubled and contradicted by poetics shaped in Bombay and Lahore. The theoretical idiom of 1960s Paris informs Brink’s early novelisations of Cape colonial history, while within Coetzee’s fictional worlds, perhaps one can discern a report from the besieged cities of Zbigniew Herbert and other writers from eastern Europe, where a word like ‘comrade’ possessed a very different valence to its use in the Gugulethu of *Age of Iron* (1990). Watson’s poetry and prose is suffused with the sensuous, existential glare of Camus’ Algiers; the remembered enclaves of African exile – Lusaka, Lagos, Maputo – play out in the work of Jeremy Cronin, while Zoë Wicomb’s Cape Town is overlain by the presence what was once another major port of the British Empire, Glasgow.

Finally, as a chain of disparate writings bounded by shared contours and weather systems, escarpments and rain shadows, the literature of the Cape explored here is one that asks for a more creative reading of the relation between the topography of the city and the inroads of its inhabitants, a more capacious literary ecology for understanding the intriguing yet always elusive dialectic of mind and place.

³² See Hedley Twidle and Sean Christie, ‘Taxi on Main’, in Stephen Watson ed., *A City Imagined* (Johannesburg: Penguin, 2005) 166-83.

³³ ‘Two Interviews with J. M. Coetzee, 1983 and 1987’ with David Morphet, rep. in David Bunn and Jane Taylor eds., *From South Africa: New Writing, Photographs and Art*, special issue of *TriQuarterly Magazine* 69, (Spring/Summer, 1987), 460.

³⁴ I draw my sense of Guy Debord’s 1955 coinage ‘psychogeography’ primarily from the ramblings of Iain Sinclair, in particular his *London Orbital: a Walk Around the M25*, (London: Granta, 2002).

INTRODUCTION

'THIS REMARKABLE PROMONTORY...'

And drive back home, still with nothing to say
Except that now you will uncode all landscapes
By this: things founded clean on their own shapes,
Water and ground in their extremity.

Seamus Heaney, 'The Peninsula', (1969).

Ten years after South Africa's first free elections, an exhibition called 'Democracy X' was held at the Castle. In the rooms of De Kat, treasures of the William Fehr Collection were placed cheek by jowl with conceptual art installations exploring the record of a brutal slave port. Unpeopled colonial vistas in oils were juxtaposed with the stone birds of Great Zimbabwe while dimly flickering footage of the 1952 Van Riebeeck Tercentenary showed theatrical re-enactments involving rowboats, animal skins and feathered caps. The vast cultural distance between objects brought into the same room and the sheer weight of historicity that some of them embodied served as a reminder, if any were needed, that the process of 'Re-presenting the Past' in that part of the world known blandly as South Africa must be a uniquely difficult and controversial one.¹

Also on display were sixteenth-century copper ingots from Mapungubwe, the trumpet given to Hugh Masakela by Louis Armstrong, a bowl dated 1900 with the caption: 'Bethlehem Concentration Camp: unglazed earthenware with postage stamps'. One could even view a carved stone which had been removed from the pediment above the front entrance to the Castle for exhibition and plugged with a replica. It was, one visitor remarked, 'an oddity, a metaphor for the kind of self-inflicted wound necessary if you want to cauterise history'.²

According to the curators, the X symbolised not only ten years of democracy and the cross on the ballot paper, but also the country's history of error and wrongheadedness, the unnamed and unspeakable, the buried and forgotten. In terms of a history of writing at the Cape, the cross might also signify the profound non-literacy of the early colony, an almost total lack of books and schools in a place where only one third of burghers were able to write their name. Related to the Political Secretariat at the Castle in 1760, the expedition of the elephant hunter Jacobus Coetsé to the land of the Great Amacquas was dictated in the third person and signed with an X. In the experimental fictions of his distant descendant, J. M. Coetzee, the mark of history becomes one left on the body – scars, hare-lips and severed tongues – an emblem of submerged, silenced lives that can only be cautiously approached in the prose of the modern novel.

Yet in addition to the cultural distance and political conflict in these rooms, there was also an overwhelming impression of the human impulse to make meaning, and a sense of how we have always, as the curators put it, lived irrepressibly. Departing from its narrow definition in terms of the modern nation state, the cross emerged as an index of the urge to decorate and imbue all manner of objects with power and significance. 'Africa is everywhere

¹ Iziko Museums at the Castle of Good Hope, 'Democracy X: Marking the Present, Re-Presenting the Past'. April to September, 2004. <www.museums.org.za/democracyx> and <www.iziko.org.za/castle/exhibitions/democracyx/exhibitionoutline_1.html>.

² Chris Roper, 'Fragments Collected', *Mail & Guardian*, (7 May 2004).

inscribed', writes Alain Ricard, remarking that 'one needs a stubborn and narrow-minded commitment to alphabetic writing to deny that the continent has left graphic marks of its history everywhere'.³ Dated at over 70,000 years old and claimed by some archaeologists the world's earliest example of symbolic human behaviour, the cross-hatchings in ochre discovered at Blombos Cave were echoed in later petroglyphs (rock engravings) and ostrich eggshell pendants; patterns of crosses could be found on Portuguese *padrões* and ceremonial wooden doors, on Limpopo pottery, colonial medals and Zulu engraved horns [Figs. 2-3]. The X reappeared on the engraved postal stones under which the earliest mariners stopping in Table Bay would secure letters and reports for ships to follow, objects invoking not only Europe's sea-borne correspondences but also the Khoi leaders who took on the role as keepers, transmitters and sometimes disrupters of these earliest Cape texts.

'What highly coloured representations...'

The diversity and enormous time depth of human occupation evident here remains a major challenge in any attempt to consider where or how a cultural history of the Cape might properly be said to begin, let alone one intent on admitting the representations of non-human world once classed as 'natural history'. To return to the seventeenth-century Dutch colony and the first poem written for the 'The First Stone of the New Castle', one might narrow the focus by posing a rather simpler, perhaps naïve question. How is it that the sensitivity and detail of the drawings in Zacharias Wagenaer's 'Animal Book' (or those of the mariner Peter Mundy, or Simon van der Stel's artist Hendrik Claudius, or much later, Wilhelm Bleek's cousin Ernst Haeckel) can be contiguous with the crudity and brutality of life in the colony? [Figs. 4-7] The 1666 oration reveals explicitly how the 'naturalisation' of the European presence involved the vilification of the indigenous peoples at the Cape, yet also suggests how vexed and vulnerable a process this was. Wagenaer's comparison with classical empires verges on absurdity considering the meagre, impoverished place he had been posted to, and the Castle visible today was after all not the first fortress built by the Company.

The earlier, humbler structure was a four-cornered and precarious one made from piled earth ramparts and wooden beams which, its inhabitants feared, could easily be overwhelmed by the French and the English who were vying for control of the sea route, by 'nimble Hottentots' or even the lions that roamed the slopes and roared outside the gates at night. It finally collapsed after heavy rainfall in 1663 and by all accounts the few surviving

³ Alain Ricard, 'Africa and Writing', in F. Abiola Irele and Simon Gikandi eds., *The Cambridge History of African and Caribbean Literature*, vol. I, (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 153.

sketches show a much sturdier structure than in fact existed, an enclave where the starving Company servants huddled, overworked, diseased and potentially mutinous were it not for the savage corporal punishments with which any form of dissent were met. Desertion rates were high, the first Commander famously asked for transfer to be amongst the Japanese, Tonquinese 'and other precise nations', while the second found himself embarrassed by a garrison without cutlery where the soldiers ate with shells or their hands. He begged Amsterdam for 'some coarse window glass' to keep out the dust, bells to call the herdsman home and 'some common paintings, or illuminated plans of the chief cities in the Netherlands, to cover the ugly bare walls of our front hall'.⁴

As such intimate archival detail suggests, as an urban settlement Cape Town is unusual in having almost its entire official history documented. A mass of journals, company reports and judicial records constitute a vast three-way correspondence with both the *Heren XVII* in Amsterdam (the Lords Seventeen, the governing body of the VOC) and the Council of India in Batavia. My chapter title 'Writing the Company', then, refers not only to contemporary literary recreations of the VOC period, but also this massive project of correspondence through which the world's first multinational constituted itself: a writing to the Company brought out more strongly in the Afrikaans omission of the particle. At the time such texts were, as Carli Coetzee writes, the preserve of a closed, elite readership in which Company secrets were closely guarded: 'the intended audience of writing at the early Cape often (even typically) excluded those living at the Cape'.⁵ Yet as a result, reading them today one sees the ambitions and failings of the Dutch outpost (and its double dealings with the Khoisan) revealed in flagrantly commercial language, with a frankness entirely different from later versions of colonialism as a civilising mission. 'What highly coloured representations have not been...made of the advantages of the Cape', Amsterdam complained in the 1662, 'Aye! That we could feed India with your produce; and how ill it turns out at last; when you cannot nearly maintain yourselves; we are by no means well pleased'.⁶

For at least the first half-century of its existence, the Cape station remained merely a geopolitical node on the way to somewhere more interesting and more profitable, barely able to refresh itself, let alone passing ships. Passing by in 1710 en route to Europe, the Batavia-born Johanna van Riebeeck could find little good to say about the fledgling colony that her grandfather had helped found. Her letter suggests how a cultural history of the Cape must

⁴ Rep. in Donald Moodie, *The Record, or a Series of Official Papers Relative to the Condition and Treatment of the Native Tribes of South Africa, Compiled, Translated and Edited by Donald Moodie* [1838-41], (Cape Town and Amsterdam: A. A. Balkema, 1960), 258.

⁵ Carli Coetzee, 'In the Archive: Records of Dutch Settlement and the Contemporary Novel', in Derek Attridge and David Attwell eds., *The Cambridge History of South African Literature*, (Cambridge University Press, forthcoming 2010). <www.york.ac.uk/depts/engl/chsal/index.htm>

⁶ Moodie, *The Record*, 259.

begin to take account not only of the physical nearness of prison and garden, but the way in which these and their figurative analogues might come to occupy the very same space:

This place looks prettier and more pleasant from the sea than on land...There is no grass and the roads near the castle and in the town are covered with holes and ruts, as if wild pigs had been rooting in them... the castle is very peculiar...the other houses here resemble prisons...One sees here all sorts of peculiar people who live in very strange ways.⁷

The peculiarity and precariousness is written all over the early records, coming as something of a shock to those steeped in the invented tradition of 'Cape Dutch' propagated by Rhodes, Kipling and their circle: of sedate wineries, oak avenues and elegantly sculpted gables. Yet the Commander's vision of laying a stone at the end of the earth suggests why, within the popular imagination and perhaps the global imaginary, a valid cultural memory of origin has been buried still further at the Cape. Or rather, precisely *because of* the Cape, here taken to refer not to the large portion of modern South Africa once administered as the Cape Colony, but rather to the topographical entity of granite, shales and eroded sandstone which forms the Peninsula. Beyond the blatant political uses to which history is inevitably put, the immense symbolic bulk of a mountain chain sunk in the sea at the foot of Africa remains a more complex and tenacious barrier to understanding the makeshift settlement that slowly evolved at the foot of the slopes.

For the Goringhauqua and the Gorachouqua, the sea-mountain *Hoerikwaggo* was a place for the summer grazing of cattle and fat-tailed sheep, the end point of a slow migratory drift which had begun some 2000 years before when hunter-gatherer bands in present-day Botswana acquired livestock.⁸ Gradually displacing the cattle-less inhabitants who have left remains going back 30,000 years in caves above False Bay, the Khoikhoi herders became the dominant society at the Peninsula by 1400. Yet for the mariners that began stopping here a century later, the Cape was a gateway not only to the East but to an entirely new conception of the globe. The alignments of continental drift, magnetic pole and agrarian development had combined to produce, as Mostert writes, a symbol exclusive to the Western world,⁹ and one so momentous that in so much of what one reads about it – from sixteenth-century mariners' logs to modernist poetry – there is the sense that it is an aspect of the European imaginary that is being considered, and little else.

⁷ D. B. Bosman, *Briewe van Johanna van Riebeeck*, (Amsterdam, 1952). Cited in Vivian Bickford-Smith, Elizabeth van Heynigen and Nigel Worden, *Cape Town: the Making of a City. An Illustrated Social History*, (Cape Town, David Philip: 1998), 69.

⁸ Gordon 1779: 'De Oude Hottentotten hieten de Caap hoer'kwaggo of di zeeberg. De emphasis op ieder der laatste syllable van het word'. G. S. Nienaber and P. E. Raper, *Toponymica Hottentotica* (Pretoria: Raad vir Geesteswetenskaplike Navorsing, 1977), 568.

⁹ Noël Mostert. *Frontiers: The Epic of South Africa's Creation and the Tragedy of the Xhosa People*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1992), 8.

'We kept returning to those Portuguese, / Daring the flat world's edge, whose light craft came / To pick the locks of all the southern seas'.¹⁰ As Guy Butler's poetry testifies, generations of writers in English have looked to the voyages of Días and Da Gama in search of a point of literary origin, and in particular their transmutation into *Os Lusíadas*, the 1572 masterpiece of Luís Vaz de Camões. Looming out of the stormy darkness at the geographical mid-point and artistic fulcrum of this great Renaissance epic, the land-locked giant Adamastor is the 'the first in a line of spectres haunting Europe',¹¹ cursing the Portuguese for their mobility and daring, prophesying all the disasters that will befall their maritime empire. In Stephen Gray's 1979 introduction to South African literature, this Spirit of the Cape is a figure 'at the root of all the subsequent white semiology invented to cope with the African experience',¹² a white man's creation myth which, like the journey upriver in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, recurs interminably in various overwrought literary incarnations.¹³

The overblown vacillation between a Cape of Good Hope and a Cape of Storms is already being ironised by John Barrow in his *Travels into the Interior of Southern Africa*, perhaps the most blatant example of the colonial travelogue in which prospects are always commercial as well as visual. The preface to the second edition of 1806 emerges as a *locus classicus* for a sense of how the iconography of the Cape has always remained frustratingly inconstant. Beginning a sarcastic summary of the fanciful claims made by those travellers preceding him, Barrow describes (perhaps with a little help from Hamlet) how 'This remarkable promontory... has been variously represented':

Whilst some of our public orators have held it out as a terrestrial paradise, where nature spontaneously yielded all that was necessary, not only for a the supply of ordinary wants and conveniencies, but also the luxuries and superfluities of life...others have described it as an useless and barren peninsular promontory, connected by a sandy isthmus to a still more useless and barren continent.¹⁴

The passage is included by both Chapman and Van Wyk Smith and in their respective histories of South African literature, invoked to suggest how a cartography which veers unsteadily between nurturing Eden and sterile wilderness embodies what the latter describes

¹⁰ Guy Butler, 'Elegy for a South African Tank Commander' [1960], cited in Malvern van Wyk Smith, *Grounds of Contest*, (Kenwyn: Juta, 1990), 83.

¹¹ David Quint, *Epic and Empire: Politics and Generic Form from Virgil to Milton*, (Princeton University Press, 1993), 125.

¹² Stephen Gray, *Southern African Literature: an Introduction*, (Cape Town: David Philip, 1979), 27.

¹³ See Malvern van Wyk Smith's anthology *Shades of Adamastor* for an exhaustive account of the 'protean permutations of the Adamastor motif in our literature, from an image of hostile confrontation to be overcome by the European conquistador, to an implicit and growing emblem of resistance to such conquest'. (Grahamstown: National English Literary Museum, 1988), 19.

¹⁴ John Barrow, *Travels into the Interior of Southern Africa*, Second Edition, (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1806), vi.

as the fundamental systole and diastole of the literature: a pattern of aggression and renunciation, of epic achievement undercut by guilt and futility which will inform symbolic versions of the Cape well into the twentieth century.¹⁵ The 'stark ridges' of Adamastor's 'broken jaw' reappear most portentously in Roy Campbell's 1926 poem 'Rounding the Cape'. Often taken to signal the first wave of literary modernism in South Africa, it ends with the mystified rumblings of Africa's future decolonisation, but in terms of my reading emerges as equally resonant for its buried ecological dimension:

Across his back, unheeded we have broken
Whole forests: heedless of the blood we've spilled,
In thunder still his prophecies are spoken,
In silence, by the centuries fulfilled.¹⁶

Yet as Gray wrote in 1979, using a metaphor which still seems apt, this is only an island in an archipelago of separate southern African literatures, one of several disparate traditions linked by little more than their physical adjacency. Unlike the later British administration, the early Dutch settlement has often been characterised as unusual among colonial societies for how quickly and completely it severed its ties with Europe, both economic and cultural. Literary histories of Afrikaans have traditionally turned inland for a starting point, looking to the diaries of free burghers and *Africaanders* who had begun to break away from the controlling arm of the Company and to feel a deeper affinity with the fertile valleys of the Cape fold mountains. And if there was any master text here then it was surely the *Staten* bible, particularly the ringing Old Testament cadences telling of chosen peoples, trials in the wilderness and promised lands. The 'aged grazier' of the interior 'understood the imagery of the Hebrew writers more perfectly than anyone in Europe could understand it', wrote the nineteenth-century Colonial Historiographer George McCall Theal in language which suggests why his account of the struggle for southern Africa would prove attractive to later Afrikaner nationalists; 'for it spoke to him of his daily life':¹⁷

He had heard the continuous roll of thunder which was the voice of the Lord upon many waters, and had seen the affrighted antelopes drop their young as they fled before the storm, when the great trees came down with a crash and lightning divided like flames of fire. He knew too of skies like brass and of earth like iron, of little clouds seemingly no larger than a man's hand presaging a deluge of rain, and of swarms of locusts before whose track was the garden of the Lord, while behind was a naked desert. When he spoke of these things he

¹⁵ Michael Chapman, *Southern African Literatures*, (London: Longman, 1996), 82. Van Wyk Smith, *Grounds of Contest*.

¹⁶ Roy Campbell, *Selected Poetry*, (London: Bodley Head, 1968), 17.

¹⁷ George McCall Theal, *History of South Africa under the Administration of the Dutch East India Company (1652-1795)*, vol. II, (London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co, 1897), 340. For Theal's usefulness to Afrikaner nationalism, see Ken Smith, *The Changing Past: Trends in South African Historical Writing*, (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1989), 43.

could be eloquent enough, but they were not subjects for conversation with casual visitors.
(340)

Today, both these points of literary genesis seem outdated and inadequate: a fragment from the national epic of a country that ultimately wanted nothing to do with southern Africa; and an inward-looking *volkkunde* (folk art) which sought to erase the realities of slavery and indentured labour from its uneasy colonial version of the pastoral. And in a sense, coming either before or after the real colonial contact in Table Bay, both the offshore survey and the journey to the heart of the country pass over the real, material origins of settlement, an encounter which was by no means a single, epic moment on a shoreline, but rather a long and complex history of interaction and broken dialogue between the Khoi peoples of the Peninsula and the European birds of passage. What is distinctive about the early colonial contact at the Cape – a place bypassed, surveyed and speculated about for so long before being settled – and how did this long pre-history shape the more familiar narrative which began in 1652?

‘A search for survivors in endless space’

In the last decades, as the demand for a literature of witness to contemporary events has receded, several authors have turned to this more distant past, elaborating upon the fragmentary lives preserved in the official record. Some have returned to the voices of the three seventeenth-century Khoi interpreters which emerge with surprising force and intactness in the archive, offering themselves almost too perfectly as three distinct responses to the colonial presence: the sly, persuasive Autshumato (Harry), the resistance fighter Doman, the compliant, much-abused Krotoä (Eva), mother of the first mixed-race child at the station. Others have listened for the testimony of slaves and other accused members of the underclass that surface in the voluminous records of imprisonment, corporal and capital punishment. Writers of non-fiction have traced moments of slippage when the litany of abuse directed at the ‘Hottentots’ and ‘Bushmen’ momentarily betrays the underlying anxieties of classification itself. Novelists have attempted the kind of literary thought experiment which views the encroaching patterns of European agrarian settlement – the *wagen pad*, watchtowers and granaries – across what has been called the most fundamental rift in human history: from the perspective of nomadic peoples who remained

largely immune to notions of landed property, dignifying labour and organised religion, but not to the smallpox epidemic brought ashore by contaminated laundry in 1713.¹⁸

The search for a new kind of literary origin, then, is the point of departure for this work; or rather, following Edward Said, the claims and silences that attend the rather more worldly set of written 'beginnings'.¹⁹ It is a project which turns continually on the words of the so-called 'First Peoples', and how they have been translated and appropriated for various political ends and aesthetic effects. Indeed the claims to literary origin multiply so quickly that the Cape provides a unique context to compare and read them against each other. In André Brink's *The First Life of Adamastor* (1993) we begin with a playful, postmodern 'writing back' to Camões, a hybrid which draws not only on the cantos of the first Western poet to cross the equator, but also the verse of the *Eerste Taal Beweging* (First Language Movement) and the first local experiments in that international strain of postcolonial literature often called 'magical realism'.

Brink is the writer who has done more than any other to bring the raw material of Cape history into the realms of fiction, gleefully blurring the distinctions between them in the process. Surveying his post-apartheid literary output, I trace the shifts from weighty national allegories to more irreverent re-imaginings of the past, going on to enquire how successfully the flamboyant narrative procedures which he helped to import can survive in a South African context. It is an account borne of an admiration for the sheer ambition of his attempt at *Reinventing a Continent* (as his 1996 essay collection has it), but also from an unease that this purveyor of a prose which strays into the realms of the 'postcolonial exotic' is regarded as such a major writer on the international stage (one who must be classed, according to the Vintage edition dustjackets, with García Márquez and Solzhenitsyn).²⁰

Moving on to an account of 'Writing the Company', I contrast various adaptations of the early colony's *Daghregister*, concentrating on Dan Sleigh's *Eilande* (2002) to examine how an archivist turned novelist uses the textual 'islands' provided by official documentation to create a huge prose work that is remarkable for placing the Cape in its properly global colonial context. Surely this region's most exhaustive rendering of the genre known problematically as 'the historical novel', it ranges from seventeenth-century Germany and Holland via St Helena and the Cape to Madagascar, Mauritius and Batavia. If for Brink 'the lacunae in the archives are most usefully filled through magical realism, metaphor and

¹⁸ See for example Hugh Brody, *The Other Side of Eden: Hunter-Gatherers, Farmers and the Shaping of the World* [2000], (London: Faber and Faber, 2001); and Alfred Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism: the Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900*, (Cambridge University Press, 1986):

'When Captain Cook and the Australians of Botany Bay looked at each other in the eighteenth century, they did so from opposite sides of the Neolithic revolution' (18).

¹⁹ Edward Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method*, [1975], (London: Granta, 1975).

²⁰ See Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*, (London: Routledge, 2001), 13.

fantasy',²¹ Sleigh's work forms the opposite pole, offering an example of a much slower, lonelier genesis and a more cautious recovery of historical specificity. I hope to discern the possibilities and constraints of these very different fictional modes, asking what is gained and what is lost in the attempt to recreate the strange and desperate place that was, as Van Riebeeck assured his penny-pinching superiors, 'More the name than the reality'.²²

For even as writers dismantle the myths of brooding promontories, 'mild' slavery and Cape Dutch idylls, it seems necessary to ask also which contemporary forms of myth-making and usable pasts might be taking their place. As Ernst Renan expressed it in 1881, the modern nation state constitutes itself through acts of both specific commemoration and deliberate forgetting – 'I would even go so far as to say historical error'²³ – while Said remarks that nationalist agendas tend to resemble each other, particular in 'such malleable activities as reconstructing the past and inventing tradition'.²⁴ At a time when novels and other literary treatments comprise one of the most widespread mediums through which new readings of the past are explored and absorbed, what kind of modern writing can do justice to the encounter?

Like other metaphors used to imagine this process of imaginative recuperation – metaphors of 'giving voice to' or archaeological excavation, of restoration, re-membering or re-presenting – the notion of *doing justice to* must be a contentious and inadequate one, implying a sense of fullness and completion that should properly be resisted. Yet perhaps it gains a certain appropriateness for reasons both historically distant and all too recent. Firstly, as the accounts of 'rogues, rebels and runaways' that have emerged in recent years suggest,²⁵ those narratives of the Cape underclasses which do exist are almost all lodged within legal documents: the records of the court at Stellenbosch or those of the Council of Justice in Cape Town.²⁶ And despite their distance in translation and transmission, they still convey a sense of what Carmel Schrire calls the 'delicate lunacy' of VOC policy which to some degree permitted the representations of the indigenous people and imported slaves whom they had so recently and relentlessly dispossessed.²⁷ No less than the trials, inquests

²¹ Carli Coetzee and Sarah Nuttall eds, *Negotiating the Past: the Making of Memory in South Africa*, (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1998), 3.

²² The phrase is used as a chapter heading for the period 1620-1662 in Bickford-Smith et al., *Cape Town: the Making of a City*.

²³ Ernest Renan, 'What is a Nation?' [1881], trans. Martin Thom, in Homi Bhabha ed., *Nation and Narration*, (London: Routledge, 1990), 11.

²⁴ Edward Said, *Freud and the Non-European*, (London, New York: Verso, 2003) 49.

²⁵ Nigel Penn, *Rogues, Rebels and Runaways: Eighteenth-Century Cape Characters*, (Cape Town, David Philip, 1999).

²⁶ See for example Nigel Worden and Gerald Groenewald eds., *Trials of Slavery: Selected Documents Concerning Slaves from the Criminal Records of the Council of Justice at the Cape of Good Hope 1705-1794*, Van Riebeeck Society Second Series 26, (Cape Town, 2005).

²⁷ Carmel Schrire, 'Digging Archives at Oudepost I, Cape, South Africa' in Anne Elizabeth Yentsch, and Mary C. Beaudry eds. *The Art and Mystery of Historical Archaeology*, (Boca Raton FL: CRC Press, 1992), 362.

and token legal structures of the apartheid state, these remain as evidence of an administration that was required to look some way into its crimes.

Secondly, the revisiting of such records has of course run in tandem with the much larger, more recent process of recovery which sought to unearth and redress the political trauma of the late twentieth-century. All the writers considered here have worked in a period where they could not help but be defined by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, either through an explicit engagement with its procedures and findings, or else a resistance to its peculiarly religious nature in a secular world, a scepticism with regard the workings of confession, self-interest and political expediency. Interviewed in 1997, the poet Ingrid de Kok spoke of the 'unavoidable dilemma' posed by the need to acknowledge the profusion of narratives which resulted – in many different languages, contexts and registers – set against the inadequacies of any formal strategy which might be employed: 'I don't know how you can write in South Africa and not reference this major revelatory complex mixture of truth and lying in some way. Yet it also seems impossible, invasive, to do so'.²⁸

'...what I am here calling history'

It is on reaching this kind of aesthetic and ethical impasse that one turns to the work of Coetzee, and an engagement with the Cape archive that begins an intellectual journey moving from 'the forgotten frontier' of the eighteenth century to the 'frontier of world literature' at the turn of the millennium.²⁹ Coetzee won international renown with *Waiting for the Barbarians* in 1980, yet began his career with the singularly odd and disturbing diptych novella *Dusklands* in a print run of only a few thousand copies by Ravan Press in 1974. In its second half, he ventured 'my own contribution to the history of the Hottentots':³⁰ what purports to be a translation of *Het Relaa van Jacobus Coetsé Jansz*, the actual travelogue written up at the Castle by a secretary of the VOC in November 1760 as told by an illiterate frontiersman and hunter.

²⁸ Susan Rich, Interview with Ingrid de Kok, (December 1997) in Robert Berold ed., *South African Poets on Poetry: Interviews from New Coin 1992-2001*, (Scottsville: University of Natal Press, 2003), 115.

²⁹ The 'forgotten frontier' refers to the northern Cape frontier zone which historians like Penn have concentrated on in recent years to balance the attention given to the nineteenth-century Xhosa-British encounter in the eastern Cape. The second phrase is from a review of *Disgrace* by Geoff Dyer, reproduced on the 2000 Vintage paperback edition: 'By this late point in the century the journey to a heart of narrative darkness has become a safe literary destination, almost a cliché. *Disgrace* goes beyond this to explore the furthest reaches of what it means to be human; it is at the frontier of world literature'.

³⁰ J. M. Coetzee, 'Remembering Texas' [1984], rep. *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, ed. David Attwell, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 52.

With its dustjacket of colonial watercolour and fussy editorial apparatus, 'The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee' 'enters the rank of Africana as a slim fifth column', in the words of one reviewer.³¹ And the fact that this savage pastiche of regurgitated exploration narrative and genocidal retribution was mistaken by some early readers for a plausible historical document serves as an indictment of the kind of violence submerged in the antiquarian editions of the Van Riebeeck Society. Yet equally, as Coetzee rewrites his distant ancestor Coetsé, the building extremity of its language makes for a parody far in excess of its immediate target. Indeed the very concept of imaginative literature bringing a sense of raw historicity into the public domain is no longer adequate when reaching this *oeuvre*.

In a well-known 1974 essay arguing for a recognition of the historical text as a literary artefact, Hayden White suggested that 'the presumed concreteness and accessibility of historical milieux, these contexts of the texts that literary scholars study, are themselves products of the fictive capability of the historians who have studied those contexts':

The historical documents are not less opaque than the texts studied by the literary critic. Nor is the world those documents figure more accessible. The one is no more 'given' than the other.³²

As with the Jerusalem prize speech, in a 1987 address at the Baxter Theatre which any literary history of this part of the world cannot help but revisit, Coetzee voiced the strong, locally embodied version of an argument that was fast becoming orthodoxy in the American and European academy. 'The Novel Today' is a piece often reproduced in the secondary literature, but one which has never been reprinted or collected by the author himself, perhaps because of the extremity of its metaphors. Speaking at a time 'of intense ideological pressure', Coetzee describes himself – a novelist threatened by the 'flattening' of academic Marxism – as 'a member of a tribe threatened with colonisation', and then goes on to offer a view of his chosen medium as 'a rival to history':

I mean – to put it in its strongest form – a novel that operates in terms of its own procedures and issues in its own conclusions, not one that operates in terms of the procedures of history and eventuates in conclusions that are checkable by history (as a child's schoolwork is checked by a schoolmistress). In particular I mean a novel that evolves its own paradigms and myths, in the process (and here is the point at which true rivalry, even enmity perhaps enters the picture) perhaps going so far as to show up the mythic status of history – in other words, demythologising history.³³

³¹ Peter Knox-Shaw, 'Dusklands: A Metaphysics of Violence', *Contrast* 14 (1982), 66.

³² Hayden White, 'The Historical Text as Literary Artifact', *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1978), 89.

³³ J. M. Coetzee, 'The Novel Today', *Upstream*, 6:1 (Summer 1988), 3.

Returning this today, following the decompression of the post-apartheid (or perhaps, post anti-apartheid) moment, one wants to complicate and extend it in several ways. First, Coetzee distinguishes between ‘what used to be called “the historical novel”’ and the demands of ‘the historical present’, making it clear that he is dealing with the latter and in no way touching upon his own deep rootedness in the early colonial past of the Cape. So too this antagonistic binary opposition overshadows the wider import of the address: that there exists a whole spectrum of different narratives and writings competing for legitimacy and primacy. It is a vision given a more optimistic inflection by White when he writes of an additive, collective and enriching labour that produces the paradox whereby ‘the *more* we know about the past, the more difficult it is to generalize about it’ (89). As such, rather than rehearse the labyrinthine debates which surround the encounter of poststructuralist theory with the text of history, I hope to examine throughout these chapters actual exchanges between novelists and professional writers of non-fiction of the Cape. So Brink explicitly novelises the scholarship of Hermann Giliomee, V. C. Malherbe and Nigel Penn; Penn and Schrire draw on *Dusklands* in evoking the contact zone in the northern Cape. Coetzee reviews Noël Mostert’s *Frontiers* (1992) and is in turn read by social historians like Charles van Onselen and Jonny Steinberg.

Moreover, although the dismissal of a censorious schoolmistress ‘checking’ literature against the answer script of history is a memorable and polemically effective one, it does not, perhaps, acknowledge or allow for a common enough desire to discern some kind of limit or check to literary invention. Particularly in a context where the playful, magical realist elaborations of those like Brink were for a long time almost the default setting for the world’s new fiction,³⁴ there arises an urge to posit a boundary to the workings of the literary imagination, however difficult and contentious this may be. It is, perhaps, this very limit that Coetzee’s work seems to approach and limn the contours of – if only by silent implication and negative definition – in its reticence to encroach on the untellable or unspeakable. It is an intellectual discipline that one can trace as the word ‘history’ itself accrues different, ever more urgent meanings as it recurs throughout his interviews and essays. In one of the exchanges collected in *Doubling the Point* (1992), he contrasts ‘the almost infinite lattice of a shared European culture’ drawn on by a poet like Zbigniew Herbert with the absence of prior literary models for ‘white writing’ in South African context:

In Africa the only address one can imagine is a brutally direct one, a sort of pure, unmediated representation; what short-circuits the imagination, what forces one’s face into the thing itself, is what I am here calling history. ‘The only address one can imagine’ – an admission of defeat. *Therefore*, the task becomes imagining this unimaginable, imagining a form of address that permits the play of *writing* to start taking place.³⁵

³⁴ See Robert McCrum, ‘Last Rites for Magic Realism’, *Observer*, (May 12, 2002).

³⁵ Coetzee, *Doubling*, 68.

In 'Doubling the Cape', then, I hope to trace the process by which Coetzee marked out this singular fictional terrain. At the same time, the multiple meanings of the verb 'to double' allow for world of ethical seriousness set against constant textual play, of deep personal investment coexisting with consummate elusiveness.

'Great spaces washed with sun'

Following the course of the *wagen pad* (now become the clogged transport artery of Main Road as it curves around the slopes of Devil's Peak) [Figs. 8-9], the next chapter considers Rudyard Kipling's time spent at the Cape from 1891 and 1908, much of it as a guest of Cecil Rhodes. In doing so it provides a portrait of Cape Town as a seat of high empire, and considers a peculiarly literal kind of dream topography. At a time when surveyors' lines were subdividing the growing city into private pockets, the arch-imperialist Rhodes used his mining wealth to buy up almost all the old burgher farms on the mountain flanks, creating a protected estate that still stretches south from the shoulder of Table Mountain all the way to the botanical gardens at Kirstenbosch and Cecilia Forest (a name that rather loses its beauty when one realises whom it commemorates). Along with Roman lion cages, Corsican pines, English meadows, oak avenues, aviaries, deer parks, llama paddocks, summer houses and hydrangea beds, he also installed a 'cottage in the woods for poets and artists' where they could draw inspiration from the mountain.³⁶ 'Through a tap, as it were', wrote William Plomer in his caustic 1933 biography of Rhodes: 'Unfortunately, when turned on, the tap seems to have produced little but mountain mist and a few hiccups of patriotic fervour'.³⁷

Kipling may have written *Kim* (1901) during these years and read the much-loved *Just So Stories* (1902) to his children in the Woolsack garden, but even his most ardent admirers admit he never penned the masterpiece that his hero and patron was expecting, that he could not create British South Africa in the way he had Anglo-India. It was, he wrote to a correspondent in Simla, 'All like and yet unlike the old country'.³⁸ Read through criticism of the other Nobel laureate who wrote on these slopes, vintage Kipling lines like 'The granite of the ancient north' and 'Great spaces washed with sun' (from the poem partly inscribed on the Rhodes Memorial)³⁹ offer a particularly flagrant example of that literary *topos* which

³⁶ Herbert Baker, *Cecil Rhodes by his Architect*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1934), 44.

³⁷ William Plomer, *Cecil Rhodes* [1933] ed. with intro. by Geoffrey Haresnape, (Cape Town: David Philip, 1984), 140.

³⁸ Letter to Edmonia Hill, 8 March 1905, Thomas Pinney ed. *The Letters of Rudyard Kipling, Volume III 1900-1910*, (Basingstoke; Macmillan, 1990-2004), 180-81.

³⁹ 'The Burial' [1912], *Rudyard Kipling's Verse*, 209.

imagines an Africa measured in geological aeons: a prehistoric landmass absent of any indigenous human presence that might contradict the claims of European settlement. Paying close attention to his correspondence and lesser known writings from those years, my reading explores the reasons for this failure, its local dimension and its consequences for a literary history of the city. Throughout, one is able to discern the stresses attending the transfer of a poetics shaped in one sector of the British Empire (in this case, north-west India) to an entirely different colonial situation. Nonetheless, the overdetermined, unexpected quality of Kipling's prose also yields images of the Cape that now seem strangely prescient.

Extending the notion of a 'dream topography' still further, the remaining chapters are increasingly concerned with literary presence of the Bleek and Lloyd Collection. In the same suburb of Mowbray, the decades prior to Kipling's time at the Woolsack saw a unique instance of cross-cultural interaction within South African history and the creation of an archive now lodged in the special collections of the University of Cape Town. Amongst photographs, watercolour sketches and other material traces it includes 150 notebooks filled with columns of Victorian handwriting: phonetic notations of the languages once spoken by southern Africa's /Xam and !Kung peoples with English translations alongside that run to some 13,000 pages.⁴⁰ [Figs. 10-11]

In 1870, following a request to the Cape governor Sir Philip Wodehouse, the eminent philologist Wilhelm Bleek obtained permission to have an inmate from the Breakwater Convict Station transferred to his villa. Over the next fourteen years, he and his sister-in-law Lucy Lloyd would accommodate a succession of individuals from four extended families of /Xam-ka !ei: a people descended from one branch of the indigenous inhabitants of southern Africa who had no collective name for themselves, but were known to the Dutch as *Bosjemans*, to the English as Bushmen, and to the cattle-owning Khoikhoi as Sonqua, Soaqua or San. In colonial suburbia they were received first as convicts on parole, servants and 'native informants' for Bleek's abstruse philological enquiries, yet increasingly as valued teachers, storytellers, artists and (in Lloyd's phrase) 'givers of native literature'.⁴¹

Transcribed, translated and edited with uncommon diligence and foresight by Bleek and Lloyd, the words of individuals like /A!kúnta (Klaas Stoffel), Diä!kwain (David Hoesar), /Han#kass'o (Klein Jantje), //Kabbo (Oud Jantje Tooren), Kweiten-ta-//ken (Griet) and others reach us now as dense, digressive and often confusing fragments of text. Their disembodied

⁴⁰ For a general introduction to the making of the collection and its relation to other Khoisan oratures see Hedley Twidle, "'The Bushmen's Letters:/' /Xam Narratives of the Bleek and Lloyd Collection and their Afterlives', in Derek Attridge and David Attwell eds., *The Cambridge History of South African Literature*, (Cambridge University Press, forthcoming 2010). Draft available online at <www.york.ac.uk/depts/engl/chsal/index.htm>

⁴¹ W. H. I. Bleek and L. C. Lloyd, Preface to *Specimens of Bushman Folklore*, (London: George Allen and Company, 1911), x.

words comprise the most important record of indigenous expressive culture on the subcontinent, even as their names encode a history of forced acculturation, genocidal violence and language death that resulted from colonial settlement meeting with a hunter-gatherer economy in the arid regions south of the Orange River.

Filtered first through the deliberately archaic diction of Bleek and Lloyd's translation and then many subsequent adaptations, the testimony of the master narrator //Kabbo ('Dream') about wishing to return to 'my place' has come to stand at the head of several recent histories and anthologies as a new kind of beginning for, or prologue to, southern African literature.⁴² [Figs. 12-13] And while folklorists and ethnographers of the twentieth century tended to focus on the 'Customs and Beliefs' of 'Dr Bleek's Bushmen', in recent years other readers of the collection have been drawn to the more personal narratives elicited by Lloyd. Poets, archaeologists, and filmmakers have, as we shall see, all explored these evocations of the home territory of the /Xam which seem to intimate a sense of place entirely other to the feminised landscapes or depopulated vistas of colonial writing. For as a comparison of the VOC archive with the Bleek and Lloyd Collection bears out, when considered over a long time span, it is agricultural societies that have a tendency to restless, perpetual movement; hunting and herding peoples have been much more firmly allied with a specific territory. As Hugh Brody remarks in *The Other Side of Eden* (2000), the stereotyped opposition of 'settled' farmers and 'nomadic' hunters or herders has it the wrong way round.⁴³

The monumentalised verses of high imperialism and the fragments of a multiply translated, disembodied shamanism: the troubling vicinity of these very different dream topographies informs the latter half of this work as it attempts to enquire what shape a natural history of the Cape might take if it did not disavow the social. In one sense, their juxtaposition serves to underline the utterly disparate forms which are often subsumed under the rubric of 'colonial discourse'; on the other hand, for the literary imagination there remains an intriguing affinity between them.

The title of Kipling's *Just So Story* 'How the Alphabet Was Made' might well describe the learning process conducted in the suburban drawing rooms and verandas of The Hill where Bleek and especially Lloyd used children's books, early Cape travelogues and even visits to the natural history museum to build vocabularies with the /Xam narrators. In the secondary literature surrounding each encounter one senses another powerful and enduring

⁴² See Duncan Brown, *Voicing the Text: South African Oral Poetry and Performance*, (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1998) 33-74; Chapman, *Southern African Literatures*, 21-37; Helize van Vuuren, 'Orality in the Margins of Literary History: Prolegomena to a Study of Interaction between Bushmen Orality and Afrikaans Literature,' in Smit et al. eds., *Rethinking Literary History in South Africa*, (Durban: Y Press, 1996), 129-35.

⁴³ Hugh Brody, *The Other Side of Eden: Hunter-Gatherers, Farmers and the Shaping of the World*, [2000], (London: Faber and Faber, 2001).

myth of a biblical, Adamic language: a perfect transaction of things for words in a colonial garden. In both, nineteenth-century evolutionary theory intersects with a quest for linguistic origins, all of it overlaid by the vividness of remembered colonial childhoods. These produce in the popular imagination, then as well as now, an instance of ideal cultural translation, what Andrew Bank has called a 'garden myth', yet one which constantly harks back to the troubled landscapes of the northern Cape.⁴⁴

Drawing playfully and haphazardly on folkloric traditions from around the world, the *Just So Stories* have (via the immense international reach of Kipling's *oeuvre*) popularised a phrase in the English language that can in turn be applied to many of the creation narratives and tales of the 'Early Race' that make up the /Xam transcripts. In explaining why the hare has a split lip, the widely distributed southern African fable often known as 'The Origin of Death' could also be classed as a 'Just So Story' – an outlandish narrative explaining why things (and in particular, animal morphology) have come to assumed their present forms. Yet the phrase takes on another, more pejorative sense in discussions of organic evolution: following Darwin, a 'Just So Story' becomes an account which (like the theories of Lamarck) is unable to comprehend the number of variables that comprise natural selection and the complexity resulting from their interaction. It is a narrative limited by too basic an understanding of cause and effect, by the attribution of too much agency to the organism in question – in effect, by an anthropocentrism which does not go far enough towards (to relocate Coetzee's phrase) imagining the unimaginable.

These nineteenth-century encounters in Cape Town, then, presents a rich site for tracing the traffic between the literary and the ethnographic, the philological and the biological. How, and with what results, do concept metaphors pass from one domain to another; and how might one begin to imagine a more nuanced relation between literary history and natural history than is commonly the case in postcolonial critique?

'Scratches on the face of the country...'

Having considered the 'mountain church' of the Rhodes Estate as a place where early nature conservation and a rhetoric of the sublime are directly implicated in a politics of imperial expansion, the remaining chapters ask if any kind of meaningful 'nature writing' can be recuperated by contemporary authors. I begin with a survey of how Enlightenment travellers and scientific observers like Sparrmann (1775), Le Vaillant (1790), Lady Anne Barnard (1797), Barrow (1801), Burchell (1824) and Darwin himself (1836) rendered the

⁴⁴ Andrew Bank, 'From Pictures to Performance: Early Learning at The Hill', *Kronos: Journal of Cape History*, 28, (2002), 66-101; and *Bushmen in a Victorian World*, (Cape Town: Double Storey, 2006).

physical geography of the Cape, logging the shifting cultural dimensions of both the phrase 'natural history' and of a mountain chain which emerges as both icon and political unconscious of an increasingly divided city.

'Pine dark mountain star' goes on to establish the context for a close, contrapuntal reading of the English and Afrikaans poets which seeks to transform the Peninsula into words. It asks how successfully writers like Sydney Clouts, Ingrid De Kok, Antjie Krog and Stephen Watson free themselves from the mystifications of the colonial pastoral or the pristine demands of wilderness narrative. It traces in a local context the vexed intersection of 'landscape poetry', post-structuralist literary theory and that strand of environmentalism which proclaimed, in the title of Bill McKibben's 1989 work, *The End of Nature*. And in each of these varied texts which go by the inadequate name of 'nature writing', one senses how the very act of verbally reconstituting the textures of coastline or contour path betrays an ineluctable apartness from the non-human world which the poet longs to write him or herself into.

In the closing sections, however, the material, collectively experienced fact of incarceration reasserts itself. The Slave Lodge abutting the Company Gardens; the /Xam narrators transferred from the Breakwater Convict Station into the 'garden myth' of colonial Mowbray; the lush grounds of Rhodes Estate contrasted with the labour barracks glimpsed by Kipling in Kimberley – having been in close physical and discursive proximity throughout, the prison and garden come together nowhere more literally than in Nelson Mandela's account of growing vegetables while incarcerated on Robben Island and in Pollsmoor (and indeed, burying the secret manuscript of *Long Walk to Freedom* in the earth).⁴⁵ [Figs. 14-15] The work of writers like Dennis Brutus, Alex La Guma, Albie Sachs, Breyten Breytenbach and Jeremy Cronin surely constitutes a veritable sub-tradition of Cape prison literature. And as their prime importance as documents of witness, solidarity and struggle subsides, it seems that some of the most powerful, experimental literary voices have emerged from those who had come to the inner sanctum of the police state.

Mindful of this attention to the play of space and constriction at the smallest verbal levels, the final chapter surveys the various afterlives of the Bleek and Lloyd Collection. Its rediscovery and dissemination has been one of the major events of South African scholarship in the last decades, bringing together archaeology, linguistics, poetry, rock art studies and cultural politics in ways which have been contested and often controversial. In tracing a series of scandals in the postcolony, I try to discern just what kind of poetics *can* provide a verbal guarantee of adequate engagement with such an archive. And considering

⁴⁵ See Nelson Mandela, *A Prisoner in the Garden: Opening Nelson Mandela's Prison Archive*, (Johannesburg: Penguin, 2005); Elleke Boehmer, 'Spectres in the Prison Garden', *Nelson Mandela: a Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford University Press, 2008).

the expansive, improvisatory element – or to use //Kabbo’s metaphor, ‘floating’ quality – at the heart of such an oral tradition, how is one to approach such modern versions in a ways which remain ethically sensitive without being judgemental or proprietorial?

Simply bringing the intensely overwritten and sentimentalised figure of the ‘Bushman’ into focus presents a particular challenge in South Africa. In a similar context, the editor of the 2000 *Granta* edition on Australia cast a sceptical eye on the belated literary fascination with Aboriginal culture: it all too easily became ‘an unpunishing version of Catholicism’ with idealised indigenes cast as ‘the sacred suppliers of art, mystery, tourism, identity and guilt’.⁴⁶ Similarly, whether reading about the ‘Harmless People’ of Laurens van der Post’s pseudo-anthropological quests or the ‘First Peoples’ of Thabo Mbeki’s African Renaissance, one has a comparable sense that under the cover of an interest in the San such claims of history on prehistory are *always concerned with something else*. Even within the otherwise superb displays at the Origins Centre in Johannesburg, the ‘proudly South African’ desire to promote the modern nation state as the ‘Cradle of Humankind’ makes for something questionable and possibly demeaning.

Yet the painful autobiographical testimony contained in the Bleek and Lloyd Collection and the particular, context-bound circumstances of its creation mean that it can hardly be considered as a nostalgic access to a pre-modern existence; or, as Bleek put it in his second *Report* of 1875, as ‘pictures of the native mind in its national originality’.⁴⁷ Instead, each transcribed fragment, indeed each page of the notebooks (now available online through a large scale process of digitisation) is approached here as a language event of great complexity, difficulty, beauty and unexpectedness.⁴⁸ Reading the English and Afrikaans writers who have woven such fragile physical and textual traces in to their own work, I follow a submerged strand of elegy and rock art *ekphrasis* that runs from Eugene Marais through to a contemporary eco-poetics where – no less than the repeatedly severed ‘cord of tenderness’ that links Michael K to his ‘patch of earth’ – a famous fragment like Diä!kwain’s ‘Song of the Broken String’ cannot but acquire a profound charge of ongoing environmental diminishment.

Having begun with the VOC records and the suspect visions of the land discussed by Coetzee at the height of apartheid, this work culminates then in the ramifying body of creative adaptation, cultural selection and scholarship which envelops this very different colonial archive. As such, it seeks to move away from the dream topography of the silent,

⁴⁶ Ian Jack ed., *Granta 70: Australia, The New New World*, (London: Granta, Summer 2000),10.

⁴⁷ W. H. I. Bleek, *Second Report concerning Bushman Researches: a Brief Account of Bushman Folk-Lore and Other Texts*, (Cape Town: Government Printer, 1875), 2.

⁴⁸ A large part of the archive, including all the /Xam and !Kung notebooks, was scanned and placed online by Pippa Skotnes between 2005 and 2007. See ‘Lloyd Bleek online’: <www.lloydbleekonline.uct.ac.za>

unpeopled geological expanse toward a vision which takes as its metaphor the complex and beautiful 'script' of rock art spreading throughout the Cape fold mountains and the entire subcontinent.⁴⁹ [Figs. 16-17] In doing so I hope to suggest, if only tentatively and from an irrevocable distance, where an account of writing the land might properly begin.

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⁴⁹ Duncan Brown, *To Speak of This Land: Identity and Belonging in South Africa and Beyond*, (Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2006), 21-2.

FIRST LIVES, FIRST WORDS

CAMÕES, MAGICAL REALISM AND THE LIMITS OF INVENTION

This is how space begins, with words only, signs traced on the blank page. To describe space: to name it, to trace it, like those portolano-makers who saturated the coastlines with the names of harbours, the names of capes, the names of inlets, until in the end the land was only separated from the sea by a continuous ribbon of text...Space as inventory, space as invention.

Georges Perec, *Espèces d'espaces* [1974].
Trans. John Sturrock, (1997).

Witness then, experts in nomenclature
What wonders exist in unlettered Nature!

Luiz Vaz de Camões, *Os Lusíadas*, Canto V 22, [1572].
Trans. Landeg White, (2001).

In his massive 1992 work *Frontiers* – described in its subtitle as ‘The Epic of South Africa’s Creation’, compared to Gibbon on its dustjacket and surely the most widely read popular history of the Cape – Noël Mostert pauses to envisage the arrival of Portuguese caravels from the landward side: ‘What those Gouriqua or Outeniqua herdsmen thought of the strange billowing structures that suddenly floated into sight towards the beach as Bartolomeu Días came inshore to anchor and land can hardly be imagined’.¹ Undaunted, the opening lines of André Brink’s 1988 novella, *Die Eerste Lewe van Adamastor* (*The First Life of Adamastor*, 1993), attempt just this:

Now that really was a sight to behold. From the sea, from the nesting-place of the sun, we could see two objects swimming towards us, looking for all the world like two enormous sea-birds with white feathers fluttering in a breeze that had newly sprung up....After a long time our eyes prised a third sea-bird loose from the horizon...Then a strange thing happened...the two birds in front began to lay eggs of a curious roundish shape, and brown in colour...What amazed us was that these eggs did not emerge, as one would expect, from the tail-end of the birds, but rather from under their wings; and soon the eggs came drifting towards us on the tide. They had hardly reached the shore when people started hatching from them, not one at a time, but whole bunches.²

The ostrich-like stiff-leggedness of the Europeans continues the bird metaphor; so too their puffed sleeves and colourful plumage, as Brink’s prose attempts to reconstitute a sense of utter newness in this encounter. Evoking the sense of historical vertigo that ensues when one sees galleons, wagons and broad-brimmed hats beginning to intrude on the surface of rock art in the western Cape, Mostert writes of ‘the arrival of measure where none existed, an ominous intrusion upon the seemingly eternal’ (31). [*Fig. 18*]

When we are told these figures ‘knew nothing resembling a language’, that the sounds they uttered were ‘quite meaningless, like the chattering of birds’, a common Western complaint about the Khoikhoi is inverted: the latter were a speech community whose complex array of clicks and implosives led to centuries of repeated, recycled disparagement of their ‘gobbling’ and ‘clucking like turkey-cocks’.³ The strangers have pinched, beak-like features and hair all over their faces, which is just as well since their skin looks fragile and deficient: ‘all pale and white like grass that had grown under a rock for too long’. The leader of the party may be Días or Da Gama, but the speaker cannot be entirely sure. He has seen paintings of the latter, ‘and that square man in his drapes and embroidery...does look familiar; but can one trust a painting, especially one made so long after the event?’ (12-13)

¹ Noël Mostert. *Frontiers: The Epic of South Africa’s Creation and the Tragedy of the Xhosa People*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1992), 36.

² André Brink, *The First Life of Adamastor* [1993], (London: Vintage, 2000), 11.

³ Jodocus Hondius, *A Clear Description of the Cape of Good Hope* [1652], trans. L. C. van Oordt, (Cape Town: Van Riebeeck Festival Book Exhibition Committee), 26-28. See J. M. Coetzee, *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 12.

The teller of this impossibly self-aware tale is a Khoi chief, T’Kama, who is also a more down-to-earth embodiment of the mythical giant Adamastor, intent on giving his version of the famous events and replacing the image of a brooding Cape Peninsula with a very different kind of creation myth. In a preface, Brink explains the fictional conceit of his short book: re-reading *The Lusiads*, he wondered from what raw material or *Ur-text* the poet could have fashioned his typically sixteenth-century version of the story:

Suppose there *were* an Adamastor, a model for the giant of Camões’ fanciful history; and suppose that original creature, spirit, or whatever he may have been, had survived through the centuries in a series of disparate successive avatars in order to continue watching over the Cape of Storms: how would *he* look back, from the perspective of the late twentieth century, on that original experience? (7)

In the Portuguese original, Adamastor explains how he was locked in stone as punishment for his pursuit of the daughter of the sea-gods Doris and Nereus, the pale nymph Thetis who continues to tantalise him by swimming in the waves off the Cape. ‘What love of nymph could e’er suffice / To cope with that of giant of this size?’ asks Camões, and here, in Brink’s estimation, ‘our pretentious poet’ is ‘blowing up, in a manner of speaking, out of all proportion a stumbling-block which might well have been overcome with some patience and considerable pleasure’ (3). His T’kama-Adamastor is demythologised to the point where his legendary size refers to only a single part of his anatomy, and one which causes manifold difficulties as he attempts to consummate a relationship with a woman stranded after a skirmish between the Khoi and the European birds of passage.

‘Nuwe woorde, nuwe voorstellings en nuwe beelde...’

It is a veering from an African sublime to the ridiculous that can be traced through Brink’s long literary career. The weighty tomes about Afrikaner rebels and resisters caught up in apartheid emergencies have gradually been rivalled by a parallel strand of fantasy and fabulism where a more distant past is conceived – no less than literature – as a tissue of overlapping fictions, unreliable narrators and colourful metaphors: *A Chain of Voices*, in the title of his 1982 work about a slave revolt in the Koue Bokkeveld which represented one of the first major attempts to bring the language (and violence) of the Cape archives into the domain of popular fiction. In the *First Life*, the imprisoned Titan of *The Lusiads* has metamorphosed from its original epic proportions via the vexed romanticism of colonial English poets to become the stuff of postcolonial, postmodern farce, and one that finds great scope in the chaos of myth and offshore speculation through which the southern coasts of Africa were written up by Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

Reading across the wildly popular body of twentieth-century fiction known controversially but conveniently as 'magical realism', it seems that the affinity between writings from the time of the earliest colonial contact zones and those of the postcolonial aftermath is a profound one. Both, perhaps, transpire at a historical cusp when discredited, ludicrously old-fashioned representations of the Other are being abandoned; when ways of writing the historical disjunctions engendered by new technology are still coming into being, texts which have little truck with the kind of realism that creates what it claims only to describe. 'The articulated superposition of whole layers of the past within the present', Frederic Jameson suggests, 'is the formal precondition for the emergence of this new narrative style'; as a formal mode it is then 'constitutively dependent on a type of historical raw material in which this disjunction is structurally present'.⁴ And if the protean energies of Renaissance literature have increasingly been understood as a by-product of the voyages of discovery; then, following the dismantling of the colonial project in the late twentieth century, the proliferation of postcolonial migrant writing has become, as Elleke Boehmer remarks, almost inseparable from the runaway success of *lo real maravilloso*. It is a contested but internationally recognised vocabulary of fictional special effects through which writers with a view from the fringe of once dominant European cultures are able to present 'a world fissured, distorted, and made incredible by cultural displacement'.⁵

Yet how successfully can such baroque narrative procedures be transplanted to this part of the world? Brink is after all only one of several post-apartheid fabulists: in their very different works, authors like Anne Landsman, Zakes Mda, and Etienne van Heerden have all refracted the various frontiers of Cape history through the prism of a fictional mode which has migrated from South America via India to the Caribbean and Australia before arriving (somewhat late in the day) on these shores. Given South Africa's curiously staggered colonial history and its delayed decolonisation, how might the debates about national allegory and lingering exoticism which have enveloped the work of authors like Gabriel García Márquez and Salman Rushdie play out here?

In a 2005 address on 'Post-Apartheid Literature: A Personal View', Brink counters that the appellation 'magical realism' is in fact an unfortunate one in a South African context: it inevitably brings to mind the fiction of the Latin American boom, whereas 'Africa has had its own form of magical realism in the long tradition of oral narrative which spanned many

⁴ Frederic Jameson, 'On Magic Realism in Film' [1986], *Signatures of the Visible*, (London: Routledge, 1990), 138-9.

⁵ Elleke Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*, (Oxford University Press, 1995), 4. The term *lo real maravilloso* appears in Alejo Carpentier's famous preface to *El Reino de Este Mundo* [1949], *The Kingdom of This World*, trans. Harriet de Onís, (London: André Deutsch, 1990), n.p.

centuries before it erupted in the work of writers as diverse as Amos Tutuola or Ben Okri'.⁶ Invoking Brenda Cooper's 1998 account of West African fiction, he goes on to say that what predominates in this tradition 'is the foregrounding of ancestors who continue to intervene actively in the affairs of the present, an easy gliding between the worlds of the living and the dead' (17).⁷

Peopled by disembodied avatars of colonial history and drawing increasingly on pre-colonial Khoi mythology, Brink's own recent work surely attempts to access and buttress an indigenous tradition of the marvellous even as it rides the currents of both early modern and postmodern 'world literature'. Like Mostert's encomiums to the original Khoisan place names of the Cape, in paying attention to these 'First Peoples' it (like much post-apartheid, or post-anti-apartheid, writing) seeks to imagine a new, more inclusive way of re-naming a paradisaical African landscape. And in doing so it surely holds in mind N. P. van Wyk Louw's grand conception of Afrikaans as the language able to act as a bridge between, and to draw strength from, both 'the great lucid West and the magical Africa'.⁸ In the remarkable passage from his 1961 essay 'Vernuwung in die Prosa' ('Innovation in Prose') now engraved on the Taalmonument (Language Monument) in Paarl, one sees how intimately literary openness co-exists with linguistic exclusion, natural expanse with nationalistic isolation, as this new African language evolves to encompass 'every rill and fold' of the landmass:

Afrikaans is die taal wat vir Wes-Europa en Afrika verbind; dit suig die krag uit dié twee bronne; dit vorm 'n brug tussen die groot helder Weste en die magiese Afrika – die soms nog so onhelder Afrika; hulle is albei groot magte, en wat daar groots aan hulle vereniging kan ontspruit – dit is miskien wat vir Afrikaans voorlê om te ontdek...Maar wat ons nooit moet vergeet nie, is dat hierdie verandering van land en landskap as't ware aan die nuwe woordende taal geslyp, geknee, gebrei het; nuwe woorde, nuwe voorstellings en nuwe beelde laat ontstaan het, ou woorde en voorstellings laat verdwyn het, oor elke riffel en vou van die nuwe wêreldbeeld kon sluit. En so het Afrikaans in staat geword om hierdie nuwe land uit te sê soos geen ander Europese taal nie. (13)

Brink's rewritten *Adamastor* is the first of many Adams that will appear in these pages as I seek to explore how such confidence to name the natural world might be earned and guaranteed, or else assumed and forfeited, by the literary work. The Linnaean naturalist obsessively affixing labels to specimens; the transplanted Romantic poet seeking a language in which the African landmass might 'naturally' reveal itself; the contemporary 'nature writer' drawn to the litanies of place contained in the Khoisan oratures – each of these comprise a complex intermingling of real wonder at the exchange of world for word

⁶ André Brink, 'Post-Apartheid Literature: A Personal View', in Elleke Boehmer, Robert Eaglestone and Katy Iddiols eds., *J. M. Coetzee in Context and Theory*, (London: Continuum, 2009), 16.

⁷ Brenda Cooper, *Magic Realism in West African Fiction*, (London: Routledge, 1998).

⁸ N. P. Van Wyk Louw, 'Vernuwung in die Prosa' [1961] quoted in 'Prysvraag: Taalmonument te Paarl,' *South African Architectural Record* (May 1996), 13. Rep in Vladislavić and Judin eds., *blank_*: *Architecture, Apartheid and After*, (Cape Town: David Philip, 1999).

with a conspicuous, questionable innocence. And indeed the blurred etymology of Camões' creation (itself drawn from Rabelais) suggests how the tendency to collapse human history into inhuman wilderness is present from the very inception of writing the Cape: the Latin echo *Adamaster* yields an 'imitative rival of Adam'; the Greek root *Adamastos* suggests 'untamed' or 'untameable'. In the literature of colonial contact, then, the presence of the inanimate world, as it exceeds and threatens the biblical act of naming, all too easily becomes the maligned, mysterious Other, and nature does the work of culture.

Faced with this difficult encounter between postcolonial and ecocritical impulses in the act of reading, I begin here with Brink as representative of one pole in recent South African writing: a literature of abundance and novelty, violent yet exuberant, ready to experiment with new forms of literary genesis. The other pole will emerge in later chapters through the sparse and self-aware *oeuvre* of J. M. Coetzee: a stringent artistic economy which turns away from the lush garden of Judaeo-Christian myth (or pre-colonial African mythology) towards the self-contained island of the Crusoe figure. As both inaugural English novel and archetypal text of colonialism in the New World,⁹ 'Crusoe's Journal' is, in Derek Walcott's poem, 'our first book, our profane genesis'; the castaway is 'the second Adam since the fall'.¹⁰ Yet equally, as Coetzee once remarked, this vision of marooning, solitary creation and self-sufficiency is perhaps the 'only story', in which the act of writing becomes not one of untrammelled invention but rather an inventory of salvaged fragments.

'The sheer excess, the inspired bad taste'

In his 1988 anthology, *Shades of Adamastor*, Malvern van Wyk Smith writes that 'although the Cape of Good Hope was not known to Europeans "till the Portugales of late began their navigation on the back-side of Africa", as George Abbott put it in 1599', the southern extremity of the continent was 'effectively invented before it was discovered'.¹¹ He shows how it had existed as symbol in the European imaginary since antiquity: 'an ancient text under revision' which veered sharply between visions of paradise and purgatory,

⁹ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* [1993], (London: Vintage, 1994), 82-83.

¹⁰ Derek Walcott, 'Crusoe's Island' and 'Crusoe's Journal' in *The Castaway and Other Poems*, [1965] rep. *Collected Poems: 1948-1984* (New York: Noonday Press, 1988), 69, 92.

¹¹ Malvern van Wyk Smith, *Shades of Adamastor*, (Grahamstown: National English Literary Museum, 1988), 8. In the substitution of 'invention' for 'discovery' he is surely adapting the thesis of the Mexican historian Edmundo O'Gorman in his classic work, *The Invention of America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1961), who, like Brink, draws on Michel de Montaigne: 'Our continent has just invented another'. Cited in Brink, *Reinventing a Continent: Writing and Politics in South Africa, 1982-1995*, (London: Secker & Warburg, 1996), 230.

refreshment and desolation, fabled Christian empires and hazardous torrid zones.¹² One can trace this instability on maps and mariners' charts where attempts to reconcile Classical speculation and real geography produce some extraordinary shapes: Africa stretched, distended, split in two or joined to the bottom of world in order to accommodate conflicting surveys and superimposed myths. Unintentionally 'discovered' when Días is blown around it in 1488 and tacks East to find no land, the Cape is doubled again in receiving two names: Cape of Storms from Días, Cape of Good Hope from his sovereign, although most chroniclers agree the mariner coined both, and that *Cabo de Boa Esperanza* was attributed to King João II in the interests of loyal politeness and imperial propaganda.

If this residue of the marvellous is a matter of frustration and hazard for navigators and investors, for a poet like Camões, immortalising Da Gama's voyage of 1497, it yields a massive linguistic and descriptive payload. In the words of the poem's most recent, acclaimed translator, Landeg White:

Camões was – for the point bears repeating – the first major European artist to visit the tropics and the Orient. He was thus the first to face the challenge of finding a language and form to give expression to such experiences. Da Gama's voyage of exploration becomes an extended metaphor for his own explorations in the 'craft' of poetry.¹³

As the fifth canto tacks around the bulge of Africa, 'christening' headlands and crossing the 'burning line' into the southern hemisphere, the octavos are famously sensitive to the wonders of 'unlettered nature' that are being unlocked by this rendering of the Portuguese sea-borne empire (100).¹⁴ White's rendering brings into fine focus the 'Lion Mountains' of Africa's coastline, the mouth of the Zaire 'immense and brimming', the violence of electrical storms and the appearance of new constellations overhead (100). In one of the poem's most celebrated moments, the phenomenon of the waterspout enters Western literature for the first time, growing from a slender tube – 'A little vapour and subtle smoke / Rotating a little from the wind's drag' – into a swollen, threatening parasite: 'As a purple leech may be seen swelling / On the lips of some beast...The more it sucks the bigger it grows / Gorging itself to bursting point' (102).

It is a mixture of wonder and grossness present throughout the poem, and the shift from expansive horizons to parasitic possession rendered in microcosm here foreshadows

¹² Malvern van Wyk Smith, 'Ptolemy, Paradise and Purgatory: Portugal and the African Imaginary' in Ivan Vladislavic ed. *T'kama-Adamastor: Inventions of Africa in a South African Painting*. (Johannesburg: University of Witwatersrand Press, 2000).

¹³ Luiz Vaz de Camões, *The Lusíads*, trans. with intro by Landeg White, (Oxford University Press, 2001), xvii-xviii. All quotations are from this edition unless otherwise stated.

¹⁴ The phrase which White translates as 'experts in nomenclature' (used as the epigraph to this chapter) appears as in the original as *sábios na escritura*: i.e. 'those who are wise from reading rather than from observation of nature'. See Luis de Camões, *Os Lusíadas* [1572], Canto V 22, ed. with intro by Frank Pierce, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), n.114.

the larger, structural modulation into a different, darker key signalled by the rounding of the Cape. Yet even as Adamastor materialises in a similar process out of inanimate matter and the night air – ‘hair grizzled and matted with clay, / Its mouth coal black, teeth yellow with decay’ – there still is an unmistakably literary sense of staking out new poetic territory. We are seeing – the poet tells us – what ancient geographers had no conception of, and in a charged verse form that can only truly resound as it should in open vowels of the original Portuguese:

*Eu sou aquele oculto e grande Cabo
A quem chamais vós outros Tormentório,
Que nunca a Ptolomeu, Pompónio, Estrabo,
Plínio, e quantos passaram fui notório.*

I am that vast, secret promontory
You Portuguese call the Cape of Storms,
Which neither Ptolemy, Pompey, Strabo,
Pliny, nor any authors knew of.¹⁵

Following the Renaissance figurative practice of imitative *contaminatio*, Camões concentrates and distils a wide variety of Classical myths and literary antecedents into a single figure: allusions to Homer’s Polyphemus and the comic genealogies of Rabelais combine with shifting Greek and Latin etymologies, engendering a clayey African Adam as well as complex play of recognition and imaginative transposition in the reading process which is largely lost to us today.¹⁶ What can still be sensed though, setting *The Lusíads* apart from the historical chronicles on which it is based and ensuring its place in world literature, is the poised temporal perspective enabled by the literary work. Using it as an epigraph to *Frontiers*, Mostert remarks on the complex mood where dynamism coexists with an ‘acknowledgement of the price of connecting the hemispheres with regular, predatory passage, a sadness...a stigma and burden for releasing so vast a proportion of the diverse fates of humankind during the last five hundred years’.¹⁷

Writing in the mid-sixteenth century, having witnessed corruption and cruelties in the East, lost an eye, survived bankruptcy, shipwreck and (so the legend goes) swum to shore in present-day Cambodia with only the sodden manuscript of *The Lusíads* clutched to his chest, Camões recreates Da Gama’s voyage from a vantage point much later in the trajectory of the Portuguese empire. In cursing the mariners, Adamastor foretells in coded poetic terms the death of Días in a hurricane in 1500 off the Cape, the massacre of the

¹⁵ Camões, *Os Lusíadas*, 121; trans. White, *The Lusíads*, 180.

¹⁶ Jeremy Cronin even suggests that with his clayey pallor and matted hair, Adamastor ‘is invested partly with Khoisan features’. ‘Turning Around: Roy Campbell’s “Rounding the Cape”’, *English in Africa* 11:1 (May 1984), 75.

¹⁷ Mostert, *Frontiers*, 7.

Viceroy D'Almeida in 1510 on the shores of Table Bay and the wreck of the São João in 1552, the earliest extant and most famous of all the *História Trágico-Marítima*: bestselling tales of maritime disaster and marooning printed as pamphlets and chapbooks in sixteenth-century Lisbon.

Whether this overdetermined, densely literary encounter 'inscribes future disaster at the very origin of the Portuguese imperial venture',¹⁸ or whether it is better described as 'a tautological voice which predicts the consequences of the Portuguese voyages while assuming their success',¹⁹ there is certainly a sense of a poetics tested to its limit. To read *The Lusiads* today is to be reminded of the ability of Renaissance literature to ingest so much disparate material, the 'reach and stretch' (in Puttenham's phrase) which admitted so many different phenomena, generic forms and peoples. A literary rediscovery of 'unlettered Nature' and the newness of things that energises the language of Cervantes, Rabelais and Montaigne, such linguistic ambition finds an appreciative twentieth-century audience in authors like García Márquez, Carlos Fuentes, Milan Kundera and Salman Rushdie, all of whom have acknowledged their debt to these early modern minds. In his essay on 'Gabriel García Márquez and the Invention of America', Fuentes writes that such invention is 'indistinguishable from the naming of America', and that this in turn is inextricable from a sense of its 'imaginary newness':

For it is this sense of total newness, of primeval appearance, that gives its true tone to names and words in America. The urgency of naming and describing the New World – of naming and describing in the New World – is intimately related to this newness, which is, in effect, the most ancient trait of the New World.²⁰

The 'marvellous testimonies to Nature's youth' in Canto V of *The Lusiads* (102) then find a distant echo in the famous opening lines of *Cien años de soledad* (1967), where 'the world was so recent that many things lacked names';²¹ and one might note in passing that Rushdie's hybrid of modern India and medieval Iberia in *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995) includes a character named Camoens. In turn, an essay in Kundera's *Testaments Betrayed* (1993) moves from Rabelais to Rushdie in positing the existence of 'the novel from below the thirty-fifth parallel, the novel of the South: a great new novelistic culture characterised by

¹⁸ Robert Eric Livingston, 'Discourses of Empire' in Irele and Gikandi eds., *The Cambridge History of African and Caribbean Literature*, vol. I (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 260.

¹⁹ Jared Banks, 'Adamastorying Mozambique: *Ualalapi* and *Os Lusíadas*', *Luso-Brazilian Review* 37 (2000), 4.

²⁰ Carlos Fuentes, *Myself with Others: Selected Essays* [1988], (London: Picador, 1989), 187.

²¹ Gabriel García Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* [1967], Trans. G Rabassa, (London: Penguin, 1970), 1.

an extraordinary sense of the real coupled with an untrammelled imagination that breaks every rule of plausibility.²²

Brink too has confessed a distinctly European taste for the evolving, experimental and unruly literature of the early modern period, so different to the Robinson Crusoe of the eighteenth century who seeks to assure us that his creation of a fiefdom for himself on a distant, non-European island is a 'just History of Fact'.²³ *The Lusiad, or Portugals Historically Poem* was introduced to the English-speaking world by Richard Fanshawe's version of 1655. For over a hundred years this remained the only translation, until British expansion in the East called forth no less than eight versions in the nineteenth century, most of whose authors were dismissive of their high-spirited predecessor. 'Nor had he the least idea of the dignity of the epic style', wrote William Mickle in 1776, 'He can never have enough of conceits, low allusions and expressions'.²⁴ Richard Burton complained of his taking 'improper liberties with his author: his inversions and parentheses, wheel within wheel, often make him more Camões than Camões, – not in a praiseworthy sense...He exaggerates whatever strikes him, with the jovial rollicking manner of the Carolians'.²⁵

Yet for Camões' most recent translator, it is Fanshawe's rendering that remains most faithful to the larger architecture of the original, to its 'sweetness and...bustling, grotesque energy'.²⁶ Even as he taps various reservoirs of pre-colonial southern African mythology for his short work, Brink relishes precisely this, remarking that the version he worked from – J. J. Aubertin's of 1884 – retains 'something of the great original melodrama' of Camões, a quality which even finds a physical analogue in the architecture of Portugal's over-committed imperial capital: 'as baroque and exaggerated as the arches and architraves, the sheer excess, the inspired bad taste of the Manueline churches and cloisters in Lisbon or Oporto'.²⁷

Paying tribute to this multi-lingual Renaissance man on the occasion of his seventieth birthday in 2005, the poet Antjie Krog referred to the 'awesome amplitude' of his *oeuvre*, its ambitions to assimilate and represent the total experience of the subcontinent.²⁸ In terms of bulk, *The First Life of Adamastor* is very slight, almost a five-finger exercise compared to

²² Milan Kundera, *Testaments Betrayed* [1993], trans. Linda Asher, (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), 30.

²³ Daniel Defoe, Preface, *The Strange and Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* [1719], ed. J. Donald Crowley (Oxford University Press, 1972), 1.

²⁴ William Julius Mickle 'Dissertation on the *Lusiad*', (London, 1776), xxxi-xxxii. Sir Richard Burton, *Camões: His Life and his Lusíads*, (London, 1881), 141.

²⁵ Sir Richard Burton, *Camões: His Life and his Lusíads*, (London, 1881), 141. Cited by Roger Walker in Peter Davidson ed., *The Poems and Translations of Sir Richard Fanshawe*, vol. II, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 587.

²⁶ White, *The Lusíads*, Introduction, xi.

²⁷ Brink, *The First Life*, 6.

²⁸ Antjie Krog, 'Tribute to André P Brink on the occasion of his seventieth birthday celebration'. 5 July 2005. <http://www.oulitnet.co.za/seminarroom/brink_tribute.asp>

many other books in the Brink canon. In an essay he confesses that it was conceived as only the first chapter in a planned work of thirteen afterlives which never came to be. Instead these found their way into the brick-sized 1991 thriller *An Act of Terror*, but in a curious, truncated appendix where the shades of Adamastor are used to explore the generations of an Afrikaans family, the Landsmans. It is a work cast resolutely in the other, older mould: a press photographer of the 1980s awakes to his historical predicament and plots to assassinate the State President outside the gates of the Castle. As he tours the Cape Peninsula one last time with his girlfriend, in between the customary Brinkian scenes of sex *al fresco* they read Camões – neither Fanshawe nor Aubertin but ‘a charmingly old-fashioned prose translation’ (presumably the 1952 version by Atkinson) – and feel some obscure affinity with the angry defensiveness of Adamastor, wondering if they as anti-apartheid revolutionaries can claim some kind of kinship with him. ‘I’d much rather think of us as the children of Adamastor, Thomas, not his victims’, says his partner. In a nod to Black Consciousness, he replies: ‘I think it’s up to him to decide whether he wants to accept us or not’.²⁹

‘*An Act of Terror* belongs to that small group of novels embracing a country’s ethos and history in one panoptic vision’ according to a dustjacket which equates it with Peter Carey and García Márquez. As in much of his corpus, Brink writes against the grain of apartheid’s narrowly defined nationalism, seeking to access a tradition of independence and resistance to authority: Van Wyk Louw’s *lojale verset* (loyal resistance), or *The Adversary Within*, in the title of Jack Cope’s 1982 account of dissident writers in Afrikaans.³⁰ Yet as the novel struggles to take in South Africa’s multiple, asymmetrical experience of colonial administration and anti-colonial struggle, the strain of all this earnest myth-making takes begins to show. In tone and structure it is entirely unlike *Cien años de soledad*, where the sense of universality is created not by panoptic overview but rather by carefully proscribed limit. Surrounded by swamps, the village of Macondo is at several ironic removes from a straightforward allegory of Colombian history. The family tree of the Buendías is so replete with Aurelianos and Arcadios that the process of divining any kind of coherent data from linear, causal flows and inherited traits is dissolved in a world of endless recurrence and gloriously overburdened signifiers.

Brink remarks that he abandoned his original project of afterlives since he ‘could not resolve the question of whether there should be a genealogical link between the various

²⁹ André Brink, *An Act of Terror* [1991], (London: Vintage, 2000), 29. As with many of Brink’s works, the Afrikaans title is better: *Die Kreef Raak Gewoond Daaraan*.

³⁰ Jack Cope, *The Adversary Within: Dissident Writers in Afrikaans*, (Cape Town: David Philip, 1982).

reincarnations of Adamastor, or whether their relationship should be random'.³¹ In *An Act of Terror*, the genealogical option imbues the Landsmans with an importance they can hardly bear, and as the couple reach Cape Point, the superhuman symbolism of the topography proves irresistible:

Today, he thought, today they'd reached an extremity: a moral cape as ultimate as this horn which Africa gaffs into the southern seas...Mechanically, more from habit than from any conscious decision, he took a few photographs of Adamastor, blue on blue.³²

Here surely it is the use of the psychologically charged Cape itself that is mechanical and habitual, a reflex gesture on the part of an overstretched writer. 'Africa was still Africa', Thomas muses, 'No longer romantic or virginal, but a wild subconscious in the mind of the world' (28). A vision of implacable history etched into portentous geography, it is an ossified, discredited, yet still extraordinarily current way of writing about the continent that, like many a second-rate poetic rehashing of Camões, threatens to collapse the human drama of southern Africa – both the facts of colonial violence and possibilities of anti-colonial resistance – into a blind force of nature.³³ This is Africa as setting and backdrop, as Chinua Achebe wrote when exploring the 'adjectival insistence upon inexpressible and incomprehensible mystery'³⁴ which so annoyed F. R. Leavis in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*: 'Africa as a metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognisable humanity...Can nobody see the preposterous and perverse arrogance in thus reducing Africa to the role of props for the break-up of one petty European mind?'³⁵

This vision of a brooding, mystified, undifferentiated natural world as the receptacle for a poetry of 'agonised self-appraisal',³⁶ absence and psychological crisis represents everything that this work is not interested in, and everything that it will try to separate itself from. Yet equally it seems necessary to acknowledge just how tenacious such figuration is. 'Speaking rationally about Africa is not something that has ever come naturally', writes Achille Mbembe in his *On the Postcolony* (1992), updating Achebe's famous essay even while admitting (in a metaphor that echoes Coetzee's invocation of Gordimer's *The Conservationist*) that any amount of intellectual critique seems to make little difference to

³¹ 'Reimagining the Past: André Brink in Conversation with Reingard Nethersole' in Vladislavic ed., *T'kama-Adamastor: Inventions of Africa in a South African Painting*, (Johannesburg: University of Witwatersrand Press, 2000), 52.

³² Brink, *An Act of Terror*, 29-31.

³³ See in particular Cronin's account of Campbell: 'Turning Around: Roy Campbell's 'Rounding the Cape', *English in Africa* 11:1 (May 1984), 65-78.

³⁴ F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition*, (London: Chatto & Windus, 1948), 177.

³⁵ Chinua Achebe, 'An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*', *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays 1965-1987*, (London: Heinemann, 1988), 8.

³⁶ Malvern van Wyk Smith, 'The Legacy of *Os Lusíadas*', in Derek Attridge and David Attwell eds., *The Cambridge History of South African Literature*, (Cambridge University Press, forthcoming 2010).

everyday usage: 'the corpse obstinately persists in getting up again every time it is buried and, year in year out'.³⁷ There is, he continues, 'hardly ever any discourse about Africa for itself'; the 'grotesque dramatisation' of the continent (and here he could be talking directly of Adamastor) as 'a great, soft, fantastic body', powerless and self-destructive, is always the pretext for discussion of something else, some other place, some other people. It inevitably becomes 'the mediation that enables the West to accede to its own subconscious and give the public account of its subjectivity' (3). In an exasperated, parodic paragraph Mbembe attempts to enter into and mimic the 'closed glory' of this prior imaginary:

Terrible movements, laws that underpin and organise tragedy and genocide, gods that present themselves in the guise of death and destitution, monsters lying in wait, corpses coming and going on the tide, infernal powers, threats of all sorts, abandonments, events without response, monstrous couplings, blind waves, impossible paths, terrible forces that every day tear human beings, animals, plants, and things from their sphere of life and condemn them to death... (8)

Perhaps, as Binyavanga Wainaina suggests, the only strategy left to the African writer *is* that of parody. Opening his set of instructions on how to write about the continent, he advises: 'Always use the word "Africa" or "Darkness" or "Safari" in your title. Subtitles may include the words "Zanzibar", "Masai", "Zulu", "Zambezi", "Congo", "Nile", "Big", "Sky", "Shadow", "Drum", "Sun" or "Bygone"... Readers will be put off if you don't mention the light in Africa...Wide empty spaces and game are critical – Africa is the Land of Wide Empty Spaces'.³⁸ His tongue-in-cheek dictums suggest how the image of a gaudy, violent Africa forms a lineage running from the 'Shades of Adamastor' via the imperial romance of H. Rider Haggard and the mystified aboriginals of Laurens van der Post to the bestselling exoticism of Wilbur Smith – those writers, that is, who have played perhaps the greatest role in shaping southern Africa in the global imaginary during the last century.³⁹

Magical seams, metaphor, metamorphosis

It is here that the satirical charge, or as Chris Warnes puts it, 'irreverence' of magical realism seems to provide an attractive means of invading and dismantling such time-worn images of Africa. Tracing a genealogy of the term, Warnes shows its dual allegiance: on the one hand

³⁷ Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, trans. A. M. Berrett, J. Roitman and M. Last, (London and California: University of California Press, 2001), 1, 3.

³⁸ Binyavanga Wainaina, 'How to Write About Africa', *Granta 92: the View from Africa*, ed. Ian Jack (Winter 2005), 91.

³⁹ In his 1965 introduction to William Plomer's *Turbott Wolfe* [1925], Van der Post writes of Adamastor: 'Here, in the form of a poetic intuition and parable, is the history of Africa' (London: Hogarth Press, 1965), 51.

lo real maravilloso Americano emerges from an 'aggressive assertion of Latin America's ontological difference from Europe' which receives one of its earliest expressions in Alejo Carpentier's 1949 preface to *El Reino de Este Mundo* (*The Kingdom of This World*):⁴⁰ 'But what is the history of America if not a chronicle of the marvellous in the real?'⁴¹ On the other hand, there is the very different precursor of Jorge Luis Borges (honoured, perhaps, in García Márquez's figure of the author-gypsy Melquiades), a 'world writer' entirely unconcerned with narrow cultural nationalisms and claiming that the Latin American artist in fact had a greater right to European culture than did Europeans: 'we can handle all European themes, handle them without superstition, with an irreverence which can have, and already does have, fortunate consequences'.⁴²

Exploring the different *oeuvres* of Ben Okri and Salman Rushdie as testing the claims of 'faith' and 'irreverence' respectively, Warnes suggests how while the former 'seeks to interpret the "magic" in magical realism culturally, as an expression of particular belief systems or ways of seeing the world', the latter is similar in key respects with more postmodern, unaffiliated literary projects: 'a form of epistemological scepticism, a productive fictional mode that points towards a possible re-enchantment of Western modernity' (8). That there is no absolute division between the two impulses is shown perhaps by how closely Mbembe's grotesque parody comes to resemble the prose of a work like Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991). Yet the irreverent dimension of Brink's writing is readily apparent in his work of the 1990s, the tone of *The First Life of Adamastor* entirely, refreshingly different to that of *An Act of Terror*. Like the swollen nose of Saleem Sinai or the 'inconceivable masculinity' of Aureliano Babilonia, it begins with a metaphor made all too literal, and follows wherever it may lead, engendering a contemporary strain of *contaminatio* where the writing is able to range across different historical sites, mythologies and timescales. Written while Brink was at Grahamstown, the novella drew inspiration from the discovery of new archaeological sites and shell middens at Algoa Bay, prompting him to shift the action east along the coast towards São Bras (Mossel Bay) and present-day Port Elizabeth, where Días and Da Gama made their landfalls.

Camões' Adamastor was imprisoned in the Cape Peninsula, but T'kama's hazy geography enables Brink to conflate several different historical encounters and to explore more freely what Mostert has called (with a characteristic flourish) the 'hemispheric seam', a 'frontier of consciousness' where the terrestrial odyssey of Africa encountered the maritime

⁴⁰ Chris Warnes, 'Naturalizing the Supernatural: Faith, Irreverence and Magical Realism', *Literature Compass* 2 (2005) 20C 106, 5.

⁴¹ Alejo Carpentier, *El Reino de Este Mundo* [1949], *The Kingdom of This World*, trans. Harriet de Onís, (London: André Deutsch, 1990), n.p.

⁴² Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*, ed. Donald. A. Yates and James E. Irby. (London: Penguin, 2000), 218.

endeavour of Europe: 'Nowhere else offers such an amazing confluence of human venture and its many frontiers, across time, upon the oceans and between the continents'.⁴³ A boundary between regions of summer and winter rainfall, the eastern Cape marked the southerly limit of African pastoralism, and the Xhosa that T'kama's band come into contact with regale him with early Ndebele oral narratives about 'us' and 'them' as an awareness of the multiple frontiers of South African historiography is combined with by a mix-and-match approach to oral traditions: 'In the mysterious ways of the writing process...these images conjured up others, many of them not immediately or rationally linked'.⁴⁴ Here then is the 'faith' asked of us by such writing, where pre-capitalist, pre-colonial modes become, in Cooper's reframing of the metaphor, 'the seam that is mined for the magical raw material itself'.⁴⁵

Within the *ottava rima* of the *The Lusids*, the continual snaking movement from the technical to the wondrous, the measurable to the mythic, results in part from that fundamental Renaissance dialogue between ancient and modern: the influence of the Classical gods over the Christian mariners waxes as they travel further from Europe, eventually culminating in the massive pagan up-thrust of the Cape of Storms. In *The First Life of Adamastor* the gods in residence are no longer Jupiter and Neptune, but Gaunab, Tsui-Goab and Heitsi-Eibib, in whose cairn the birdmen plant a strange object dragged from one of the ships' eggs which 'looked like the tall trunk of a tree, but...had no leaves, only two branches at the top' (17). Such deadpan defamiliarisation is not confined to visual markers of European expansion, but expands to generate a tragi-comic scene where mystified Catholicism interacts with Khoi pragmatism. T'kama soon realises that the sailors are interested in the Khoi women and swiftly negotiates a bride price for each – there are, he remarks 'signs anyone can understand' – but is bemused when he watches while the men perform a strange ritual beforehand: 'a few drops spattered on their faces while the men mumbled something and touched their own foreheads and chests and shoulders...naming them Maria this, Maria that...Each time they took a woman to the bushes they paid the price anew. A man could get rich like that'.⁴⁶

It is a quintessential magical realist moment: the matter-of-factness with regard to the marvellous that García Márquez attributed to his grandmother and Franz Kafka in equal measure reverses the colonial dream of impossibly cheap barter and endlessly profitable foreign exchange. Or rather, 'the impossibly old struggles against the appallingly new' with the result that such polar opposites are short-circuited, made to switch their valencies and

⁴³ Mostert, *Frontiers*, xv.

⁴⁴ André Brink, 'A Myth of Origin', in Ivan Vladislavic ed., *T'kama-Adamastor: Inventions of Africa in a South African Painting*, (Johannesburg: University of Witwatersrand Press, 2000), 46.

⁴⁵ Cooper, *Magic Realism in West African Fiction*, 16.

⁴⁶ Brink, *The First Life*, 19-20.

collapsed into each other.⁴⁷ As Inga Clendinnen writes of the interaction between Cortés, Doña Marina and Moctezuma during the conquest of Mexico, we are asked to imagine a history of the contact zone as ‘a tangle of missed cues and mistaken messages’ where “control of communications” seems to have evaded both sides equally.⁴⁸ Not only are we given a sense of the utter failure of the Portuguese to imprint their values on an immemorial culture, but both sides are seen to misunderstand the nature of the transaction in relation to the female body, as Brink opens his work to an as yet only partially explored aspect of South African colonial historiography.

In T’kama’s uncontrollable priapism whenever he nears the stranded woman – a favoured theme in Brink’s *oeuvre* – it seems one approaches the essential DNA of magical realism, a narrative principle programmed (no less than Fanshawe’s ‘blend of Renaissance grotesque and melodramatic *sprezzatura*’) for unruly out-growth, exaggeration and hyperbole.⁴⁹ In a passage which helps to explain the longevity of his creation and its continuing fascination for writers of all kinds, Camões has Adamastor explain exactly how he was transformed into a myth, the liminal moment of transfer between the animate and inanimate. As Adamastor tries to embrace Thetis, he finds within his arms ‘a rugged mount, / With harshest wood and thorny thickets faced’, or in Fanshawe’s appropriately craggy rendering:

*My solid flesh converteth to tough Clay:
My Bones to Rocks are metamorphosed
These leggs, these thighs (behold how large are they!)
O’er the long sea extended and were sped...⁵⁰*

In both the swelling humours of the Renaissance and fabulist prose of the twentieth century, one can discern how such metamorphosis is in a sense the opposite of overworked metaphor: a process of dilation which no longer allows representations to ‘stand for’ things external to them.

As with Gregor Samsa’s insect body, we must take T’kama’s large claims as in some sense real before the act of interpretation can commence. It is process which requires a continual switching between different orders of understanding, and in turn a laying bare of the mechanics of the reading process: ‘there is no longer any proper sense or figurative

⁴⁷ Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-91*, (London: Granta, 1992), 301-2.

⁴⁸ Inga Clendinnen, ‘Fierce and Unnatural Cruelty: Cortés and the Conquest of Mexico’, Stephen Greenblatt ed., *New World Encounters*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 18.

⁴⁹ Van Wyk Smith, *Shades of Adamastor*, 15.

⁵⁰ Camões, *The Lusiads in Sir Richard Fanshawe’s Translation*, ed. Geoffrey Bullough, (London: Centaur Press, 1963), 186.

sense, but only a distribution of states that is part of the range of the word'.⁵¹ Just as Rushdie's narrator in *Midnight's Children* (1981) believes himself inextricably entwined with the emergence of modern India – 'handcuffed to history' – so Brink's protagonist is quite literally handicapped by a European obsession with African sexual prowess, and one that will be used to justify a hypocritical colonial violence in the tragic end to the tale. A reworking of the stony embrace becomes the climax of the work as T'kama, hoping for a reunion with his beloved, is duped by another party of mariners who plant the figurehead of a ship in the shoreline under moonlight, lash him to a boulder on Heitsi-Eibib's cairn and leave him to the vultures: 'And then I died, the first of many deaths. As far as I can remember'.⁵²

The process of literary reincarnation here is a layered one, since Brink has fused the narrative of T'kama-Adamastor with that of the wreck of the *São João* off the Pondoland coast in 1552. In one of many calamitous shipwrecks that haunt the epic and suggest, in Josiah Blackmore's reading, a kind of counter-history to imperial expansion (one in which the Portuguese presence in a foreign land is always accidental, never purposeful),⁵³ Camões recapitulates the legendary demise of Captain Manoel de Sousa Sepúlveda, who buries his aristocratic wife Leonor and their children in the African earth before disappearing, insane with grief, into the wilderness:

They will see harsh, grasping people
Tear her clothes from the lovely lady,
And her body of such crystal beauty
Exposed to frost and the scorching winds,
After marching so far in the terrible heat
Tramping the rough sand with her delicate feet.⁵⁴

In *The First Life* this embedded vignette is expanded and superimposed over the figure of the tantalising Thetis to become the archetypal marooned woman, Khois, playing off the prejudices of the source material against each other while ironising another overworked seam in South African literature: that of shipwreck and female captivity among the 'natives'. It is a motif that will be replayed in the many literary treatments of the wreck of *The Grosvenor*, in Brink's 1976 work *An Instant in the Wind* (complete with its own Adam figure), Coetzee's *Foe* (1986) and even in urban, twentieth-century versions like Nadine Gordimer's *July's People* (1981).⁵⁵ Brink also remarks at being struck by the similarity between Camões'

⁵¹ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 18-19.

⁵² Brink, *The First Life*, 133.

⁵³ See Josiah Blackmore, *Manifest Perdition: Shipwreck Narrative and the Disruption of Empire*. (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

⁵⁴ *The Lusiads*, trans. White, 107.

⁵⁵ See Michael Titlestad and Mike Kissack, 'The Persistent Castaway in South African Writing', *Postcolonial Studies* 10:2 (2007), 191-218 for a comprehensive overview of the many sources and literary afterlives of the *Grosvenor*, and of shipwreck narrative more generally. They point out that at

imagery and the burning sands of Eugene Marais' 'Lied Van Suid Afrika', and here achieves a more subtle way of unearthing a dissonant counterpoint to a chauvinistic Afrikaner nationalism.

The superimposed temporalities of *The Lusiads*, then, enable a supple awareness about what the writing of history entails, and an excavation of other, neglected attempts to imagine the colonial arrival in South Africa. Returning to a flitting, birdlike sense of literary play, a mock scholarly footnote remarks that the Afrikaans poet of the *Eerste Taal Beweging* S. J. du Toit used a similar image of ship's boats hatching as eggs in 'Hoe die Hollanders di Kaap Ingeneem Het'. It is a doggerel poem of 1897 'Fertel deur ou Danster, 'n Grikwa', which describes the arrival of the 'Duusfolk' (Dutch) from the landward side:

Toen fou di ding syn flerke op,
En hy gé klyntjiis af een kant;
En ons hou toen fer hom mar dop,
Hy gé meer klyntjiis, ander kant,
Hul sak af o'er di rant.⁵⁶

Brink's protagonist remarks that Du Toit's poem 'talks about geese giving birth to little ones from their sides, which is patently ridiculous. Birds lay eggs. Including those we saw. I know; I was there'.⁵⁷ The self-enclosed 'poetry of dread' which pervades so many of the literary shades of Adamastor is eschewed in favour of a process of literary enrichment and unexpected dialogue which sends one back to a whole array of literary beginnings and to the archive, with the latter rich in cultural displacements as any fiction.⁵⁸

Curiously, Brink's narrator remarks that nowhere has he found any evidence that the early Portuguese navigators of Africa's southern coasts took women on board. Yet in his famous 1552 history of the Portuguese conquest of Asia, the royal chronicler João de Barros notes in passing how Días abducted four women from the coast of Guinea. They were to be used as emissaries to the king of the African interior, bearing the good news that the Portuguese had rounded the Cape and were looking for the sea route to India, and in particular the lost kingdom of Prester John. One died on board, two were landed on the west coast, while the fourth was marooned on the beach at Algoa Bay, close to where two Khoi individuals were seen collecting shellfish. The ships would be back to collect them, they were told:

the time when the European press were reporting the fate of the British East Indiaman, on 6 August 1783 the *Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser* 'carried an account of the wreck of the Portuguese galleon, the *São João* off the Pondoland coast in 1552, and the ghastly fate of the survivors...In the British public's imagination, these two stories of shipwreck seemed to blur: the *Grosvenor* castaways' fate had simply confirmed their worst suspicions' (203).

⁵⁶ Brink ed. *Groot Verseboek*, (Kaapstad: Tafelberg, 2008), Deel I, 12.

⁵⁷ Brink, *The First Life*, 12.

⁵⁸ Cronin, 'Turning Around', 77.

And in the meantime, they might enter the interior and report these matters to the inhabitants, and learn all they could upon the points recommended to them, which they could do in safety, being women, against whom the men never make war, and therefore they would receive no harm.⁵⁹

Even when compared to the litany of absurd proclamations, possessions and kidnappings during the New World conquest, this is an extraordinary detail; in the very casualness of its expression here, one has a dim sense of what the early contact zone meant for African women, and how profoundly in shadow their experience must always remain.

The episode receives a literary treatment in the 1931 work *Four Handsome Negresses* by Ethelreda Lewis (under the pseudonym R. Hernekin Baptist), described in the prologue as ‘an unofficial *commentario*’, ‘in no way to be trusted by the seeker after facts. Least of all should it come in the category of historical novel’.⁶⁰ Nonetheless, in embarking on a solemn, portentous elaboration of their experience – inventing names for these figures and a peaceful pre-colonial village where ‘the invisible and inexpressible were not yet caught by the wing, tethered to a word’ (9) – it is perhaps less suggestive than the few lines in Barros’ chronicle. The blitheness and brevity of the latter as it relates scenes of immense violence and dislocation suggests where the black comedy of magical realism comes into its own; and also perhaps, why the ironic compression achieved in another part of the Portuguese sea-borne empire (and by an author different from Brink in almost every respect) remains so powerful.

In her 1965 collection *Questions of Travel*, Elizabeth Bishop draws on Camões for an epigraph and in her second poem attempts to imagine the arrival of Portuguese settlers in Brazil: ‘Januaries, Nature greets our eyes / exactly as she must have greeted theirs: / every square inch filling in with foliage..’. The twentieth-century tourist arrives in a place named for the first day of 1502, just as South Africa’s Natal was named for 25 December 1497. A deftly poised speaking voice imagines the European arrival from an immense, estranged distance – ‘the Christians, hard as nails, / Tiny as nails’ – who find this lush new world ‘not unfamiliar’ and yet, in the very act of imaginatively possessing it, rupture the ‘tapestried landscape’ of the poem, disappear through the breach and are lost to view:

Directly after Mass, humming perhaps
L’Homme armé or some such tune,
they ripped away into the hanging fabric,
each out to catch an Indian for himself -
those maddening little women who kept calling,

⁵⁹ John de Barros, *Da Ásia...* (*History of the Portuguese Conquest of Asia*), vol. I, [1552]. Rep. and trans. in Ian D. Colvin ed. *The Cape of Adventure*, (London: T. C. and E. C. Jack, 1912), 5.

⁶⁰ R. Hernekin Baptist, *Four Handsome Negresses: The Record of a Voyage*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1931), 7.

calling to each other (or had the birds waked up?)
and retreating, always retreating, behind it.⁶¹

'I fill the day with names...'

In a suitably literal realisation of the literary, the T'kama who claims to have seen paintings of Da Gama in one of his many afterlives can today be found gazing in the direction of the navigator as he receives the banner of Portugal from his sovereign. In 2002 an enormous canvas inspired by Brink's novella was completed by Cyril Coetzee and hung in the William Cullen Library at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. [Fig. 19] Here it completes a triptych that includes two other massive, mural-like works – Colin Gill's 'Colonists 1826' (1934) and John Henry Amshewitz's 'Vasco da Gama – Departure for the Cape' (1935) – forming a dialogue which, just like the novella itself, cuts across space, time and tradition.

In a book which charts the progress of the commission, a lavish visual essay by the artist describes how he elaborated narrative kernels in the novella by drawing on several diverse traditions of Renaissance iconography. The birdlike ships and human eggs with which Brink seeks to create a radical newness from the landward perspective can be traced back to innumerable sources within the European tradition: the phantasmagorias of Hieronymous Bosch, sketches of Leda and the Swan after Da Vinci, the winged images of saints often found in colonial territories where Catholic influence predominated. Every bit as self-aware as its source material, the painting is peppered with motifs drawn from lithographs and engravings of wild animals in texts now shelved in the immediate vicinity, even reproducing the floral and faunal errors made by these early natural histories.

At the centre of the picture are the figures of T'kama and Khois under a flat-topped acacia, a tableau of an African Adam and Eve which draws on William Blake's, *Adam Naming the Beasts*. Yet instead of the raised fingers of benediction which signal the trinity in Blake, T'kama makes a hand gesture which, according to Cyril Coetzee, signals 'presence of giraffe' in sign language used by San hunters. This focal point draws on a passage by Brink in which T'kama joins the singing of the earth around him in an incantatory, trance-like celebration of attachment to his native soil:

I sing my land, in my tongue and throat I give it sound, I name it. I say: wood, and turn to wood. I say: mountain, hill, rock, river, sea, and become each of them in turn...I say lion, jackal, mocking-bird, partridge, *kiewiet*, I say *kombro*, I say *dagga*, I say *kierie* and *kaross*, I say *khusesti*, I say *t'gau*, I say *k'hrab*, I say *k'arakup*...I fill the day with names, I inscribe the

⁶¹ Elizabeth Bishop, *The Complete Poems 1927-1979*, (London: Hogarth Press, 1984), 91-2.

plains like a sheet of paper...I say gazelles in a calabash and ostriches in curdled milk, I say falling stars and chameleons and hares with split upper lips and lice carrying messages from the waning moon and water-snakes devouring themselves and fat-tailed sheep sailing upside-down through the sky, I say everything which is still to happen and everything no one has ever thought up, I say a terrible I and a fearsome you, and in the sound of my shout I walk into the day that breaks open before me like an egg from which impossible new words are hatched.⁶²

Reminiscent again of the first lines of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* – where a river of clear water runs along ‘a bed of polished stones, which were white an enormous, like prehistoric eggs’⁶³ – this outpouring of verbal energy resonates with many other attempts to voice a pre-verbal, primal attachment to one’s native land. Brink acknowledges a transatlantic debt to Aimé Césaire’s *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal* (1939), while there is also much in common with both Whitman’s ecstatic catalogues and Bruce Chatwin’s seductive vision of the Australian continent being sung into existence by its Aboriginal myth cycles. Calabashes, chameleons and swallowing monsters call forth the motifs of Nguni oratures, while the imagery of ‘hares with split lips’ alludes to what is perhaps the earliest recorded indigenous narrative of southern Africa – the fable explaining the origin of death among mankind – and one of the most compelling suggestions that a pan-Khoisan myth complex once extended throughout the region.⁶⁴ In a performance which goes on for the better part of two pages, the language of literary theory (‘inscribe’) combines with the superimposed menageries of southern African rock art. It culminates in an onomatopoeic bringing forth of indigenous Khoi sounds, sending one to a glossary that, in its selection of trading goods, salient topographical features and prime deities, is not unlike the earliest word lists compiled by seventeenth-century sailors calling at the Cape.

Yet reading this lavish, generous kind of prose and looking at this gaudy visual fantasia inspired by it, one is tempted to ask: for all the energy, intricacy and ingenuity, can it really find a place here? Having traced the satirical, irreverent possibilities of a South African magical realism thus far, one comes to consider, when confronted with passage like this, what the limits of its invention might be, and whether its claims are made (to adapt Rushdie’s defence of his most controversial work) ‘in good faith’. So clearly a product of the newly released energies of South Africa’s 1990s transition, can it really be mapped onto the scant

⁶² Brink, *First Life*, 46.

⁶³ García Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, 1.

⁶⁴ See the 1779 *Berigt* of Hendrik Jacob Wikar for perhaps the earliest rendering of a narrative which has been recorded in over seventy variants throughout southern Africa. Rep. and trans. in E. E. Mossop ed., *The Journals of Wikar, Coetsé and Van Reenen*, (The Van Riebeeck Society: Cape Town, 1935). In most versions it is the Moon which tells the Hare to give a message to humans saying that they would come to life again after death. The Hare distorts the message, bringing mortality into the world, and is struck a blow across the face which results in its split lip. In Wikar’s version it is the deity ‘Tzoekoab of God’ who gives ‘een boodschap aan den haas’ (a message to the hare), recorded in a language that was already moving some way from Dutch towards a proto-Afrikaans (139).

archaeological and textual remains of the historical period in which it is (at least partly) set? Or rather, to pose a narrower, more technical question: in terms of a range of fictional options and techniques, how successful is this at allowing submerged elements of the deep southern African past to surface?

This is not to level the (weak) accusation that Brink cannot step outside of a European tradition even as he tries to render it alien; such a realisation is, after all, amply explored in his playfully self-aware work which causes the universal signifier 'bird' to expand, uncontrollably, in all directions. Nor is it to repeat the astute questions which Warnes raises about the 'anthropological' dimension of magical realism, and its claims to enter into the pre-capitalist or pre-colonial world.⁶⁵ Dispensing with any prior, moralistic strictures on narrative ethics and the complex debates surrounding the matter of 'speaking for' the Other, Rushdie argued persuasively (as did Oscar Wilde before him) that the literary work either justifies itself and convinces one of its 'improper liberties' or it does not. Following this for the moment, one might ask of Brink's work (and all the other vaguely magical realist texts that have emerged post-apartheid): ultimately, how much weight can one give to these words, so unfettered and abundant? How is such a poetics earned? What can guarantee or underwrite it?

This crowded, mannerist, minutely explicated canvas by Cyril Coetzee serves as a reminder of the impatience and even exhaustion which can attend the reading of magical realism and associated genres, of reaching a point where one can no longer bring oneself to believe in the novel's signs or invest further in its restless imaginative proliferation. In the great works of the genre, perhaps, this emptying of meaning is staged explicitly: in *Midnight's Children* it becomes the descent into 'the historyless anonymity of the rainforests',⁶⁶ in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* the plague of insomnia and amnesia where the affected villagers try 'all kinds of methods of exhausting themselves' and Aureliano Buendía, far from singing the world into existence, is forced to label the most banal, everyday phenomena as the links between language and the world are eroded – *table, chair, clock, wall, bed*: 'At the beginning of the road into the swamp they put up a sign that said MACONDO and another larger one on the main street that said GOD EXISTS'.⁶⁷

In the hands of less skilled practitioners, though, the unrestrained arabesques of magical realist technique can seem a way of dodging the challenge of writing to be equal to a subject in all its historical breadth: 'the way of fantasy and extravagance' which V. S.

⁶⁵ Considering the work of Miguel Ángel Asturias, he asks: 'Who can say for certain where surrealist automatic writing ends and the Mayan world view begins in *Men of Maize*, for example? Is Okri's perspective in *The Famished Road* Yoruba, or Igbo, or New Age?' Warnes, 'Naturalizing the Supernatural', 11.

⁶⁶ Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* [1981], (London: Vintage, 1995), 260.

⁶⁷ Marquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, 47.

Naipaul equated with formal (and therefore moral) collapse: 'It is safe...empty, morally and intellectually; it makes writing an aspect of the corruption of the countries out of which it emerges'.⁶⁸ One might ignore the typically reactionary second half of that sentence and yet still feel the force of the accusation that such writing is safe: too easy, too plentiful or (to borrow a scientific term) too unfalsifiable. Perhaps the successes in the genre are a product of a particular juncture in a national or regional literary history, even a distinctly personal moment when an author comes into full voice, and that this moment is quick to pass. Three years after Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, the irascible narrator of Julian Barnes' *Flaubert's Parrot* was already calling for a quota system on South American fiction (or what Kundera called 'the tropicalisation of the novel')⁶⁹ in order 'to curb the spread of package-tour baroque and heavy irony':

Ah, the daiquiri bird which incubates its eggs on the wing; ah, the freedonna tree whose roots grow at the tips of its branches, and whose fibres assist the hunchback to impregnate by telepathy the haughty wife of the hacienda owner; ah, the opera house now overgrown by jungle. Permit me to rap on the table and murmur 'Pass!' Novels set in the Arctic and the Antarctic will receive a development grant.⁷⁰

As short work, spared the perils of a dilated narrative middle, *The First Life of Adamastor* succeeds as a gloss in the margin of a huge supporting text, a fable underwritten by Camões which makes great play of its mixed literary ancestry and, quite appropriately, poses more questions than it answers. Its casualness with regard to detail draws one back not just to *The Lusians*, but also the historical record, to neglected South African precursors and into wide variety of contemporary dialogues across the Atlantic and Indian oceans. It assumes the right to expand within the 'shadowlands between myth and history', a realm to which Brink returns to in his more recent work, *Praying Mantis* (2005).⁷¹

Offered as a tribute to his readers on his seventieth birthday, it is focalised through the historical figure of Cupido Kakkerlak (Cupido Cockroach), the first Khoi missionary ordained at the Cape of Good Hope. In taking as its epigraph Barrow's remark that 'The name of Hottentot will be forgotten or remembered only as that of a deceased person of little note', it suggests again how Brink envisions literature as a work of collaboration and collective redress. Written over a period of twenty years and enriched by a wide variety of historical sources listed in the afterword, it is one of his most controlled and convincing performances, also comprising a reprise of favourite motifs from his *oeuvre*. The release of

⁶⁸ V. S. Naipaul, 'My Brother's Tragic Sense', *Spectator*, (24 January, 1987), 22.

⁶⁹ Kundera, *Testaments Betrayed*, 30. I am grateful to Gerald Gaylard for drawing my attention to this phrase. See his *After Colonialism: African Postmodernism and Magical Realism*, (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2005).

⁷⁰ Julian Barnes, *Flaubert's Parrot*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1984), 99.

⁷¹ André Brink, *Praying Mantis*, (London: Secker & Warburg, 2005). The phrase appears on the dustjacket.

fireflies during the ecstatic coupling of Cupido and Anna Vigilant surely rewrites a scene from *Imaginings of Sand* (1996). And again, as the Khoi preacher drifts between the influence of the London Missionary Society and that of the indigenous deity Heitsi-Eibib, we have a work structured by a succession of dream-like journeys through the interior, 'often lured purely by the names':

Vlermuislaagte and Makukukwe
Gemsbok, Bloubospan
and on to Heuningkrans or Honey Cliff, to Pramberg or Tit Mountain
to Denkbeeld, which means Image
and Grootgewag, or Risked-a-Lot
to Vuilnek, Dirty-Neck, and Omvrede, Peace-All-Round (234)

In his *Travels in Southern Africa in the Years 1803, 1804, 1805 and 1806*, Hinrich Lichtenstein, despite writing largely as an apologist for the Boers, disparages 'the poverty and corruption in the expression of abstract ideas which is now universal among colonists'. The 'conciseness and naïveté' of Dutch place names, he remarks, 'borders on the figurative language of oriental poetry'.⁷² Yet for Brink, Krog and many others to follow, it is precisely such simple descriptors and designations of place which compel fascination and incantatory repetition, becoming mere syllables and fricatives strung together again and again in a litany of wishful but infinitely deferred belonging. The impossible innocence of the names must, it seems, be countered by the ongoing, endless act of naming – 'Circles and lines criss-crossing through the land, going everywhere, going nowhere' (235). Yet equally, as these mantras are translated *in situ* by Brink, one also begins to wonder how and why it is that even such basic linguistic tags signify so differently when moving between the languages. Something is being lost here: but who could say what it is?

across the Jakkals and Dwyka and Gamka Rivers
past Vyevelei, or Fig Valley, along the course of the Sand River
over Droëberg, the Dry Mountain, and Witberg, the White Mountain,
up the Droëkloofberge, that is, the Dry Kloof Range,
to Bakoondlaagte, Oven Plain, and Groenpoort, Green Gateway
past Kwaggapoel, the Quagga Pool, and Rietkuil, the Reed Hollow
past Eensaam, which is Loneliness...
drawn by names like Kootjieskolk and Wagendrift and Windheuwel
that is, Kootjie's Flood and Wagon Ford and Windy Hill...

⁷² Henry (Martin Hinrich) Lichtenstein, *Travels in Southern Africa in the Years 1803, 1804, 1805 and 1806*, Translated from the Original German by Anna Plumtre, (London: Henry Colburn, 1812), 132-33. Inevitably though, Lichtenstein displaces the primitivism of the colonial naming of the land onto its indigenous peoples: 'The first Europeans who settled in Southern Africa, when they were obliged to teach their language to the savages, might probably by way of facilitating the task to their scholars as much as possible, convey their instruction through the medium of sensible objects. Thus they called every hill a *back*, every point of a mountain a *head*, a Hottentot village, from its resemblance to a necklace, a *kraal*, all sorts of fire-arms *reeds*, horned cattle *beasts*, the whole family of the antelopes *boks*, &c. &c'.

responding to the lure of the Blomfonteinsberge, the Flower-Fountain Mountains and Nardousberg, down to Aasvoëlberg, Vulture Mountain, or Slechtgenoeg, Badenough, and Goedgegund, Wellbestowed... Paardefontein, Blinkfontein, Vlakfontein, Boesmanfontein - and that is where they make a halt. (57)

‘...so lightly that they seemed birds’

Before leaving this generous, almost utopian kind of writing, one might make some final remarks on the curious mixture of abundance and exhaustion here; how a poetics premised on virtually unlimited imaginative space risks remaining entrapped in what Abiola Irele has described as ‘the prison of the mythopoetic imagination’.⁷³ In a sceptical reading it becomes a compulsive recourse to a pre-colonial African world, inevitably constructed as a site of wish fulfilment for the contemporary writer. Whereas, when the material fact of imprisonment and confinement reassert themselves in later chapters, particularly in the /Xam narratives of the Bleek and Lloyd Collection, one is party to a language event of such suggestiveness and ‘natural surrealism’ that in comparison, the imported, deliberately irrational elements of magical realism can only seem laboured.⁷⁴ Moreover, as a genre the latter can never be wholly separated from the much larger category of fantastic literature, and it is in the work of a prison poet like Breyten Breytenbach, or Pollsmoor’s oral mythology of ‘The Number’ (as documented by Jonny Steinberg) that one finds a genuinely homespun and horrifying version of the fantastic.

‘The grotesque is a South African speciality’ remarks Ivan Vladislavić, registering his debt to writers like Breytenbach and Etienne Leroux for capturing the profound absurdity of race politics in twentieth century South Africa.⁷⁵ In 1988, the quincentenary of Días’ arrival at Mossel Bay was re-enacted as three white actors in a rowing boat landed on a ‘whites-only’ beach to be welcomed by seven more whites wearing curly wigs and painted black, the entire proceeding watched by P. W. Botha in full presidential regalia. It was, as Dennis Walder remarks, a demonstration of apartheid as the *reductio ad absurdum* of colonialism, that extreme case in which (as Frantz Fanon remarked) ‘it is the “settler” who thinks he (and it is “he”) makes history, while the “native” does not’:

⁷³ Abiola Irele, ‘In Praise of Alienation’, in V. Y. Mudimbe ed., *The Surreptitious Speech*, (University of Chicago Press, 1991), 217.

⁷⁴ Stephen Watson, Introduction, *Return of the Moon: Versions from the /Xam*, (Cape Town: The Carrefour Press, 1991), 16.

⁷⁵ Felicity Woods, Interview with Ivan Vladislavić, Johannesburg, September 2000, *New Contrast*, 29:3, (Winter 2001), 60.

Worse: it is as if the colonised are outside the imaginable, the settlers appropriating for themselves the identity of 'native' too; whence the laughable sight of whites embracing whites as a representation of European arrival upon the alien shore.⁷⁶

It is a diagnosis which will, in later chapters, go to the heart of the conflicting claims of Afrikaans and English literary traditions with regard to writing the land.

Yet always more inclined to the notion of language as possibility rather than limit – and fired by the sense that 'There is always a new discovery in the retelling'⁷⁷ – Brink remarks that sheer imaginative abundance of *The Lusíads* produced in Adamastor a figure which invites rather than resists understanding: 'It is the genius of Camões that even in setting up the Other as hideous and terrifying, he suggests a subjectivity which transcends easy categorisation'.⁷⁸ That this is 'no fancy postcolonial reading' of the text, he continues, is borne out by the way in which Camões describes the continuation of Da Gama's voyage, the landfall at São Bras where they encounter a far more placid scene which combines the alien literary convention of Renaissance pastoral with what seems like authentic detail:

Their wives, black as polished ebony,
Were perched on gently lumbering oxen,
Beasts which, of all prize cattle
Are the ones they prize the most.
They sang pastoral songs in their own
Tongue, sweetly and in harmony,
Whether rhymed or in prose, we could not gauge
But like the pipes of Virgil's golden age. (110)

Enlarging on his historical sources, Camões the poet is drawn to an encounter which remains vital today: the boundary between the oral and the written. For Stephen Gray, it is a fundamental moment in southern African literature, and a truer starting point than the overworked literary Cape further along the coast: 'a Western poet composing an epic poem which, if only distantly, relies on oral rhetorical formulations, pausing to take note of the techniques of other oral praise-singers who, like himself, codify and store a nation's history, its brave deeds and its way of life in their poetry'.⁷⁹

For all his improper liberties elsewhere, Fanshawe is faithful to the original here in calling the welcoming party 'the people that this country did possess' ('A gente que esta terra possuía').⁸⁰ For Mickle in the eighteenth century they are 'the tenants of the coast'; for Atkinson in his 1952 prose translation, 'the natives here' and for Guy Butler 'the nation', 'as

⁷⁶ Dennis Walder, 'Spinning out the present: narrative, gender, and the politics of South African theatre' in Derek Attridge and Rosemary Jolly eds., *Writing South Africa: Literature, Apartheid and Democracy, 1970-1995*, (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 204-5.

⁷⁷ Andre Brink, *On the Contrary* [1993], (London: Vintage, 2000), 16.

⁷⁸ Brink, 'A Myth of Origin', 45.

⁷⁹ Stephen Gray, *Southern African Literature*, (Cape Town: David Philip, 1979), 24.

⁸⁰ Camões, *Os Lusíadas*, Pierce ed., 123.

though Da Gama was welcomed on the beach by a delegation from the ANC'.⁸¹ If the 'hemispheric seam' of this coastline is plainly the site of multiple translations and retrospective abductions of meaning, for Brink the question of speaking for the Other is it seems less a matter of political ethics than harnessing the energies latent in language itself, the only tool with which to prise loose from a distant mental horizon the ships that are indeed 'looking for all the world'.

Yet as the literature of New World shows again and again, the move from wonder to violence, from the marvellous to the murderous, is ever a rapid one.⁸² As Barros tells it, Días never did go ashore in 1488 but simply fired cannon and (in some sources) a crossbow. In 1497, according to the *Roteiro*, relations soon soured when the Portuguese stayed for thirteen days, helping themselves to more and more fresh water, and Da Gama employed the same technique. The volley cleared the shoreline, but when the ships set sail again, a group of Khoi knocked down the *padrão* and the marker beacon that had been carried ashore. It was one of a string of skirmishes which led the Portuguese to turn away from the coasts of southern Africa, culminating in the massacre foretold by Adamastor as an atonement for the destruction which Camões had witnessed first-hand in the East: 'bloody crimes, the massacre / Of Kilwa, the levelling of Mombasa' (107). In 1510, one of the punitive expeditions against unsuspecting villages which were habitually written up by Portuguese chroniclers as deeds of great valour came undone entirely when a party led by the Viceroy D'Almeida seized children and livestock from a kraal close to the centre of the modern Cape Town.

Even in his attempt at conferring a tragic dignity on the events, Barros reveals the nakedness and nightmarish inertia of the Portuguese when stripped of their superior technologies on the wet sand, victims of their own contempt in venturing to shore with neither armour nor firearms. The Khoi emerge, by contrast, with an agility and energy entirely different to the long litany of condemnation of idleness and passivity that will develop in the coming centuries, while the picturesque oxen of Camões' African pastoral have become deadly instruments of war:

And although some of our folk began to let the children go...the blacks came on so furiously that they...came into the body of our men, taking back the oxen; and by whistling to these and making other signs (since they are trained to this warlike device), they made them surround our men...like a defensive wall, from behind which came so many fire-hardened sticks that some of us began to fall wounded or trodden by the cattle. And since few of our men were in armour, and for weapons had only lances and swords, they could do little harm to the blacks in that manner of warfare...in the meantime a heavy sea had risen, which made him take the boats near to the ships, for safety...And when they began to reach the sands of the shore

⁸¹ White, introd. *The Lusíads*, xii.

⁸² See Stephen Greenblatt, 'Kidnapping Language', *Marvelous Possessions: the Wonder of the New World* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 95.

they became altogether unable to take a step, whereas the blacks went over the sand so lightly that they seemed birds...⁸³

'So the history of South Africa literally turned in the wind', writes Allister Sparks, remarking that for all the grim record of Spanish and Portuguese slavery, there were differences of nuance and degree between Catholic and Protestant colonial powers that left a lasting imprint on the societies they touched: 'a mineral rich Republica de Boa Esperance might have evolved into another Brazil perhaps, a society noted for its degree of racial integration rather than as a world symbol of segregation'.⁸⁴ Perhaps one could develop this speculative counter-history in terms of a literary poetics to suggest why Brink's imagining of the encounter between Catholic and Khoisan works so well, but why fabulism and narrative indulgence cannot be so easily grafted onto the Cape after 1652.

Thus far the seam has been taken to signify an epic colonial encounter, or a cache of pre-colonial riches to be mined by the magical realist author. Yet in searching for a metaphor that moves beyond isolated archipelagos and disembodied creation myths, Leon de Kock develops Mostert's metaphor in terms of a painful, unavoidable crisis of representation. Considering South African literature in the light of its several historical frontiers and many language barriers, he imagines the sharp point of the nib as 'a stitching instrument that seeks to suture the incommensurate', and suggests that the writing evinces and explores this troubling conceptual 'ridge or furrow', 'the site of a joining together that also bears the mark of the suture':⁸⁵

The suture marked by the seam – the representational 'translation' of difference, or its denial – flattens out the incommensurate only by virtue of the strain that the ridge of the seam marks and continues to mark for as long as the suture holds. (276)

In its connotations of strain, scarring and a compulsive return to the traces of that wounding, it seems a more apt paradigm through which to consider the work of writers less inclined to imaginative elaboration within the lacunae of the archive.

For as the sixteenth century progressed and the contours, coastline and peoples of the Cape slowly emerged from centuries of speculation about Mount Purgatory, Ethiopia and Monomotapa, this was a place could be absorbed neither into the paradisaical visions of the Americas brought back by the Renaissance voyages nor the lure of a rich and sensual

⁸³ Barros, *Da Ásia...*, trans. and abridged in R. Raven-Hart, *Before van Riebeeck: Callers at South Africa from 1488 to 1652*, (Cape Town: Struik, 1967), 10-11. See Raven-Hart for the variations between the accounts of Barros, Faria y Sousa, Correa, Castanheda and De Goes. The texts can all be found in G. M. Theal's nine volume compilation of the Portuguese *Records of S. E. Africa* (Cape Town, 1898), but Raven-Hart adds that the translations are not always reliable.

⁸⁴ Allister Sparks, *The Mind of South Africa*, (London: Heinemann, 1990), 23.

⁸⁵ Leon de Kock, 'South Africa in the Global Imaginary: An Introduction', *Poetics Today* 22:2, (Summer 2001), 274.

Orient which saw both Dutch and English East India Companies formed at the start of the seventeenth century. In his depiction of the first fifty years of the Dutch station, Dan Sleigh never trusts to literary invention above the curt, commercial diction of the VOC archive. In both his fiction and his criticism, J. M. Coetzee stringently disallows the possibility of an Adamic naming of the African landscape, 'a language in which there is no split between signifier and signified, and things are their names'.⁸⁶ For both writers, prose becomes a medium of paring down rather than hyperbolic inflation, since the arrival of Calvinism and the post-human scale of the Company at the Cape would seem to demand a different way of writing the past: less fantastic, more flatly violent. This was after all different economy, both in terms of trade and the imagination, and one that had long forgotten the wonder of the Renaissance. 'Walled in by oceans and an unexplored northern wilderness', the Cape of the seventeenth century belonged, as Coetzee has it, 'not to the New World but to the farthest extremity of the Old' (2).

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⁸⁶ J. M. Coetzee, *White Writing*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 9.

WRITING THE COMPANY

FROM VAN RIEBEECK'S *DAGHREGISTER* TO SLEIGH'S *EILANDE*

Slums, years, have buried you. I would not dare
Console you if I could...

Philip Larkin, *The Less Deceived*, (1955).

Besides, there is nothing so tainted with fiction as the history of the Company...

Jorge Luis Borges, 'The Lottery in Babylon', (1941).

In its mixture of certainty and muddled geography – the shifting languages combined with the desire to plant navigational particulars firmly in the earth – an account from a French mid-seventeenth century ‘Voyage to Madagascar’ is testament to a long history of rival callers, claims and counter-claims on the shores Table Bay:

Having passed Cape *Agulhas* or *Needles*, where abundance of great Reeds were seen floating in the Water, and many Sea Dogs swimming, we put in near the *Cape of Good Hope* to a small Island encompass’d by a River of fresh Water, call’d *Table Bay*, and by the Dutch *Baij Van*. The French call the Island *a la Biche*. All ships that touch here, of what Nation soever, stick a Staff into the Ground, tying a *Bottel* to the top of it, and a Paper giving an Account of the Day they came thither, from whence, and some particulars of their Voyage...¹

The misconception that the Peninsula was an archipelago – an isolated outcrop on the sea route to the East, just like the other refreshment stations of St Helena or Mauritius – is one often repeated in the logs of mariners who had not seen the African coast for months, and who had no interest in venturing further inland when water, timber and meat could be so easily obtained below the slopes of Table Mountain. ‘Soldanya is, as I suppose an Island’, wrote Sir Thomas Roe in 1615, using the name that the bay had assumed for English mariners ever since Antonio de Saldania entered it by mistake in 1503: ‘On the South end whereof is the Cape of Good hope, divided from the Mayne by a deep Bay on the S.E. side’.² He goes on to describe the inhabitants – five or six hundred of them, he estimates – as ‘the most barbarous in the world, eating Carrione, wearing the gutts of sheepe about their necks for health, and rubbing their heads...with dung of beasts and durte’, yet concedes that ‘They have left their stealing by trading with us, and by signes make showe their harte is good. They know noe kind of god or religion’ (77).

In fact there were some four to five thousand Khoikhoi in the Peninsula and its immediate vicinity – perhaps 100,000 in the western Cape – and their position at this vital stop on the sea route meant that, in Richard Elphick’s estimation, ‘of all the preliterate peoples in the eastern hemisphere, they were the most frequently observed and intensively discussed’.³ Roe’s account constitutes only a few lines in an international litany of disgust and disapproval with regard to the ‘Hottentots’ or ‘Saldaniamen’ that would last for some two centuries. The use of raw guts as both ornament and foodstuff was perhaps the favourite set-piece of these horrified passing ethnographers (many of whom had never set foot on

¹ Francis Cauche, ‘Voyage to Madagascar’ [1644], Trans. in Major R. Raven-Hart, *Before van Riebeeck: Callers at South Africa from 1488 to 1652*, (Cape Town: C Struik, 1967), 156. Hereafter cited as *BVR*.

² Sir Thomas Roe, [1615], MS British Museum, rep. Hakluyt Society II 1; *BVR*, 77.

³ Richard Elphick, *Kraal and Castle: Khoikhoi and the Founding of White South Africa*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1977), xvi.

shore) and Roe is the only observer to suggest that the practice might have a religious or medical significance.

His version of an ideal exchange of signs and goods, however, is wishful thinking. At the time of writing, the miraculously cheap trade in meat which had from the late sixteenth century allowed whole fleets to be fed in exchange for iron nails, spikes and scraps of discarded metal lying around any ship, was changing. English ships' logs blamed this on Coree, a Khoi 'captain' who had been abducted in 1613, taken to London and given 'good diet, good cloaths, good lodging' by none other than the principal merchant of the English East India Company, Sir Thomas Smythe. 'Now one would think that this wretch might have conceived his present, compared with his former condition, as Heaven upon Earth', wrote the chaplain Edward Terry in 1616, yet even the 'tinckerlie treasure' of a suit of brass armour failed to assuage his homesickness: 'none ever more desirous to return home to his country than he; for when he had learned a little of our language he would daily lie upon the ground, and cry very often this in broken English, "Coree home go, Souldania go, home go"'.⁴

Coree – or Corre, Quore, Cary as he also appears in variants as an English approximation of the guttural Gora – is the first named Khoi individual to enter the historical record at the Cape. Immediately his actions and motivations become impossible to read in a situation where the European sailors must have seemed every bit as transient and unpredictable as the Hottentots they attacked, befriended, traded with or kidnapped. Mariners suspected him of scuppering the trade in sheep, yet having returned to the Cape and thrown off his European garb, Coree taught his people the single phrase '*Sir Tho: Smythe English Shippis*' which they would repeat 'with great glorye' when a British fleet arrived in the bay, evidently with the hope of securing their aid against enemies inland.⁵

Relations became strained in 1615, however, when ten convicts who had avoided the gallows at Tyburn were landed at the Cape with only bread, knives, dried fish and some turnip seed. Fearing the Khoi, some fled to 'Penguin Iland' – today's Robben Island – where there was no shelter or water but only rats and an 'abundance of great snakes lying upon the ground against the Sune'. After eight months, 'almost mad by reason of their several pressing wants and extremities', the 'Newgate Men' begged passing ships that they might be taken back and hanged. So too did the second batch, three men sent out a year later in a final, abortive attempt to establish a vanguard colony of British convicts like the later New South Wales. Terry's description inverts entirely the imagery of ships, birds and a magical hatching of new forms already encountered in Brink and Du Toit's rendering of the contact zone: 'Our commander told them, that he had no commission to execute them...but our fifth

⁴ Edward Terry, *Voyage to East India...* [1777], *BVR*, 83.

⁵ Walter Peyton, Ship's log MS Add. 19276, British Museum, [1615, 1617], *BVR*, 73.

ship the *Swan*, staying in this place after us a day or two, took these poor men into her, and then took her course for Bantam, whither she was bound'.⁶

Collected from archives around the world in Raven-Hart's 1967 volume, *Before Van Riebeeck*, the documents which first described such uncertain transactions, broken languages and lapsed origins were at the time embroiled in precisely such problems. For how could one convey information to one's own fleet without the danger of having navigational secrets destroyed by the indigenes, or poached by a rival power? In 1615, with all the absurdity inherent in the processes of imaginative plantation and transportation, one chronicler suggested that a special rock be imported for the express purpose of securing such oceanic correspondence:

In my opinion it weare fitt that a stone weare brought out of England of purpose onely to hyde letters onder, the length thearof might be fower feet, the breadth 2 ½ feete, & the thickestnes 5 or 6 ynches, upon which the Armes of England (or suche lyke) might be ingraven, therby to be knowne as the English stone...⁷

He advised copying the Hollanders, who left their letters always in one place '& onsealed unto th'end that after perusal, either the principalls, or the Copies thearof maye bee returned under the same againe...thus every of their Comaunders aryving theare, boath takes & leaves advise' (76).

By mid-century the Dutch East India Company would become the world's largest trading enterprise, and its growing influence precipitated another false start on the part of their English rivals. A recent popular history of Cape Town begins not with the familiar story of Van Riebeeck but rather with the annexation undertaken by Andrew Shillinge and Humphrey Fitzherbert in 1620, whereby they took 'quiet and peaceful possession' of Table Bay and 'of the whole continent near adjoining' in the name of 'the High and Mighty Prince James'. What is now Lion's Head was to become 'Ye Sugar Loaf', and Devil's Peak 'King Charles his Mount'.⁸ Topographical labels and attitudes towards the Cape continued to shift uncertainly in the following decades; even in 1646, the year before the wrecking of the *Nieuwe Haerlem* and the temporary fort built by its crew which would act as a forerunner to the station of 1652, a VOC official would deem that 'Nothing can be had there for certain except good drinking-water'.⁹

'The Remaking of Chief Harry'

⁶ Terry, *Voyage, BVR*, 84.

⁷ Peyton, *BVR*, 75-6.

⁸ Vivian Bickford-Smith, Elizabeth van Heynigen and Nigel Worden, *Cape Town: the Making of a City. An Illustrated Social History*, (Cape Town, David Philip: 1998), 12.

⁹ Cited Noël Mostert. *Frontiers: the Epic of South Africa's Creation and the Tragedy of the Xhosa People*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1992), 120.

It is in this context that Dan Sleight's *Eilande* begins, an enormous prose work written in the early 1980s, published two decades later and translated into English in 2004 by André Brink. The first of its seven linked narratives opens with a man 'covered in blood, robbed, humiliated' walking from the dunes toward the ocean: 'Behind them in the smoking rubble were their dead, ahead of them was the sea'.¹⁰ This is Autshumao, the Chief Harry or Herrie who will come to exert an almost obsessional fascination in the *Daghregister* of the early Dutch station as interpreter and go-between, a broker of cattle and culture. Yet in these opening pages he is only dimly concerned with the different mariners that come and go along the shores of the bay, giving him and his small band clothes, bread and sometimes tobacco in return for the safekeeping of letters. Neither does he show an interest in their contents, or a sense of wonder at the disembodied, ghostly process of writing like that which runs through the contact zone of the New World. Instead his mind is consumed with his loss of cattle and of status, his relegation to the level of Goringhaicona, the *Watermen* or *Strandlopers* who must subsist on 'meagre food gathered from icy rock pools' or even 'a seal on the beach, dead for days, covered with sand lice and deeply corroded by crabs and gulls' (9). He looks inland to see the 'the smoke of his enemy's transition fires, heavy and reeking with cream and fat' (4).

It is an opening *in medias res* which deftly conveys a sense of life processes, seasons and timescales entirely other to the literature of European exploration: the point of departure for Autshumao's narrative is not, perhaps, where a more conventional historical novel (or a postcolonial exercise in 'writing back') might place it. Around 1631, he too was abducted by English mariners, but in this case taken east to Batavia. On that voyage, Autshumao 'contracted the seamen's diseases, learned their language, and became Chief Harry':

In the Orient he'd seen, when sometimes the ship had been moored to a quay in a river mouth, how dark men with gowns and long hair would stretch their necks like gannets on a rock to talk up to the ship. Their air was dusty since early morning, their seawater tepid, the food strongly spiced, the stars alien...Dun-coloured cattle with drooping ears would wander among the people, mainly dried cows and heifers, disconsolate animals without a bull, and lean oxen pulling carts. And there'd be beggars stretching their hands towards him...So poverty existed on both sides of the big sea; he was not alone...Behind each quay lay a town, behind each town a green jungle like a wall, behind the jungle there would sometimes be mountain peaks, and behind the mountains thunder. He stopped looking at it. What was there to see? (6)

Unlike many novelists working with the textual remains of early Cape history, Sleight resists the temptation to elaborate within what from today's vantage point seems to be the

¹⁰ Dan Sleight, *Islands [Eilande, 2002]*, trans. André Brink, (London: Vintage, 2005), 3.

richness of such material, the space for exotic imaginings that it affords. The scenic descriptions of the Orient are barely recognisable as such, framed not by the laden expectations of Europe but rather the harsh economy and distinctive ecology of the Cape. There is no attempt at orientation or a chronological record of progress; the 'particulars of their Voyage' are bilious, meaningless sensations, or the alien cattle and destitution that Autshumao cannot help but notice as an erstwhile 'captain' embroiled in the disintegrative processes of Khoi society. Eventually the prose dissolves into a waking dream entirely abstracted from his monotonous surroundings; his body pressed against the gunwale so that the sailors do not step on him, he recedes into a sea-sick reverie of his dwelling place and his sister's child, Krotoä:

When he opened his eyes he could see red paint on English oak; when he closed them, there was his niece, and behind her a pale yellow mat of thin reeds in the curve of a *harubis* house. In his long dream, going on for days and nights, he could smell dry reeds, and cold ashes among the stones, and cow dung. (7)

In its balance between the international traffic of the growing colonial networks and personal strategies for survival within them, Autshumao's voyage to the Orient is a kind of overture to the larger work. Throughout *Islands* one senses an enormous effort of narrative self-restraint: an attempt to remain within a particular mental horizon and a specific geography, even as its personages are enveloped by the vast, impersonal forces transforming the planet in the seventeenth century.

Sleigh's work emerges here as a basis of comparison for other literary versions of the VOC period. It is surely the most comprehensive, archivally textured instance of 'the historical novel' set at the Cape of Good Hope. Although that dated label seems inadequate when considering how this (and the other recent treatments of the early settlement read here) possess an in-built questioning of what the writing of the past from the present entails. Yet rather than assuming that the most recent or avowedly self-aware works are necessarily the most adept at mediating the early colonial era, this chapter reads across both literary and non-fictional versions of the archive, looking for instances of dialogue between them. The claims of the 'historical novel' then (and of its more fractured, experimental variants) are checked by the limits of the 'historicised novel': a dual awareness of both the literary aspect of history and the material history of literature.¹¹ The post-apartheid turn toward the early colony in works by Brink, Russell Brownlee, Yvette Christiaansë, Zoë Wicomb and others should itself be contextualised if one is to consider how the cultural preoccupations of the 1990s impinged on the work of imaginative recuperation underway in the last decades: of

¹¹ I have benefited here from P. R. Anderson's speculations on 'The Place of History' in 'The Host of Vagabonds': *Origins and Destinations of the Vagrant in Cape History and Ideas*. Unpub. PhD thesis, (University of Cape Town, March 2007), 2.

recovering the untold lives of the early colony and honing the narrative forms that can do them some measure of justice.

The travelling archive

‘One of the circumstances that had agitated the respectable portion of this colony, has been the publication of the authentic Cape records’, wrote an American visitor in 1842: ‘Many entered warmly into the scheme at first, but it was soon perceived what the developments were likely to be...Like the secret details of all colonies, they will show a great deal of misrule, inhumanity, and want of system in the conduct of affairs’.¹² He referred to libel actions following the publication of *The Record, or a Series of Official Papers Relative to the Treatment of the Native Tribes of South Africa*. Compiled and translated by Donald Moodie, the former ‘Protector of Slaves for the Eastern Division of the Colony’ whose position had become redundant following emancipation on 1 December 1834, *The Record* was the first major exercise in preparing the earliest documents of the VOC at the Cape for public consumption. Commissioned by the Cape governor, Sir Benjamin D’Urban, its initial political impetus was explicit: the refutation of the missionary John Philip’s accusations of colonial cruelty in his 1828 *Researches in South Africa*. Yet as Moodie brought ever more incriminating Dutch and English documents into the public domain, official support was withdrawn.

A three volume edition of Van Riebeeck’s journal was commissioned for the Tercentenary of his landing in 1952 – by which time the ‘secret details’ of the early colony were barely a cause for comment – but despite the labours (and productive rivalry) of archivists like G. M. Theal and H. C. V. Leibbrandt, attempts to present the minutes, decrees and labyrinthine correspondence of the Company in their entirety have always remained piecemeal and unfinished, stymied by the huge and disparate amount of material involved. Stored first in the Castle, then the High Court (site of the former Slave Lodge) and after that the Parliamentary Library, the mass of documentation is now housed in what used to be Roeland Street jail. It is an irony relished by former inmate Albie Sachs: ‘The building where I was archived has become part of a national archive’.¹³ But in a sense their symbolic journey through a changing city has only just begun: today an international partnership is in the

¹² Charles Wilkes, *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition during the years 1838, 1839, 1840, 1841 and 1842*, vol. V: 424-5. Cited in Introduction, *The Record, or a Series of Official Papers Relative to the Condition and Treatment of the Native Tribes of South Africa, Compiled, Translated and Edited by Donald Moodie*. [1838-41]. Intro. Anna Smith, (Cape Town and Amsterdam: A. A. Balkema, 1960), vi.

¹³ ‘Justice of the Peace: A Life in Writing’, *Guardian Review*, (26 August 2006), 11.

process of transcribing and translating all the records of the VOC, creating a database that forms part of UNESCO's Memory of the World collection. Through coordinated efforts at repositories in Cape Town, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Tamil Nadu and The Hague, some four kilometres of shelved material are to be preserved in digital archive, searchable via the internet and safe from both fire and tropical humidity. Already it forms, according to the project website, perhaps the most extensive source on early modern 'World History' in existence.¹⁴

In Cape Town, the first stage has involved digitising all of the 'Resolutions of the Council of Policy', the proceedings of the prime governing body at the Cape, dating from late 1651, when the first meeting was held aboard the *Drommedaris*, to 1795, when a bankrupt administration (rechristened *Vergaan Onder Corruptie*) could offer little resistance to the British fleet.¹⁵ Six million words of crabbed seventeenth-century chancery hand and eighteenth-century italic script, written in bleeding brown ink on both sides of folio sheets, have been meticulously deciphered and converted into an 'international platform-independent *eXtensible Mark-up Language* format', with online glossaries to provide assistance with archaic Dutch expressions.

Alternate spellings, unfamiliar abbreviations, words either linked or dismembered into unfamiliar particles – all these provide great challenges to the modern researcher, concede the online editors, but at least one has 'a neutral copy of the original text' where the normalisation of words and the fleshing out of shortened notations will always produce a version that is manifestly a personal interpretation.¹⁶ From a purely linguistic point of view, the Resolutions are an immensely valuable source: one can chart the entry into Cape Dutch of loan words from the Khoi language families (*abba*, *gogga*, *karos*), from south-east Asia (*baklei*, *piesang*, *blatjang*), and from ship's slang (*kombuis*, *komers*) as well as the complex genealogy of place names. In an entry of 1710, one learns of the eight day's journey to *Rivier zonder Eijnde*, the town whose petrol attendants now vie for custom on the N2 just beyond the escarpment. The name is a translation of the Khoi *Kannakamkanna*, so called because the river's source was difficult to locate among the many headwaters and tributaries. [Fig. 20]

Dan Sleight worked for several years as an editor in the transcriptions service at Roeland Street; this laborious process, he explains, is the reason why his own *magnum*

¹⁴ Towards a New Age of Partnership (TANAP): 'Introduction to the Resolutions of the Council of Policy of Cape of Good Hope', Accessed via <<http://www.tanap.net>>.

¹⁵ Ms Resolusies 1651-1743 had already been published and could therefore be scanned in; Ms Resolusies 1744-1795 were newly translated and transcribed.

¹⁶ TANAP, <http://www.tanap.net/content/activities/documents/resolutions_Cape_of_Good_Hope/introduction_english/11.htm>

opus on the Dutch East India Company remains untranslated.¹⁷ When published in 1993 after decades of enquiry, *Die Buiteposte van die VOC onder Kaapse Bestuur, 1652-1795* (The Outposts of the VOC under Cape Control, 1652-1795) was hailed by revisionist Afrikaans historians as ‘the greatest research endeavour in South African historiography’.¹⁸ In the foreword, Sleigh explains his approach of viewing the Company from its periphery, from the manned outposts which spread throughout the Cape as it became clear that the planned refreshment station could not function within the geographic and economic limits of Table Valley. In the volumes of incoming letters at the Cape Archives, sandwiched between the lengthy, official epistles from Holland, Batavia and Ceylon, there are shorter ones, sometimes roughly scrawled notes of only a few sentences on small scraps of paper, usually passed over by historians.¹⁹ These are the correspondence from the outlying stations, dealing with parochial, everyday concerns, and it is these that Sleigh used to evoke the lives and the local concerns of the *posvolk* in extraordinarily rich detail.

Each *buitepos* receives its own treatment, from the lookout post on *Leeuwencop*, with its *vlaggelui* (flag men) and *zeewagters* (sea watchers), to the timber stations of *Paradijs* and *Houtbaai*; from the redoubts and cattle gates of the first frontier along the Liesbeeck, to the second line of defence stretching from *buitepos t’Nieuwland* to *buitepos Hottentots-Holland* (the last region so named because it was here that the Khoi herders on their seasonal migration to the Peninsula would gesture towards when asked about their homeland). By the late eighteenth century, the network reached from False Bay to the West Coast, including both *Robben* and *Dassen Eijland*, extending to the Boland, the Overberg and as far the outposts *Outeniqualand* and *Plettenbergs Baaij* in the increasingly desperate search for timber. The work culminates with what are virtually separate monographs on *Rio de Lagoa* (present-day Maputo) and Dutch Mauritius, dependencies of the Cape which were both written off by the Company as failed, costly experiments, then packed up and abandoned.

‘Soos eilande afgesonder van die vasteland’

¹⁷ Personal interview with the author, Pinelands, Cape Town, 10 March 2007. This is also the reason, he adds, why he did not translate *Eilande* himself.

¹⁸ Professor D. J. Kotze, quoted on the dustjacket. Dan Sleigh, *Die Buiteposte: VOC-Buiteposte onder Kaapse Bestuur 1652-1795*, (Pretoria: Haum, 1993).

¹⁹ James C. Armstrong, ‘Review Article: *Die Buiteposte*’, *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 32: 2/3, (1999), 580-83.

As a lifelong historian of the VOC, familiar with its written records in forms ranging from handwritten notes to international databases, why, one wonders, did Sleigh choose to write a novel? What was it that could not be expressed within his scholarly works, and why did he undertake the task of stringing so many disparate documents together to form a new kind of writing?²⁰ It is a question to which he has a ready answer as an interviewee: it pays better. But the story of its genesis, the scope of its narrative and its difference from other fictions out of the archive reveal a more complex reasoning, where the strictly material approach of *Die Buiteposte* inevitably leads back to the daily rhythms and textures – the ‘everydayness’ – of life at the Cape, and where the ruthless, post-human economy of the Company will interact with that of narrative itself.

Eilande first came to prominence when it was entered into a national *romanwedstryd* by its publishers in 2001, yet in talks to the *leeskring* of greater Cape Town, its author reveals that as a professional historian and dedicated reader of non-fiction, he is not wholly comfortable with the label ‘novelist’: ‘ek ken nie hulle geheime handdruk of geheime taal nie’.²¹ At the same time, he registered a frustration with the judges and reviewers who spoke fulsomely of how well *Eilande* evokes early Cape history, without confronting what that history might mean in its fullness. He even speculates that it might have been better to set the action (like Conrad’s *Nostromo* or Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians*) in a wholly imagined or abstracted world, so disallowing critical discussion content merely to draw links between story and history, text and context. Clearly such inadequate, provisional terms have to be kept in a dynamic relation as one seeks not only to recover historical textures via the novel, but also to survey the formal possibilities of the novel when set in, or set against, an urban settlement unique in having its entire history documented.

Most obviously and most powerfully, the structure of *Islands* is able to convey the enormous geographical spread of the VOC and the globalised, mercantile economy which it heralded. As the author notes, his work is better described as a collection of seven novellas – ‘sewe kort verhale...sewe sukkelaars’ – enabling it to ingest and juxtapose far-flung lives which are picked up where they enter the archival record and dropped when they disappear from it. Each introduces an entirely new topography into the work, a new source of narrative energy. And yet each lived trajectory remains disturbingly opaque, un-analysed until the same historical personage resurfaces, translated into an entirely different context, viewed from a great narrative distance.

²⁰ The Vintage edition states that *Islands* is Sleigh’s first novel, but see J. C. Kannemeyer for an account of the whole series of shorter literary works which he has published in Afrikaans, running in parallel to his work as a professional historian and including treatments of figures like Estienne Barbier and Adam Tas. *Die Afrikaanse Literatuur 1652-2004*, (Kaapstad & Pretoria: Human & Rousseau: 2005), 415.

²¹ Text of talks to Cape Town book clubs: received from Dan Sleigh, 10 March 2007.

In the second part, the story of the struggling, early settlement is taken up through Peter Havgard, also known as Pieter Meerhof, the Company surgeon who married the Khoi woman Krotoä-Eva, gave his name to Meerhof's Kasteel as one of the colony's first explorers and was killed while on a slaving mission to Madagascar in 1667. Here 'Chief Harry' is a distant, shadowy figure, out of favour with the Khoi bands who have united under Doman, the third 'Captain' to be abducted and taken to Batavia in 1657. The focus shifts to Autshumao's niece, the 'woman between' who gave birth to the first mixed-race children at the Dutch station, and has been the subject of so many literary recuperations in recent years.²² In the opening paragraphs, Van Riebeeck describes to his protégé Meerhof her skill at picking up languages – not just Dutch but also fragments of Malay, English and the Portuguese which was spoken at the Cape well into the nineteenth century – and the effect she has on the garrison when she crosses the courtyard in her sarong and *badjoe*: 'The East, it's pure East' (57). In the careful attention to developing forms of language, dress and food preparation, in the annual rhythm of outgoing and return fleets, the prime division of slaves and sailors into *orang baru* (those newly entered into the Company's service) and *orang lama* (those with experience of the East), we are given a portrait of the *Cabo* as a fulcrum of historical forces at work in the seventeenth century, not simply a matter of kraal and castle, but, in the words of Robert Ross, 'a synthesis in the dialectic of continents'.²³

After this the narrative shifts disconcertingly to 'the limitless ocean north-east of Mauritius', where the sailor Bart Borms floats after a hurricane that decimated the return fleet from Batavia in 1662. Directed more by the vagaries of ocean currents and commercial flows rather than his own conscious decision, he will make a life first as a cultivator on Mauritius and later as a *Saldanhavaarder* (Saldanha farer) also becoming a step-father to Meerhof and Krotoä's daughter Pieterella, the curiously absent individual around whom these diverse narratives pivot. The next novella begins with a German soldier fleeing a fatherland of 'burnt ruins, desecrated churches, felled trees, beached dykes, contaminated wells' as deep structure of the work begins to convey a sense of colonisation, increasingly advanced by economic historians, as an index of Europe's domestic weakness rather than its strength.

As in Brink's highly coloured version of the life of Estienne Barbier, *On the Contrary* (1993), 'the whole country was streaming down to the sea'.²⁴ Yet while Brink's playful,

²² The biographical sketch by social historian V. C. Malherbe, *Krotoä, called 'Eva': a Woman Between*, (University of Cape Town: Centre for African Studies, Communications Series 19, 1990), has been a source book for several literary versions. The phrase 'a woman between' refers to the savage obituary for Krotoä in the colony's *Daghregister*: 'this brutal aboriginal, always still hovering between'. See H. C. V. Leibrandt, *Précis of the Archives of the Cape of Good Hope: Journal 1671-74 & 1676*, (Cape Town: W. A. Richards & Sons, 1902), 208.

²³ Robert Ross, 'Cape Town (1750-1850): Synthesis in the Dialectic of Continents' in Ross and Gerard J. Telkamp eds, *Colonial Cities: Essays on Urbanism in a Colonial Context*, (The Hague: Leiden University Press, 1984), 105-121.

²⁴ Sleight, *Islands*, 289, 306.

experimental work is billed by its highly unreliable narrator as 'Being the life of a famous rebel, soldier, traveller, explorer, reader, builder, scribe, Latinist, lover and liar', the career of Sleight's soldier is less adventurous. As the incoming correspondence from the *buiteposte* confirms, Hans Michiel Callenbach never reached the East but was instead transferred between various lonely postings at the Cape: *Keert-de-Koe*, the cattle gate built at the site of an old Khoi cairn where the road to the interior crossed the Salt River; *Robben Eijland*, where he witnesses the banished Eva's decline into alcohol abuse and venereal disease; *t Huis de Rust* at Saldanha Bay, where French fleets try to gain a purchase on the Cape, and where the long, stark beaches and shallow waters remind him of the coastline of northern Europe.

The sense of new, emerging relations between different parts of the globe and the perplexing superimposition of them enabled by the literary work continues with the narrative of Pieter Deneyn, a notoriously harsh judicial officer who penned the first love poems of the Cape, occasional verses to ladies which can still be read in the archives (one of which employs a trope which will recur throughout white writing of the Cape: the experience of seeing the Southern Cross for the first time). In abstract legal terms he considers the dissonance between the directive from Amsterdam to remain on good terms with the indigenous population and the irreversible, uncontrollable process of dispossession that granting land to the free burghers has set in train. Following this, the narrative is taken up through the free burgher and cooper Daniel Zaaïjman, who marries Pieternel and begins to raise a family on Mauritius – the island in a different climactic zone which the VOC hoped could help feed the Cape, and vice versa – only to witness its wholesale abandonment by the Dutch in 1710. Buildings are fired, stock slaughtered and dogs set loose on the island to kill off the remaining fauna: it is a slow and methodical dismantling of human structures which suggests an analogy, subtly developing throughout the text, between the operations of a Company outpost, the workings of the human mind and the written artefact itself.

The reasons for this ghostly, scholarly presence become apparent when, in the final section, we shift to a farm outside Stellenbosch in the early eighteenth century and encounter a larger narrative intelligence. Here Johannes Guilielmus de Grevenbroek, once Secretary of the Council of Policy under the Van der Stel governors, now an old man wrapped in his tattered academic gown for warmth, struggles to finish a manuscript on the first fifty years of the station: 'He felt the need to write as strongly as thousands of his contemporaries felt the urge to reach the golden East, but after more than five months on more than two hundred foolscap pages, he had still not progressed beyond the years of settlement'. (690) A graduate of the University of Leiden, a botanist and author of *An Elegant and Accurate Account of the African Race living round the Cape of Good Hope* (1695)

remarkable in its departure from the usual ethnographic prejudices, De Grevenbroek has been called the first Cape intellectual.²⁵

In *Islands* he becomes the frame narrator who has reconstructed the previous lives, and in turn a surrogate for the twentieth author who transcribed his minutes, missives and affidavits into a digital archive. He considers the versions of the Cape offered by his few contemporaries, yet is searching for a way of writing that is both less detached than the descriptions of Reverend Valentyn in Holland and the 'young man Kolbe' now back in his *lieber heimat* Franconia; less stridently local than the *Dagregister van den Landbouwer Adam Tas*. And so even though the prose surface of *Islands* is not disrupted by the usual markers of authorial self-consciousness, its epilogue refracts back through the whole a complex meditation on the practice of writing the past. His nearness as archivist *in situ* will ensure that *Islands* is no exercise in naïve realism; his distance will remove it entirely from the well-meant but often sentimental uses to which the records of the Cape have been put in the last decades.

'...like excluding history itself'

Reading Sleigh's work in tandem with other novels set in the years of the VOC, one is struck by how its genesis and long gestation form an intriguing reversal of the usual process by which a historical novel comes about. Broadly speaking, one surmises that a writer 'does their research' (or uses that of others) as a way of supplementing an urge to plot or characterise, as a means of fleshing out a compelling historical individual or providing adequate context for an 'image' (in Ezra Pound's sense) that has engaged the writerly imagination. Always generous in acknowledging his sources, Brink describes how the historian Hermann Giliomee brought to his attention the failed slave revolt of 1825 in the Koue Bokkeveld, and the 2000 pages of legal testimony in the archives which triggered *A Chain of Voices*. On the first page Brink reproduces the grisly sentence passed on the slaves, an epigraph used in turn by Allister Sparks in his debunking of the myth (much favoured by Sarah Gertrude Millin and Jan Smuts) of a 'mild' South African version of slavery: 'the heads of Galant and Abel to be struck off from their bodies and thereupon stuck upon iron spikes affixed to separate poles to be erected in the most conspicuous places in the Bokkeveld, there to remain until consumed by time and the birds of the air'.²⁶

²⁵ Hermann Giliomee, *The Afrikaners: Biography of a People*, (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2003), 4.

²⁶ André Brink, *A Chain of Voices*, [1982], (London: Minerva, 1995). Allister Sparks, *The Mind of South Africa*, (London: Heinemann, 1990), 77.

So too Brink acknowledges the work of a Cape academic who has carefully reconstructed, amongst several other microhistories, the life of Trintjie of Madagascar, a slave who was forced into a relationship with the brewer Willem Menssink and who murdered her child by him in 1714: 'This story was researched by the indefatigable Nigel Penn and published in his scintillating study, *Rogues, Rebels and Runaways* (1999); and I still remember the little smile with which he offered me the book, saying, "You might find something in here". Which I promptly did, in *The Rights of Desire*'.²⁷ In contrast, Sleigh worked for many years as a researcher for the late Dalene Mathee, an author who combined a gift for bestselling narrative and forest-shrouded mysticism with meticulous historical accuracy. Moving from her familiar narrative terrain of the Outeniqua mountains, Mathee's 2000 work *Pieterella van die Kaap* was amongst the first of the wave of revisionist recuperations of Krotoä and her daughter, involving trips to Mauritius and intricate genealogical research. While full of praise for the gifts of Mathee (and indeed his translator Brink), Sleigh registers an exasperation with the way that these figures have since come to dominate reception of his work – 'Dit bly by Krotoä, Krotoä, Krotoä met Sarah Baartman as afwisseling. Wanneer gaan dit, byvoorbeeld, uitbrei?' – and remarks that he wrote much of *Islands* out of all the collected, branching material which Mathee did not use.²⁸

It is a detail which goes some way to explaining why it is a book where the more obvious narrative contours and correspondences are absent, why it has the 'resistant form' of having been worked around, or in the cracks and joints of a large body of historical raw material. The phrase is used by Michael Green in his *Novel Histories*, an enquiry into the literary possibilities of reading the past *from* the present without appropriating it *for* the present. The most valuable works, Green suggests, are those with an in-built awareness of the resistance of historical material to the forms in which it is produced, a quality which he contrasts with the 'formal domestication' common in lesser historical novels.²⁹ In a similar way, when discussing Zoë Wicomb's often satirical treatment of the public use of Cape history, Dorothy Driver draws attention to how a 'self-interrogating density of verbal texture' enables literary works to distance themselves from less complex and nuanced forms of writing.³⁰ In this encounter with 'the otherness of earlier literature', writes Gillian Beer, '[e]ngaging with the *difference* of the past in our present makes us aware of the trajectory of

²⁷ André Brink, *Persistence of Memory*, in Stephen Watson ed., *A City Imagined*, (Johannesburg: Penguin, 2005), 123. The life of Trintjie of Madagascar was, however, first 'reconstructed' by Dr H. Heese.

²⁸ 'Dan Sleigh trotseer ons panel', Interview with panel of M-Net-boekprys, 2001. <<http://www.oulitnet.co.za/paneelklopper/eilande.asp>> Personal interview with the author, Pinelands, Cape Town, 10 March 2007.

²⁹ Michael Green, *Novel Histories* [1997], (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 2001), 30.

³⁰ Dorothy Driver, Afterword, to Zoë Wicomb, *David's Story* [2000], (New York: The Feminist Press, 2001), 271. The phrase is from Dennis Porter, 'Orientalism and its Problems', in Francis Barker et al. eds., *The Politics of Theory*, (Colchester: University of Essex, 1983), 179-93.

our arrival and of the insouciance of the past – their neglectfulness of our prized positions and our assumptions.³¹

Again, here De Grevenbroek will prove an invaluable and self-aware intermediary between the autonomy of the past and the needs of the present. In the epilogue the retired Secretary realises that his attempt to reveal the corruption of VOC officials has transformed itself into something entirely different. He struggles with the problem of an ending, of how to draw together the disparate lives that have gone before, and acknowledges how he must use the figure of Pieternella as a means to this end if the narrative of the Cape is going to fall within that of his own life: 'It is a terrible tension to have an unfinished manuscript on your table for a long time...You're treading water'.³² All the more so, one imagines, while steadily more topical but less credible versions of the same historical personages appear in the works of others.

As Carli Coetzee shows, versions of Krotoä-Eva within Afrikaans letters underwent a complete reversal within the twentieth century. Where once the genealogical research which linked Krotoä to the Saaymans of the Cape was suppressed and ridiculed, in the 1990s there was a considerable cultural *cachet* in locating non-white ancestry amongst certain Cape Afrikaners once classified white. Whereas early twentieth century playwrights of the Second Language Movement omitted to mention Eva's marriage and stressed her 'inevitable' lapse into alcoholism, revisionist one-woman plays evoked her as *onse ma*, a figure of motherly origin, earthy fertility and forgiveness.³³ She appears in similar guise in Brink's first post-apartheid novel, *Imaginations of Sand*, although here the mystic, healing presence of Krotoä-Eva has been transmuted to Kamma-Maria and transplanted to the very different frontier of the *trekboers*.³⁴

Considering her fate in the hands of English-language writers, Stephen Gray posited a 'Hottentot Eve' as counterpart to the Adamastor of *The Lusiads*. Envisioning a 'pastoral ambassadress, temptress, mediator and, ultimately miscegenator' who 'comes to symbolise both the attractions and the intractability of inland', he finds the literary descendants of Krotoä extending in a continuum through Saartje Baartman to the demotic Kaatje Kekkelbek of Thomas Geddes Bain; from the temptress of Sarah Gertrude Millin's *God's Step-Children*

³¹ Gillian Beer, *Arguing with the Past: Essays in Narrative from Woolf to Sidney*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), 1. She goes on to cite Habermas and Gadamer: 'For what leads to understanding must be something that has already asserted itself in its own separate validity' (3).

³² Sleigh, *Islands*, 741.

³³ Carli Coetzee, 'Krotoä Remembered: A Mother of Unity, a Mother of Sorrows?' in Coetzee and Nuttall eds, *Negotiating the Past: the Making of Memory in South Africa*, (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1998).

³⁴ See Meg Samuelson for an extensive account of Krotoä-Eva as 'Translator, Traitor, "Rainbow" Mother' in the work of Brink, Sleigh and Trudie Bloem. *Remembering the Nation, Dismembering Women? Stories of the South African Transition*, (Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2007), 15.

(1924) to the forlorn apartheid wanderer of Fugard's *Boesman and Lena* (1969), the woman by the roadside wearing 'one of those sad dresses that reduce the body to an angular gaunt cipher of poverty'.³⁵ On the one hand Gray's work is an inspired exercise in comparative reading; on the other, in drawing such long-distance correspondences and sifting the texts of early travellers, it risks entrenching a colonial stereotype still further and merely reproducing the voyeuristic fascination with genitalia and steatopygous buttocks that it seeks to ironise.³⁶

The very word 'steatopygia' becomes an object of fascination in Wicomb's 2000 novel, *David's Story*, a mantra to be rolled around the mouth and playfully reclaimed from both its pretensions to scientific enquiry and overtones of postcolonial outrage. Here the figure of Krotoä is invoked in a much more unstable act of literary origin: in the opening paragraphs the narrator (employed to transcribe the story of the one-time freedom fighter David Dirkse as per his instructions) casts an ironic gaze on this all too easily usable past:

David's story started at the Cape with Eva/Krotoä, the first Khoi woman in the Dutch castle, the only section I have left out. He eventually agreed to that but was adamant about including a piece on Saartje Baartman, the Hottentot Venus placed on display in Europe. One cannot write nowadays, he said, without a little monograph on Baartman; it would be like excluding history itself.³⁷

Not only has Krotoä-Eva merged into Baartman as a single token figure – easily transferred and exchanged between texts – but the very appearance of these names has come to serve as a shorthand for the entire project of exhuming forgotten lives, and to signal the trajectory they must inevitably follow.

Yet ultimately, the unreliable amanuensis in Wicomb's novel will excise both 'the woman between', and 'the Hottentot Venus' from the novel we hold in our hands. Instead, a very different, disturbing narrative continually threatens to surface: David's adulterous affair during his exile in ANC training camps with a woman subsequently subjected to torture by the liberation movement as a possible informer. What has by now become a narrative cliché is exchanged for a subject that is still barely voiced as Wicomb, writing from Glasgow, attests her up-to-dateness in matters of cultural politics in an immensely ambitious and

³⁵ Stephen Gray, *Southern African Literature: an Introduction*, (Cape Town: David Philip, 1979), 43. 68.

³⁶ One might say the same of the large body of fairly recent scholarly enquiry into the written and visual representations of the peninsular Khoi peoples; for example in Malvern van Wyk Smith, "The Most Wretched of the Human Race:" The Iconography of the Khoikhoin (Hottentots) 1500-1800', *History and Anthropology*, 5:3-4 (1992), 285-330. Why, one wonders, is there a compulsion to bring so many of these sensationalist colonial depictions into circulation again, and who gains by it? See David Johnson, 'Representing the Cape "Hottentots" from the French Enlightenment to Post-Apartheid South Africa', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 40:4 (2007), 525-552 for an extensive bibliography of such enquires. It is in mind of this that I have not reproduced the full text of Krotoä's obituary in the colony's *Dagbregister*, nor any of the absurd engravings of the 'Hottentots' which fill so many southern African travelogues.

³⁷ Zoë Wicomb, *David's Story*, 1.

experimental novel. There is, however, a price to be paid for this mediation between local and global audiences. The international edition of *David's Story* includes a long scholarly afterword detailing the social demography of the Cape and the fate of the Griqua peoples – all the historical matter that is only obliquely referred to in the main text. In the words of Kai Easton, 'another narrator takes over and fills in the gaps, "unravels", as it were, the literary and historical intertexts for an international readership'; and despite the calibre of the research and rigour of the analysis 'we might still question the marketing of this novel – which is so wittily attentive to interpretative strategies – with an afterword that, in the end, explains it all'.³⁸

'A fortuitous surplus of violence'

Considering all the avowedly self-aware and experimental works out of the Cape archive in recent years – those which attempt to tell the past while simultaneously questioning the status of any written history – one is struck by the recurrence of this pattern: the greater the deployment of self-conscious narrators and frame-breaking techniques, the greater the degree of *hors texte* explanation required. A recent issue of the Cape historical journal *Kronos* was devoted to a discussion of *Proteus*, a 2003 film based on the records of a trial conducted before the Cape Council of Justice in August 1735. Rijkaert Jacobsz (a VOC sailor from Rotterdam) and Claas Blank (a Khoi individual from the south-west Cape), already prisoners of many years on Robben Island, were accused of 'mutually perpetrated sodomy' by Panaij van Boegies, a slave banished from Batavia in 1730. Mixing direct quotations of the records in Dutch and Portuguese with Afrikaans dialogue, the visual grammar of film also included a series of deliberate anachronisms. Concrete breakwaters and steel water drums on the island; the beehive hairdos of court stenographers and uniforms of apartheid konstabels: all these, according to the directors, were intended to reference 1964, the year of Nelson Mandela's incarceration:

The pristine past of 1735 that we sought to recreate didn't exist, couldn't exist – it would always be haunted by the present, by every image we know from our century, by Biko and Soweto, by whites-only beaches and black townships, and now by ten years of democracy when South Africa became the first country in the world to enshrine gay rights in their constitution...It's impossible to know what Claas and Rijkaert really experienced, impossible to know what they felt and dreamed, because we weren't there. We could only invent our version of their story, a version that's specific to our imaginations, and our lives today. Because we weren't pretending to be 'pure', the beehives and concrete breakwaters allowed

³⁸ Kai Easton, 'Travelling through History, "New" South African Icons: The Narratives of Saartje Baartman and Krotoä-Eva in Zoë Wicomb's *David's Story*, *Kunapipi* (Vol. XXIV: 1-2, 2002), Special Edition: South Africa Post-Apartheid, 237-249.

us to be 'true' to our 1735 story, and most important, true to the memory of these two forgotten convicts.³⁹

The more one considers this line of argument – fashionable and sophisticated as it may be – the more one suspects that it is flawed. It posits an equivalence between very different kinds of struggle, and grants itself the right to see them as continuous across time. It risks assuming that the use of self-aware, frame-breaking techniques in narrating the past *automatically* guarantees an adequate engagement with the archive; when in fact they might become a kind of lip-service which is then taken to authorise anything that follows. And surely something – a kind of historical integrity, or facticity – is lost in the very process of reading so much into events, in the strenuous attempt to yoke one of the twentieth century's most celebrated liberation struggles (not to mention gay rights) to the closed, hopeless world of this obscure trial. For all its advertised radicalism, such an approach risks replicating precisely the tone which a thinker like Michel Foucault so abhorred: 'the easy, cosy intimacy that historians have traditionally enjoyed in the relationship of the past to the present'.⁴⁰ To sympathise too readily (and on a first-name basis) with such figures is perhaps to betray them.

It is here that one approaches a dilemma presented by much of Brink's *oeuvre*, and also a sense of unease that he is regarded as such a serious presence – 'a writer of inspired violence' – on the world stage.⁴¹ Having presented Afrikaans prose with, in Antjie Krog's words, 'a military review of modern and avant-garde techniques' over the decades, he has also mapped out the changing strategies of the novels in several of essays.⁴² It is a sustained and cogent meditation on the relation of story to history, but one in which an excitement at the sheer profusion of narratives emerging from the archive blends rather queasily with the violence of their content. In an essay collected in *Reinventing a Continent* (one which goes some way to explaining why the interior monologues of nineteenth-century slaves owe much to the language of Parisian structuralism circa 1968), Brink discusses that in consulting the trial documents for *A Chain of Voices*, he was most drawn to the 'unguarded moments' and ungrammatical turns of phrase where the original voice of the speaker seemed to sound out through the palimpsest of transcriptions. Looking back however, he acknowledges that his sense now is of the extreme unreliability of the documentation which demonstrated that 'history, even in the most traditional sense of the word, is composed not only of *texts* (written and otherwise), but strung together from

³⁹ Susan Newton-King ed., 'History and Film: A Roundtable Discussion of *Proteus*', *Kronos* 31, (November, 2005), Rep, on dustjacket.

⁴⁰ Mark Poster, *Foucault, Marxism and History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984). Cited in Green, *Novel Histories*, 28.

⁴¹ A reviewer's phrase reproduced on several of the Vintage editions.

⁴² Antjie Krog, 'Tribute to André P Brink on the occasion of his seventieth birthday celebration'. 5 July 2005. <http://www.oulitnet.co.za/seminarroom/brink_tribute.asp>

silences. And this, it seems to me, is what primarily attracts the novelist (as it originally attracted the historiographer)'.⁴³

Such strings of silence are in turn linked to the violence of the colonial record, but in a way where Brink is always more than ready to expound on both; in his recent autobiography, this produces the lazy paradox that 'Violence is a kind of language in its own right, an articulation which is either preverbal or which begins where language stops'.⁴⁴ He goes on to remark that 'Violent encounters occur in all societies; but in South Africa there almost inevitably appears to have been an added edge to it, a fortuitous *surplus* of violence' (14). Doubtless the strict, neutral sense of fortuitous as 'happening by chance' is intended here, but nonetheless the word carries with it a more colloquial, widespread sense of a happy accident. Fortuitous, perhaps, only for 'a writer of inspired violence'; or rather the purveyor of a voyeuristic, almost pornographic depiction of brutality which emerges most gratuitously in a work titled (aptly enough) *The Other Side of Silence* (2002).

The professional historian's smile on handing narrative raw material to Brink is surely telling. Perhaps it evinces an awareness that his invaluable role as prolific author-translator-populariser co-exists with inevitable distortions inherent in the sheer ambition of his undertakings. In *On the Contrary*, the flights of fancy of the incorrigibly romantic and rebellious Estienne Barbier are created from the wilder imaginings of travellers like Kolb: his journey into an African interior is 'composed not so much of landscapes and climatological conditions as by the *texts* of numerous eighteenth-century travellers through the Cape hinterland'.⁴⁵ Yet in *Rogues, Rebels and Runaways*, Penn's account of Barbier shows that his opposition to the Company was less an African inflection of Continental liberty, equality and fraternity (or, for that matter, Parisian literary theory) than a desire to maraud and murder the indigenous peoples of the northern Cape without restraint. Here magical realist or fabulist techniques surely reach the limits of invention and begin to effect a distortion that cannot be accounted for by even the most dilated account of artistic licence.

Again, neither does such an objection have to be framed in moral, or rather moralistic, terms: as with T'kama-Adamastor's magical singing of his native land into being, at points the increasing density of the language can only signal its ebbing power. So too the silences, darkneses and absences which are liberally sprinkled through the titles of Brink's books (and the paragraphs of criticism which buttress them) can all too easily become tokens of common currency, outdated by their very attempt to remain at the cutting edge of international trends. Like the figure of Krotoä-Eva-Baartman these enter into too easy an exchange; they begin to lose their suggestive power and local force. In the verdict of a more

⁴³ André Brink, *Reinventing a Continent: Writing and Politics in South Africa, 1982-1995*, (London: Secker & Warburg, 1996), 240-41.

⁴⁴ André Brink *A Fork in the Road: a Memoir*, (London: Harvill Secker, 2009), 15.

⁴⁵ Brink, *Reinventing a Continent*, 243.

sceptical reviewer of *A Chain of Voices*, Brink 'writes historical novels in the way other people travel'; 'an exercise in what might be called apartheid gothic', they become 'costume dramas of the present': 'He is unable to apprehend the past in any but the forms and tones and meanings of his own exceptional experience as a South African in 1982, the forms of a familiar but distorted world'.⁴⁶

'...that country remained to be described'

To read a novel like *Islands* is to leave this for a much lonelier aesthetic, and to observe a series of worlds built from first principles. As the fantastic elaborations of a European imaginary desperate for landfall resolve into the harsh, monochrome world of permanent settlement, the descriptive details and dabs of colour in the opening sections inevitably turn on material consumption and cargo: the fatty smoke of transition fires, the noxious gas escaping the wreck of the *Haerlem* as pepper rots in its hold; the green excrement falling on the heels of oxen as Autshumao's people drive them too quickly to the Fort in anticipation of tobacco and alcohol. Stalled on Robben Island, the narrative of Peter Havgard conveys a powerful sense of stagnation, of lives governed by the alien rhythms of the Company and its distant Directors. It intimates that perhaps the real challenge of a historical novel is to convey a radically different experience of time passing, to evade as far as possible any directed, subsequently agreed narrative: the teleology implied, for example, in the titles of two standard histories of the period, where the early colony is inevitably read in the light of later conceptions of the nation state.⁴⁷ Reviewing Hilary Mantel's recent *Wolf Hall*, Stephen Greenblatt writes appreciatively of how it invites us to 'forgo easy irony and suspend our awareness of what is going to come to pass': 'The triumph of the historical novel, in Mantel's vision, is to reach a point of ignorance'.⁴⁸

By contrast, in a review of *Islands*, Christopher Hope cited it as proof of his suspicion that 'much of the narrow unforgiving hatred that marked later South African lives' may be traced back to the officials of the seventeenth-century Dutch station.⁴⁹ Van Riebeeck's defensive fort and boundary hedge 'set the political tone for centuries to come', he states, going on to say that 'it is somehow reassuring to know that the Dutch East India Company recruited as servants and sailors not the impeccable white paragons touted in the history

⁴⁶ Jane Kramer, 'In the Garrison', *New York Review of Books*, (2 December, 1982), 8.

⁴⁷ Elphick, *Kraal and Castle: Khoikhoi and the Founding of White South Africa*; Elphick and Hermann Giliomee eds., *The Shaping of South African Society 1652-1820* (Cape Town: Longman, 1979).

⁴⁸ Stephen Greenblatt, 'How it Must Have Been', *New York Review of Books*, (5 November, 2009), 24.

⁴⁹ Christopher Hope, 'Harry's Dementors', *The Guardian*, (22 May, 2004).

books but the dregs of Dutch and German gutters'. Quite apart from its historical simplification and elision of the second, British colonial administration, this approach does no justice to the processes of narrative unfolding in the work.

As Paul Carter shows in his essay on the spatial history of colonial Australia, the process of 'choosing, directions, applying names, inhabiting the country' is precisely what is omitted from such assured, conventional framings of history: 'they take it for granted that the newcomers travelled and settled a land *which was already there*. Geomorphologically, this was perhaps so – although even the science of landforms evolved as a result of crossing the country – but historically that country remained to be described'.⁵⁰ If anything, the literary work's sensitivity to this gradual, spatial mapping works to undermine precisely such generalisations and the temporal markers they rely on. The disrupted, dislocated lives cut across received chronologies, while in the attention to the overlapping, evolving conceptions of dwelling which made up this collection of outposts, we are required to abandon the overworked frontier metaphor for a contact zone of unexpected intimacies and extreme precariousness.

Testifying to what Mostert calls 'one of the most remarkable examples of deprivation amidst plenty that history offers', Van Riebeeck's *Daghregister* records how the Dutch station very nearly went the way of the Newgate Men.⁵¹ As the 'seeds from the Fatherland' (*patriase saden*) are repeatedly washed out by torrential rain and the inhabitants of the fort forced to subsist on a diet of penguin, cabbage and even a dead baboon 'as large as a small calf', the gaze is turned enviously on the Khoi herds which gradually approach and then entirely encircle the fort. The strained early entries and the silences between them leave us to consider the effect of omens like snow on Table Mountain and a comet in the night sky.

In a reading of the early text of settlement more sophisticated than Hope's, yet which also cannot help working via a backdated narrative, Michael Chapman describes the *Daghregister* as evincing 'a mind continually ill at ease with itself as observations of the surrounding situation skew into psychologies of confession and self-justification'; it 'evokes the rudiments of a history in South Africa that would be characterised by suspicion, uncertainty, arrogance and pig-headedness'.⁵² Yet just as Sir Francis Drake almost certainly never penned the famous description of 'the fairest Cape...in the whole circumference of the earth', so too the *Journal* of Van Riebeeck was not written by him. Nowhere in the original journal does his own handwriting appear (as it does in corrections and additions to minutes of the Council of Policy); rather we have a document sometimes dictated by him, sometimes chronicling his actions in the third person, and sometimes composed in his absence.

⁵⁰ Paul Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay: an Essay in Spatial History*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1987), xxi.

⁵¹ Mostert, *Frontiers*, 123.

⁵² Michael Chapman, *South African Literatures*, (London: Longman, 1996), 77.

Perhaps then it is better viewed as a collective, political unconscious of the station and one whose images and obsessions are subjected to a deep pattern of rereading and reorientation in Sleigh's work.

As J. M. Coetzee showed in *White Writing*, when accounts of the Khoi move from the static categories of a proto-anthropology to the temporal record of chronicle, their much lamented idleness is suddenly replaced by a welter of activity: 'where he ought to be generating data for the categories, he is merely lying about', but 'in history the Hottentots suddenly seem all too busy, intriguing with one another, driving off cattle, begging, spying'.⁵³ And while Raven-Hart's *Cape of Good Hope: the First Fifty Years of Dutch Colonisation as Seen by Callers* (1971) is filled with descriptions of the garbled language of the Khoi, in the Journal the voice which emerges in dialogue with the Dutch is a surprisingly fully formed one, the arguments of Autshumao, Doman and other Khoi leaders offering convincing rebuttals of the Company's methods.

Concluding the terms of an uneasy peace after the first 'frontier war' along the Liesbeeck in 1660, the Journal records that 'they dwelt long upon our taking every day for our own use more of the land, which had belonged to them from all ages...They also asked, whether, if they were to come into Holland, they would be permitted to act in a similar manner'.⁵⁴ We read that to prevent the Dutch carting away cattle dung for use as manure in their vegetable garden, the Khoi began burning it, 'causing us thereby great inconvenience'.⁵⁵ Pages of the *Daghregister* are given over to watching the wagon road, a route vital for the supply of timber, yet also, one senses, for providing some kind of conceptual axis with which to traverse the confusing geography of the Peninsula. On 10 February 1655, after weeks of one-line reports about wind direction and shipping, an entry beginning on the *wagen pad na t'bos* develops into a long, frightened recollection that ruptures the assured chronology:

Only last night it happened that about 50 of these natives wanted to put up their huts close to the banks of the moat of our fortress, and when told in a friendly manner by our men to go a little further away, they declared boldly that this was not our land but theirs and that they would place their huts wherever they chose. If we were not disposed to permit them to do so they would attack us with the aid of a large number of people from the interior and kill us, pointing out that the ramparts were only constructed of earth and scum and could easily be surmounted by them.⁵⁶

⁵³ J. M. Coetzee, *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 23.

⁵⁴ Cited Mostert, *Frontiers*, 134.

⁵⁵ Cited Mostert, *Frontiers*, 130.

⁵⁶ 10 February 1655, *Journal of Jan van Riebeeck, Volume I, 1651-1655*, ed. with intro by H. B. Thom. (Cape Town and Amsterdam: A. A. Balkema, 1952), 292.

A hopeful footnote by the Van Riebeeck Society edition here suggests that while ‘both the Cape original and the Hague copy have *schuijm* (rubble, rubbish). Probably the diarist intended to write *schuijn* (with a slope)’ (292).

Beginning in the long, sporadic history of contact prior to settlement, the first section of *Islands* dramatises this acute awareness of resource use as well as the complex, internally-riven Khoi response to the European presence. The desperate, envious gaze of the early Journal – ‘would it matter so much if one deprived them of some 6 or 8 thousand cattle?’ – is reversed as Autshumao watches Van Riebeeck’s small, growing kraal, but also the herds of the ‘fat captain’ Gogosoa.⁵⁷ In the second part, we look over Peter Havgard’s shoulder as he reads *Daghregister*, scanning it for references to Eva. ‘There was one sentence in the journal that Peter could remember clearly, word for word: *But you, Eva, you’re pleading with the commander*. The word the speaker used was *soebat*. An Oriental word which meant: to curry favour’.⁵⁸ In this etymological attention to an accusation levelled by Doman, the ‘synthesis in the dialectic of continents’ described by Ross has become instead a corrosive hybridity. It is a reminder that what historian Wayne Dooling calls the ‘*blatjang* and *bobotie*’ approach stressing the ongoing legacy of the colonial underclass at the Cape (especially as manifested in contemporary cuisine) risks forgetting the destructive aspect of this mix, and its psychic cost.⁵⁹ As Carli Coetzee writes of Krotoä, ‘Better to remember her as...a mother of sorrows rather than of unity. Better to remember that her silence is not a sign of forgiveness’.⁶⁰

‘...unheeded we have broken / Whole forests’

In 1658, the year which marked the arrival of the first slave ship at the Cape, the *Daghregister* also records for the first time the ‘reckless destruction’ of forests, and restricts felling to the post on the southern side of the mountain named *Paradijs*. In *Islands* there is very little attention given to Company Gardens, the rectilinear strip of greenery shown to passing dignitaries and used as the lush setting for Russell Brownlee’s 2005 work *Garden of the Plagues*. As an epigraph he uses the impressions of Guy de Tachard in his ‘Voyage to Siam’ of 1688: ‘We were mightily surprised to find one of the loveliest and most curious gardens that I ever saw, in a country that looks to be one of the most dismal and barren

⁵⁷ 18 December 1652, *JVR*, 116.

⁵⁸ Sleight, *Islands*, 100.

⁵⁹ Wayne Dooling, *Slavery, Emancipation and Colonial Rule in South Africa*, (Scottsville: University of Kwazulu-Natal Press, 2007).

⁶⁰ Coetzee, ‘Krotoä Remembered’, 119.

places in the world'.⁶¹ In his account, Tachard goes on to describe them in terms that prefigure so many of the natural histories of the eighteenth century. Learned comparison with European models, nomenclatures, fine discriminations and branching descriptive abundance unfold in the immediate proximity of human suffering, in this case the structure of the Slave Lodge itself:

Its beauty does not lie in flower-beds and fountains, as in the gardens of France: these could be easily had here...since there is a stream of fresh water which comes down from the mountain and flows through the garden. But there are avenues there as far as the eye can see, of citron, pomegranate and orange trees, growing in the ground and protected from the wind by thick and high hedges of a sort of laurel that they call spek, which is always green and not unlike filaria.⁶²

Yet as the view from the outposts shows, the colonisation of the Cape was less a case of planting, than a relentless process of deforestation. Bickford-Smith et al. remark that “the “Paradise” post was ironically part of the process that was rapidly destroying the landscape of the paradise of earlier European descriptions and imagination. Paradise was being pushed back across the Cape Flats’.⁶³ [Fig. 21] And it is here that the strictly materialist approach taken in *Die Buiteposte* shades into a distinct ecological awareness, so that the sensitivity to the natural world in *Islands* becomes immediately entangled with social hierarchies and control of the Peninsula’s spaces. As we watch woodcutters burn the monogram of the VOC into the heads of heavy tree trunks with a branding iron – the Company’s mark ‘smoking in the greenwood’ – we are shown not only the social but also the environmental cost of the colonial project, and how intricately they are associated.⁶⁴

In the seventeenth century (Sleigh’s academic work informs us) the majority of the wood felled at the Cape was carried off by the ships themselves: in 1685 the VOC fleets took 805 wagonloads away from the Cape, each of which would have required some twelve slaves to fell and pack. In 1671, free burghers were forbidden to collect firewood between the Lion’s Head to Rustenburg, and so forced their slaves to Diep Rivier and beyond. In 1705, the usage by senior personnel of the Castle alone was 672 wagonloads, over half of which went to the governor, with an allowance of one wagon load per day. In 1712, the Company kitchens were demanding ‘wortelhout uit de Duinen’, while the slaves of burghers were required to ford the Salt River twice a day, in summer and winter, a situation which had their owners complaining repeatedly about loss of their property through drownings and sickness. By 1730, the stripping of the Cape Flats was virtually complete: postholders were given the authority to shoot trespassers in the official preserves, while slaves forced into a

⁶¹ Russell Brownlee, *Garden of the Plagues*, (Cape Town: Human & Rousseau, 2005), 7.

⁶² Raven-Hart, *Cape of Good Hope*, vol. II, 276.

⁶³ Bickford-Smith, van Heynigen and Worden, *Cape Town: the Making of a City*, 25.

⁶⁴ Sleigh, *Islands*, 378-9.

prohibited part of the Peninsula by the burghers would be whipped and forced to work a year in chains by the Company.⁶⁵ Tracing the movement of just this single resource through early Cape colonial society shows a structure of hierarchy and command in conflict with itself, where free burghers were anything but free, and where the loose sand blown from the stripped dunes gradually changed the shape of Table Bay:

So the Castle with its unappeasable hunger for fuel and timber was beginning to gnaw at the land. One day it would start gnawing at the Company itself; Saturn devouring its own children, the present gnawing at the future...Teams of axemen were sent into the old yellow-wood forest at Hout Bay to cut firewood for the lime kilns and long beams for the jetty. Every two or three days without interruption, a hooker or a flute brought the logs and fuel from Hout Bay, and laid it at the Castle's feet, as if on an altar.⁶⁶

As we see it change the very ecology of the Peninsula, we are given an overwhelming impression of the total presence of the Company, a devouring, post-human economy of scale which uses up virtually all the lives in its service. In talks to the *leeskring* of greater Cape Town, Sleigh describes the socio-economic organisation of VOC in terms of an inverted triangle; with the founding of the Dutch station, 'het die hele gewig van n' omgekeerde piramide met die skerp punt na onder, op die Kaap kom rus'.⁶⁷ This becomes the informing paradigm of *Islands*: the decrees of the *Heren XVII* to do the impossible are channelled through the intricate hierarchies of the Company, coursing through everything it administers – human bodies, outposts, forests, the lives of animals – increasing in pressure and violence at every step.

To lay the blame for the colony's development (as Hope does) on 'the dregs of Dutch and German gutters' is to miss the main achievement of recent accounts of the VOC and their ongoing relevance: how they evoke a moment when global capital first began making its inroads on the most intricate of life processes. And once the mindlessness and structural violence inherent in the VOC has been so clearly sketched out, there is little need for lingering, voyeuristic description. The sentences flatly listed in the narrative of the *Fiscaal Deneyn* are never elaborated on; rather, an observer turns away as Khoi *pandoers* beat a runaway slave to death below the Castle walls. As Penn comments of his own experiments with narration in the archive of the eighteenth century, the more one contemplates this reality, the more violent it appears to be. 'Ordinary men and women would have been fortunate to avoid becoming either a victim or a perpetrator of this violence. It is violence that

⁶⁵ Sleigh, *Die Buiteposte*, 24-29.

⁶⁶ Sleigh, *Islands*, 429.

⁶⁷ Text of talks to Cape Town book clubs: received from Dan Sleigh, 10 March 2007.

links the marginal people of these pages together and it is violence that makes them our contemporaries'.⁶⁸

'An island which Prospero has left'

In his survey of how the island of the *The Tempest* has shifted from a place to imagine an early modern utopia to a fertile ground for African and Caribbean rewritings in the twentieth century, Jonathan Bate suggests another horizon of possibility emerging from Shakespeare's work: the voice of Ariel, trapped in the cloven pine, 'a voice which has been oddly silenced by recent criticism's obsession with Caliban': 'In the twenty-first century, we will need to imagine an island which Prospero has left, an ecosystem which man must be content to leave alone'.⁶⁹ The image of an abandoned island is one which De Grevenbroek returns to again and again in the epilogue to Sleigh's work. Instead of writing his planned denunciation of the Van der Stels after years of collecting and organising material copied from the Company records, he finds himself interviewing Pieter Zaaijman and the disgraced Commander Lamotius to hear about the last days of Mauritius under the Dutch flag: farmlands barely breaking the thick volcanic crust of the island, the smallpox and dysentery which spread so quickly during the dry season when everyone washed in stagnant pools, the rivermouths clogged with the last ebony trees carried down from the forests. It is an image which seems somehow linked to the shutting down of this large narrative itself, a vision in which an acknowledgement of self-interested, destructive human agency co-exists with a desire to leave textual artefacts and historical personages immanent, intact within their world.

De Grevenbroek may struggle to complete his *Portrait of the Cape*, yet Sleigh has remarked that this was the figure who enabled him to finish his own dormant work, an individual who appeared out of the records, 'like a drowning body, released from the bottom of the ocean'.⁷⁰ For all its geographical spread and despite the palpable sense of narrative exhaustion which hangs over the end of the work, *Islands* does draw some kind of circle of completeness. It begins with the Khoi 'captain' who guarded, then traded, then manipulated colonial missives and messages; it ends with one of the first scribes concerned with the Cape in and of itself. In an epistle of 1695, the real De Grevenbroek strikes a note very different to the contemporary callers at the Cape: 'This remote corner into which I have been

⁶⁸ Nigel Penn, *Rogues, Rebels and Runaways: Eighteenth-Century Cape Characters*, (Cape Town, David Philip, 1999).

⁶⁹ Jonathan Bate, 'Caliban and Ariel write back', in Catherine Alexander and Stanley Wells eds., *Shakespeare and Race*, (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 173, 176.

⁷⁰ 'A Search for Survivors', Interview by Sean Zintl, *Mail&Guardian*, (4-10 June, 2004), 6.

thrust is more fertile than I had hoped for or believed, and charms me more than the refinements of European civilisation'.⁷¹ It is a sense of isolation, yet also of rootedness, self-sufficiency and sensitivity to environmental niches, one which perhaps resurfaces in a certain kind of twentieth-century Afrikaans writer: Marais, Leipoldt, Jonker and Sleigh himself. In a well known paper of 1989, the ex-prisoner Sachs, once 'archived' within the Roeland Street jail, recasts the relation of the natural and the social with regard to Afrikaans literature, suggesting that even if the former may be compensatory this does not necessarily detract from the achievement: 'Many of the early books, written to find a space in nature to make up for lack of social space, have since become classics of world ecological literature'.⁷²

In an interview, Brink revealed that one of the projected avatars of his *Spirit of the Cape* which never came to be published was an attempt to imagine Coree's journey to Shakespearean London.⁷³ 'The Second Life of Adamastor', then, was to tell of this individual's journey to the 'prime meridian' of the European metropolis, where the author departed from the historical record and had his 'Xhorê' visit the Globe Theatre. In J. M. Coetzee's rewriting of *Crusoe*, Friday taken to London draws (like Conrad's Stevie) geometrical shapes which convey only his inability to be represented in the tradition of the English novel. Yet in the painstaking notation of external detail which produces Sleigh's work, one has a type of prose poised some way between the poles of playful, magical-realist fantasy and starkly sceptical experimentalism. The characters of *Islands* are not symbolic beyond themselves, nor are they ciphers which rupture any attempt at interpretation. Rather, through a sustained blurring of the island metaphor, they become examples of extreme isolation but also of landfall and possible rescue. The slow and solitary accumulation of archival traces in Sleigh's work generates an unfinished dialogue between microcosm and macrocosm, extending the history that all Dutch schoolchildren could recite like a nursery rhyme (De Grevenbroek tells us), until we feel its most geographically remote and intimately personal effects:

The key to the Dutch economy was the Company, the key to the Company's success was control of the Eastern trade, the key to the Eastern trade was successful shipping, the key to shipping was the Cape replenishment station. Decades later he himself discovered what was

⁷¹ Isaac Schapera ed., *The Early Cape Hottentots, described in the writings of Olfert Dapper (1668), Willem ten Rhyne (1686) and Johannes Gulielmus de Grevenbroek (1695): the original texts, with translations into English by I. Schapera and B. Farrington*. Edited, with an introduction and notes, by I. Schapera. (Cape Town: Van Riebeeck Society, 1933), 297.

⁷² Albie Sachs, 'Preparing Ourselves for Freedom', [1989] Paper prepared for an ANC in-house seminar on culture, rep. in Derek Attridge and Rosemary Jolly eds., *Writing South Africa: Literature, Apartheid and Democracy, 1970-1995*, (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 245.

⁷³ 'Reimagining the Past: André Brink in Conversation with Reingard Nethersole' in Vladislavic ed., *T'kama-Adamastor: Inventions of Africa in a South African Painting*, (Johannesburg: University of Witwatersrand Press, 2000), 52.

still lacking in that tottering house of cards, that the key to the Cape replenishment station was its outposts. And even that knowledge was incomplete. There was still more to know: the outposts were *living people*. (695)

On the dustjacket, Brink claims that *Islands* is the Great South African novel. Certainly it seems the definitive evocation of European arrival in southern Africa, and perhaps the English version is best looked on as an unusual and powerful joint work, where Brink's role as a translator of Cape history for a global readership is combined with Sleight's intensely local respect for the autonomy and distance of the past. Yet the term betrays an anachronism, a retrospective gaze, which the work everywhere resists; and for all the temporal and geographic expanse it traverses, the narrative treats only one of the contact zones that created modern South Africa. The periphery of the Company and that of the unmanageable colony that it unloosed coincided for only a few decades at the end of the seventeenth century. After this, the locus of colonial history – or rather, the historical seam where the country's various peoples, languages and technologies encounter each other most intently – moved away from the settled, increasingly prosperous Cape, east towards the well-known frontier with the Xhosa peoples, north towards the lesser known domain of *droster* gangs and fugitives along the Orange River. A more disciplined reader of the archives than his translator, Sleight makes no such claims. He has very little to add outside his work, only going so far as to say in an afterword that for all the theories advanced about it repeating itself as tragedy or farce, 'There is no history other than the analysis and interpretation of documents; a search for survivors in endless space' (759).

DOUBLING THE CAPE

J. M. COETZEE AND THE FICTIONS OF PLACE

double, *v.*

1. b. *absol.* (In quot., to double the stakes). 1669 Dryden *Tyrannic Love* III I, Wks. 1883 III. 412 *I am resolved to double till I win.*
- e. *to double a part*: to act as the double of or substitute for (another player); to play two parts in the same piece...In extended use, to become or act as a double agent.
- h. *intr.* To play two (or more) musical instruments. So *to double (on)*: to play (an instrument) in addition to one's main instrument.
3. a *trans.* To repeat or reiterate; to redouble; to make a copy or duplicate of (*Sc*). *Obs.*
9. *Naut.* a. (*trans.*) To sail or pass round or to the other side of (a cape or point), so that the ship's course is, as it were, doubled or bent upon itself.
- b. *intr.* To get round. *to double upon* (in naval warfare): to get round to the other side of (an enemy's fleet), so as to inclose it between two fires.
10. a *intr.* To turn sharply and suddenly in running, as a hunted hare; to turn back on one's course; to pursue a winding or tortuous course.
- b. *trans.* To avoid or escape by doubling; to elude, give the slip to.
11. *fig. (intr)* To make evasive turns or shifts; to use duplicity, act deceitfully.

(*OED*, 1989).

Would you like to comment further on the importance which you attach to the notion of resistance?

Coetzee: I hope that a certain spirit of resistance is ingrained in my books; ultimately I hope they have the strength to resist whatever readings I impose on them on occasions like the present.

'Two Interviews with J. M. Coetzee, 1983 and 1987', *From South Africa*, (1987).

There remains the matter of getting past Coetzee.

Dusklands, (1974).

Given a reputation for aloofness and the resolute unwillingness to be in any way placed which make interviews with him such entertaining reading, it comes as a something of a surprise to see footage of John Maxwell Coetzee conducting a kind of guided tour of Cape Town's southern suburbs in a 1997 documentary.¹ From the steps of the Rhodes Memorial, he points out the hospital where he was born; the suburb of Plumstead where he lived as a young boy and the university campus where he spent much of his academic career. A colleague recalls how Coetzee would not take calls from the Booker Prize committee because he was invigilating undergraduate examinations: a measure of his professionalism. We visit his Standard Three classroom at Rosebank Primary – 'a very good little school, for what it was' – now a rape crisis centre; we see the dapper, silver-bearded author on Rondebosch Common, now a vacant space which has not been used as common pasturage for over a century, he notes, but was once the venue for his school sports days. Presumably midway through the writing of *Disgrace*, he recalls taking gold in the running backwards race of 1948, as if enjoying a wry joke at the expense of anyone who thought that such an exercise might grant some privileged insight into his work.

Coetzee has many times tried to shake off the label of 'South African author' and all the assumptions it entails, yet can he in some sense be regarded as a regional writer, a writer in and of the Cape? As suggested by the exercise in autobiography – or rather *autre*-biography – which makes up the trilogy of *Boyhood* (1997), *Youth* (2002) and now *Summertime* (2009), it is a question which the work simultaneously tempts and resists. And if it may at first seem a counter-intuitive approach to an *oeuvre* which so deliberately detaches itself from any single context, it is one which that has produced some of the most urgent and convincing critical accounts of his work, readings which proceed from a desire to rescue Coetzee from the shallow charge that his elusive fictions represented, amid the clamour of late twentieth-century South African history, a kind of political quietism or avant-garde elitism.²

Following them, this chapter seeks to move beyond any traditional or static sense of literary place in an attempt to trace a fraught dialogue which seems to lie at the heart of Coetzee's practice as both novelist and intellectual: between an international, experimental rootlessness and a deep rootedness in the geography, literatures and early colonial history of the Cape; between intimations of great physical space and a discipline of severe verbal

¹ *Passages*, dir. Henion Han, 52 mins (London: Dizzy Ink, 1999).

² My account of Coetzee and the Cape is especially indebted to and in dialogue with the work of Rita Barnard, collected in *Apartheid and Beyond: South African Writers and the Politics of Place*, (Oxford University Press, 2007); and Kai Easton, specifically her doctoral thesis 'Textuality and the Land: Reading *White Writing* and the Fiction of J. M. Coetzee', (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 2000), parts of which are reproduced in an article with the resonant title 'Text and Hinterland: J. M. Coetzee and the South African Novel', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 21:4, (December, 1995), 585-99.

economy. Sensing, however, that to lean too heavily in this direction is to risk traducing the work entirely (and also, perhaps, that Coetzee hardly needs rescuing), it revisits the notion of *doubling* – with its shifts between transitive and intransitive, duplication and duplicity – in an attempt to discern what it might be that makes his displacement of the region into fiction so compelling.

10. b. *trans.* To avoid or escape by doubling; to elude, give the slip to.

The essays and interviews collected in the 1992 volume from which I adapt my title are informed by a notion of *doubling back* as the self-aware switchings of course which chart an intellectual biography intent on creating ‘a place from which to speak’ during a time of intense ideological pressure. But the editor’s introduction also touches on a more literal, nautical sense of the phrase: ‘This volume...intimating the history (since early mercantile expansion) of “rounding the Cape”, implicitly reflects on the encounter in which the legacies of European modernism enter the turbulent waters of colonialism and apartheid’.³ It is this encounter, Attwell suggests, which goes some way to explaining why Coetzee’s writing does not partake of ‘the spirit of abandonment’ that seems to typify much self-reflexive, postmodern fiction, and why it remains particularly charged today: ‘a form of postcoloniality felt on the bone’ (3).

Enlarging on this more local emphasis, this chapter hopes to show that the relationship of rivalry between novelist and historian suggested by Coetzee in his much quoted (but never reprinted) address of 1988, ‘The Novel Today’, is hardly an adequate framework in which to read his work. As suggested by the cryptic autobiographical accounts about encountering the archive in ‘Remembering Texas’ (1984) and *Youth* (2002), the polemic is belied by a considerable ‘historical breadth’ evident throughout his work; it is a quality which, in a different context, he described as the fundamental trait of real intellectual labour.⁴ What else, after all, could redress the literature of failure, the ‘failure of the historical imagination’ which he diagnoses in *White Writing?* (9)

So too, in following the traces of a muted but always present ‘natural history’ drawn throughout the novels, I suggest that to remain too narrowly within the terms set by Coetzee as critic in his essays on literary pastoral, *plaasroman* and ‘Reading the South African Landscape’ is to risk missing a unique aspect of his achievement. Yet at the same time, this account takes refuge in other, less common senses of the verb, forced to acknowledge that

³ J. M. Coetzee, *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, ed. with introd. and interviews by David Attwell, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 3.

⁴ J. M. Coetzee, ‘Critic and Citizen: A Response’. *Pretexts: Literary and Cultural Studies* 9:1, (2000), 109.

the process of reading this writer means entering a textual world of canny impersonation and multiple roles, of raised stakes and intricately constructed verbal games.

To enquire about writing the Cape becomes (as ever) a means of approaching the different expectations of local context and global audience, and here I hope to track the way in which this author *pursues a winding and tortuous course* between them: ambitiously, strategically, and yet also with an acute awareness of the 'exasperated simplifications' which can so easily result, and which are surely incompatible with the deeper processes of fiction. Disenchanted with a lecture on 'The Novel in Africa' given to cruise liner passengers by a self-styled 'exotic' Nigerian writer, the jaded Elizabeth Costello wonders: 'how can you explore a world in all its depth if at the same time you are having to explain it to outsiders?'⁵ In a moment which recalls Coetzee's remarks about the 'two halves of the imaginary audience' to whom Nadine Gordimer addressed herself,⁶ Costello questions how can there be such a thing as the African novel when it is written not by Africans for Africans, but by authors 'glancing over their shoulder all the time they write, at the foreigners who will read them' (51).

Responding to 'The Novel in Africa' in the *Mail and Guardian*, the real Nigerian novelist Helon Habila observes that what Coetzee fails to mention is that this is because for centuries Africa and its peoples have been misinterpreted, and it is left to authors to redress the problem.⁷ The debate is an intractable one which goes to the heart of ideas about what 'postcolonial' writing might be; yet of course this is not the voice of Coetzee but Costello, a narrator who is perhaps also – such is the complexity of the authorial substitutions which begin in his later work – a version of Gordimer. In any case, the pretence of impartial literary insight is soon dissolved when we learn that Costello once spent three nights with Emmanuel Edugu at a writers' conference many years ago, and can hardly contain her resentment as she sees him slip away with the Russian cabaret singer, feeling 'excluded from the game. Like being a child again, with a child's bedtime' (58).

Given the extent of Coetzee's game playing in his recent versions of the writing life, and his readiness to collapse literary and philosophical debate into the most intimate workings of desire and the ageing body, one is tempted to read his early novels in more personal, speculatively biographical ways than is usual. In a review of *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007), James Wood restates in a different idiom that sense of buried urgency which Attwell discerns in *Doubling the Point*. 'The pieties of current criticism', Wood writes, supposedly

⁵ J. M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*, (London: Secker & Warburg, 2003), 51.

⁶ J. M. Coetzee, 'Gordimer and Turgenev', *Stranger Shores*, (London: Secker & Warburg, 2001), 272. Referring to her essays of the 1980s, he elaborates on this dual, imagined audience: 'inside South Africa...a radical intelligentsia, mainly black; outside South Africa...a liberal intelligentsia, mainly white; each (as she was acutely aware) listening with one ear to what she was saying to them, with the other ear what she was saying to the other half'.

⁷ Helon Habila, 'The 'New' African Writer', *Mail and Guardian*, (25 June, 2004).

forbid such biographical interpretations: 'We are warned that it is naïve to confuse author and character, even when – especially when – that character is also a novelist. But if Coetzee's novels deflect such inquiries, they also invite them, not least because of the provoking extremity, even irrationality, of their ideas'.⁸ Discussing the ageing, emigrated South African novelist's reaction to Dostoevsky when re-reading *The Brothers Karamazov*, Wood continues:

We can hear the same note of personal anguish in Coetzee's fiction, even as that fiction insists that it is offering not a confession but only the staging of a confession. His books make all the right postmodern noises, but their energy lies in their besotted relationship to an older, Dostoyevskian tradition, in which we feel the desperate impress of the confessing author, however recessed and veiled. (24)

As the notebook extracts in the recently published *Summertime* (2009) suggest, if the biographical record is self-consciously distanced and deconstructed – both unauthorised and carefully authored – it is enough to hint that, as with his early mentor T. S. Eliot, Coetzee's reputation for aloofness belies an art that is intensely personal, one that intimately inhabits the *topoi* of the 'troubled garden colony' rather than demystifying or deconstructing them from afar.⁹ The beloved childhood farm of *Boyhood* will recur throughout his fiction in various guises – the 'theatre of stone and sun fenced in with miles of wire' over which Magda's imagination will range in her secret diary;¹⁰ the abandoned acres of the Visagie homestead near Prince Albert where Michael K will coax a handful of pumpkin seeds into life; the smallholding in the Eastern Cape where a disgraced David Lurie will stay with his daughter – disclosing a long-standing meditation on the relations of language and land which probes the limits of representing the human as it interacts with the non-human. And while the cold and callow John of *Youth* leaves for London with the belief that civilisation is primarily an Anglo-French affair, it is a chance encounter with the world of eighteenth-century Africa and twentieth-century America which returns his creator to the Cape in unexpected ways, to a place where he would seem to have obeyed Eliot's dictum that the artist is 'always alone...heterodox when everyone else is orthodox, and orthodox when everyone else is heterodox'.¹¹

However (to double back one final time), any account of Coetzee must concede that the most telling biography of such a writer emerges from tracing an evolving style: 'hard, durable: a style that is also an approach to the world and to experience, political experience

⁸ James Wood, 'Squall Lines: J. M. Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year*', *The New Yorker*, (24 December, 2007).

⁹ Barnard, *Apartheid and Beyond*, 29.

¹⁰ J. M. Coetzee, *In the Heart of the Country* [1977], (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982).

¹¹ T. S. Eliot, The Turnbull Lectures, [1933], *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry* ed. Ronald Schuchard. (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), 288.

included'; a style which 'as it soaks in, becomes part of the personality, part of the self, ultimately indistinguishable from the self'.¹² Coetzee's homage to the 'overwhelming' effect of an encounter with Zbigniew Herbert – how the Polish poet's works 'came to form part of the landscape of my mind' – reminds us that, to an unusual degree, the place of his fiction is an unashamedly literary one, created in large measure from other people's words, and revealing most about itself when engaged with European rather than South African forebears:

In what does his peculiar strength reside? Paradoxically, I think, in his dryness, dryness to the point of desiccation: in a removed, cerebral stance expressed in ironies that mask the most intense ethical and indeed lyrical passion. (7)

In one of the written exchanges which taken together form a remarkable meditation on the creative process in *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee describes a novel in progress as 'less a thing than a place where one goes every day for several hours a day for years on end...What happens in that place has less and less discernible relation to the daily life one lives'.¹³ The readings to follow hope to limn the contours of that other place, the deep structure of a writerly imagination, and to ask how its boundaries were constructed and policed. They seek to show how deliberately Coetzee set himself apart from other writers of late twentieth-century South Africa, and to find a language receptive to the deep personal investment that pulses beneath a surface of such strict stylistic control.

Kafka of the Karoo, Beckett of the Boland

What, after all, is implied by or expected of a regional writer, and what does it mean once other Nobel laureates from the continent have been consigned to this category? At the far end of Rhodes's failed imperial axis, Naguib Mahfouz placed the alleys of the old Arab quarter al-Gamaliyya the centre of his famous trilogy. The 'meticulous verisimilitude' with which he renders Islamic Cairo – its closely packed alleys, tenements and blend of classes – raises it almost to a generative principle within his fiction,¹⁴ enabling the kind of societal cross-section attempted by the great Russian novels of the nineteenth century, novels to which Mahfouz and Gordimer have duly registered their debt. In a letter of August 1959, however, the latter summons a more recent, more specifically regional voice:

¹² J. M. Coetzee, 'Homage', *The Threepenny Review*, (Spring 1993), 5-7.

¹³ Coetzee, *Doubling*, 205.

¹⁴ Coetzee, *Stranger Shores*, 228.

I want to disappear into a work that is long and deep and wide. I've got vague characters swimming around; some have names, none have faces. I suppose they'll come ashore in uneasy JHB suburbia – but what can I do? That's my Yoknapatawpha, bounded by Tall Trees on one side, and Orlando West on the other.¹⁵

Invoking Faulkner country to account for her relationship to Johannesburg, she describes a socially inflected geography running from the northern suburbs to Soweto, a carefully delimited fictional terrain which constricts or compels, but also buttresses the imagination. In a similar way, Athol Fugard takes Faulkner's obsessive attention to his 'little postage stamp of native soil' as an authorising precedent, something which gave him 'total security to turn round and look at the specifics, the humble specifics of an Eastern Province world...made me secure in my love of those specifics, made me hand myself over to my love, love of the region, of a place, of my passion for it'.¹⁶ Both accounts imply a kind of writerly pleasure and confidence in notating the specific textures and tonalities of their environment, a place taken almost for granted as an assured substrate for the creative process; both are underlain by a commonplace assumption that the close focus of the regional can transcend an immediate context to yield the universal.

Despite once being billed as 'Faulkner in the veld' (as well as 'Kafka of the Karoo' and even 'Beckett of the Boland'), Coetzee's fiction promptly distinguishes itself from all of the above, abetted by a series of essays which tacitly set his work apart from that of more straightforwardly regional writers from this part of the world.¹⁷ The second half of *Dusklands* (1974) may testify to the immersion in Cape colonial texts described in 'Remembering Texas' (1984) and *Youth*, but the building extremity of its language makes for a parody far in excess of its immediate target: the editions of the Van Riebeeck Society which embody so perfectly what Nietzsche dismissed as 'antiquarian history'.¹⁸ Breaking the mould of self-aware, postmodern rewritings of the colonial frontier even before it had time to form, the diction of the early work unleashes an aggression and ambition which suggest, to use a phrase which recurs in many of his interviews, that the distant descendant of Jacobus

¹⁵ Nadine Gordimer to Anthony Sampson, 11 August 1959, cited in Ronald Suresh Roberts, *No Cold Kitchen: a Biography of Nadine Gordimer*, (Johannesburg: STE Publishers, 2004), 233.

¹⁶ Athol Fugard quoted in Stephen Gray, 'A Sense of Place in the New Literatures in English, particularly South African', in Peggy Nightingale ed., *A Sense of Place in the New Literatures in English*, (University of Queensland Press, 1986), 10. Faulkner's phrase comes from a 1956 *Paris Review* interview with Jean Stein Vanden Heuvel, collected in James B. Meriwether and Michael Millgate eds., *Lion in the Garden: Interviews with William Faulkner, 1926-1962*. (New York: Random House, 1968), 255. As Rita Barnard remarks in her discussion of Fugard, the metaphor of postage stamp suggests 'not only suggests the small scope and value of the territory represented but also evokes the possibility of travel – the potentially global reach of the regional text'. *Apartheid and Beyond*, 118.

¹⁷ Cherry Clayton, 'Kafka of the Karoo', review of *Life & Times of Michael K*, *Financial Mail*, (Johannesburg, 9 December, 1983), 65.

¹⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, 'On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life', *Untimely Meditations* [1873-76], trans. R. J. Hollingdale, (Cambridge University Press, 1997), 74.

Coetsé has always been 'after bigger game'. And even once the free-floating worlds of the early novels have resolved into something more recognisable as modern Cape Town in *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983), his prose makes precious few concessions to the visible topography of the city, and never returns to a place once written. Asked about the precise coordinates of his archetypal wanderer's great anti-trek north from the city, Coetzee remarked that his fiction's geography is in no way trustworthy 'because I don't have much interest in, or can't seriously engage myself with, the kind of realism that takes pride in copying the "real" world'.¹⁹

He goes some way to explaining this suspicion of a prose overly concerned with outward appearances in an early essay on Alex La Guma, a piece in which he felt himself, however ironically, to be 'on home ground'.²⁰ Discussing a writer who, even during his long years of exile in the Caribbean, constantly returned to Cape Town in his imagination, the critic shows frustration with the pages given over to lengthy, almost voyeuristic catalogues of poverty in the tenements of District Six. It is a descriptive excess that serves as a valuable corrective to romanticised depictions of the area, but risks falling prey to the 'false portentousness' which Coetzee discusses in another context, a 'questionable dark lyricism' which permits the apparatus of a police state a metaphysical depth it hardly warrants, and evades a challenge both aesthetic and ethical: 'how to treat something that, in truth, because it is offered like the Gorgon's head to terrorize the populace and paralyse resistance, deserves to be ignored'.²¹

The question of what exactly the writer is to do when confronted with the glaring juxtapositions of the apartheid city is rephrased in the selections from *Summertime*, 'Notebooks 1972-1975', which appeared ahead of time in the *New York Review of Books*. As the author of these grim fragments considers the proximity of Pollsmoor – 'no one bothers to call it Pollsmoor Prison' – to the lush suburb of Tokai where he is living, the dryness of Herbert is again brought to mind:

It is of course an irony that the South African gulag should protrude so obscenely into white suburbia, that the same air that he and the Truscotts breathe should have passed through the lungs of miscreants and criminals. But to the barbarians, as Zbigniew Herbert has pointed out, irony is simply like salt: you crunch it between your teeth and enjoy a momentary savour; when the savour is gone, the brute facts are still there. What does one do with the brute fact of Pollsmoor once the irony is used up?²²

¹⁹ 'Two Interviews, 1983 and 1987' with David Morphet in David Bunn and Jane Taylor eds., *From South Africa: New Writing, Photographs and Art*, special issue of *TriQuarterly Magazine* 69, (Spring/Summer, Northwestern University, 1987), 455.

²⁰ Coetzee, 'Man's Fate in the Novels of Alex La Guma', *Doubling*, 337. In the interview preceding his essay on La Guma, Coetzee reflects on how it is shaped at a further remove by his own half-hearted attempt to establish a place for himself as an 'Africanist' in the American academy.

²¹ Coetzee, 'Into the Dark Chamber: The Novelist and South Africa', (1986), *Doubling*, 366.

²² J. M. Coetzee, 'From *Summertime*: Notebooks 1972-1975', *New York Review of Books*, (13 August 2009), 25

How to avoid squandering one's writerly energies in a simple reiteration of the glut of irony laid on by this distorted geography? And how to evade the temptation to construct the natural world (which is, as Mandela remarked in his famous autobiography, just within view from this prison's walls) as an easy escape from this kind of circular, aesthetic imprisonment? It is because of their reluctance to bring such matters to a head, perhaps, that one senses a similar impatience in Coetzee's cutting remarks about the 'certain elements of exoticism and sensationalism' which attract 'the middlebrow European reader' to the work of André Brink, and even in his verdict on Breyten Breytenbach, the Cape writer with whom, one senses, he felt the greatest affinity.²³ Discussing the latter's prison writings of the 1980s, Coetzee suggests that for all his very real suffering at the hands of the security police, a compensatory poetics so bound up with nostalgia for a 'passionate intimacy with the South African landscape' meant that he was still caught in something of a double-bind. For such feelings, Afrikaner nationalists like to think:

...can be expressed only in Afrikaans, and therefore (here comes the sinister turn in the reasoning) can be experienced only by the Afrikaner. Closeness of fit between land and language is – so the reasoning goes – proof of the Afrikaner's *natural* ownership of the land.²⁴

Together with its corollary describing the supposed unsuitability of *English* for rendering the land, this is an argument which recurs throughout Coetzee's criticism, yet one which will be seen to mutate significantly as it shifts between contexts. A hint that the formulation above has by no means exhausted the matter is to be found in the interview where Coetzee summarises his reservations about Breytenbach – an [English] prose which 'gives in too easily to the narcissism that always imperils self-writing – narcissism and prolixity' – but ends by remarking: 'His [Afrikaans] poetry is another story'.²⁵

For his part, Breytenbach registered surprise at this 'rather querulous review' coming from an author whose early works he regarded as 'essentially a communion' with their surroundings.²⁶ Brushing aside the strictures about exclusive nationalisms, 'the Teutonic obsession with *Blut und Boden*', (and any reservations about narcissism and prolixity), one of his many 'letters from exile' goes on to reaffirm a mystical continuum between land and self:

²³ J. M. Coetzee, 'The Great South African Novel', *Leadership* 2:4, (1983), 74.

²⁴ Coetzee, 'Breyten Breytenbach, *True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist and Mouroir*' (1985), *Doubling*, 97. In *The True Confessions*, for example, the small portion of the mountain chain visible of the walls becomes a benchmark, reference point, deity and by Breytenbach's own admission, 'a prehistoric receptacle – the mould of my mind, my eye, my very self'. (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), 262.

²⁵ Coetzee, *Doubling*, 341.

²⁶ 'A Letter from Exile, to Don Espejuelo', Breyten Breytenbach, *End Papers: Essays, Letters, Articles of Faith, Workbook Notes*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1986).

And yet I feel that my entanglement with the continent has become more complex, my rooting more painful, my involvement deeper, my concern more acute. The hills, the smells, the birdflight, the boom of breakers and the rustle of wind through frost-crystallized grass, the pairing dance of cloud and sky – these and all the other shadings of memory have entered into me; they are the ground of my being. (208)

As with some of the more overwrought passages by Brink encountered in the first chapter, the absence and self-enclosure which haunts such scenic catalogues begin to suggest why it is a more sparse and guarded prose that may come to intimate the non-human presence of the natural world. Yet Breytenbach's sensory abundance is if anything heightened in his 1993 memoir *Return to Paradise*, which includes an account of a picnic with Coetzee at the Silvermine nature reserve where the novelist is described as 'a bird living in dense undergrowth: one hears his allegorical song during certain seasons, but never sees him'.²⁷ As in Gordimer's misgivings about *Michael K* (to which we will return) or Rian Malan's comic account of trying to interview the 'crocodile-eyed genius',²⁸ one senses a sharp personal sense of unease, perhaps even betrayal, on the part of these writer-critics at Coetzee's departure from the role of author as spokesman or political pundit: the way in which his unflinching anatomisation of the most intimate transactions of place and belonging in other South African writers co-exists with a reluctance to answer for his own work *d'hors texte*.

'There is no use looking at Faulkner. You must read him', remarked a journalist in 1955, describing how would-be interviewers gradually forced 'The Lion in the Garden' further and further into the shrubbery at a party thrown by Gallimard in Paris: 'To someone who has read him, Faulkner has given all he has, and he knows it'.²⁹ The same might be said of Coetzee, and indeed one of his many authorial doubles is imagined at one point as a feline rather than performing seal – 'One of those large cats that pause as they eviscerate their victim'³⁰ – but a metaphor more popular than either tremulous bird or dangerous cat has been one offered by the Magda of *In the Heart of the Country* when she compares herself to a hermit crab, temporarily inhabiting and then abandoning the shell of various genres: the explorer's diary, the farm novel, the confession.

²⁷ *Return to Paradise*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), 155.

²⁸ Malan describes how Coetzee wrote each question down on a notepad and methodically analysed the assumptions on which it was based, 'a process that offered penetrating insights into my intellectual shortcomings but revealed nothing about Coetzee himself: 'What kind of music do you like?' I asked, desperately. The pen scratched, the great writer cogitated. 'Music I have never heard before'. Rian Malan, 'The Prince of Darkness', *Fairlady*, (February 2004), 43.

²⁹ Madeleine Chapsal, 'A Lion in the Garden', (1955) in *Lion in the Garden: Interviews with William Faulkner, 1926-1962*, 230.

³⁰ Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*, 5.

Coetzee, it seems, has been adept at setting the terms for the critical reception of his work, at least in international academic forums, and indeed the first book-length study of his novels extended the metaphor via Roland Barthes' notion of '*L'atopie – atopia*', a 'drifting habitation', to account for his curious placelessness.³¹ In his crab-like progress between different fictional genres, then, a sense of place as supportive substructure for the creative process seems to be replaced at times by a desire *to avoid or escape* from his 'home ground' by any means possible, a place to which he was unexpectedly returned by a quirk of biography in the early 1970s and which he has been attempting *to give the slip to* ever since.³² It is tempting to ask what kind of writer Coetzee might have become had he, like Vladimir Nabokov or Czesław Miłosz, stayed within the American academy. Would he have become one at all, without the constant imaginative goading of a place 'as irresistible as it is unlovable'?³³

The phrase appears in his Jerusalem prize acceptance speech of 1987, an unusually emotive, almost confessional address which goes further in suggesting why the unguarded language used by Fugard, Brink, Breytenbach and so many others is met in Coetzee by what seems at first to be a studied refusal to portray the region's iconic natural features, a deliberate effacement of the oceans, landforms and light which others have expended so many words on. Speaking of the 'hereditary masters' of South Africa, he claims:

To be blunt: their love is not enough today and has not been enough since they arrived on the continent; furthermore, their talk, their excessive talk about how they love South Africa has consistently been directed towards *the land*, that is, towards what is least likely to respond to love: mountains and deserts, birds and animals and flowers.³⁴

As in the essays which make up *White Writing* (1988), Coetzee diagnoses with unmatched candour a cultural solipsism and absence of reciprocity permeating the white South African experience of the natural world, even one as apparently innocuous as the engagement with inanimate landforms. And given that the idea of the nature as an evasion of social and political actuality became a kind of easily invoked orthodoxy within the late twentieth-century

³¹ Teresa Dovey, *The Novels of J. M. Coetzee: Lacanian Allegories*, (Johannesburg: AD Donker, 1988), 52.

Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 49. 'L'atopie – Atopia. Pigeonholed: I am pigeonholed, assigned to an (intellectual) site, to a residence in a caste (if not a class). Against which there is only one internal doctrine: that of atopia (of a drifting habitation)'. The word 'caste', one notes, recurs in Coetzee's Jerusalem prize Acceptance speech, suggesting in one sense a strong, almost biological determinism that challenges (utopian) Marxian accounts of the imperative to change history: 'The masters, in South Africa, form a closed hereditary caste. Everyone born with a white skin is born into the caste'. *Doubling*, 96.

³² See Susan VanZanten Gallagher *A Story of South Africa: J. M. Coetzee's Fiction in Context* (London: Harvard University Press, 1991) and *Doubling*, 338 for Coetzee's description of being refused permanent residence in the United States after involvement in anti-Vietnam demonstration.

³³ J. M. Coetzee, 'Jerusalem prize Acceptance Speech', [1987] *Doubling*, 98.

³⁴ Coetzee, *Doubling*, 97.

Western academy, it is worth pausing to acknowledge the strength of Coetzee's critique in a local context.

'I had a farm in Africa...'

So runs the opening line of Karen Dinesen's 1938 colonial memoir (and 1985 Hollywood film) *Out of Africa*, and it seems that, within (white) literature from the continent, almost every novelist has 'had' a farm, whether actual or imagined. With its sparse Karoo topography – 'a weary flat of loose red sand' of heat-stunted vegetation, isolated 'kopje's' and limitless sky – Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* (1883) has often been regarded as the beginning of a literary tradition in English.³⁵ As a first generation settler writer, she gives voice to a *topos* at once traditionally generic (the farm as microcosm, or symbolic locale mediate between Nature and Culture) and irreducibly implicated in new patterns of social organisation (the farm as a category used to legitimate white colonial ownership). The resulting mixture of local authenticity and alienation produces the famous dual opening, a veering from moonlit sublimity to a sun-struck grotesque as daylight reveals the all too human presences on the farm. Such distinctly South African cadences will run through the very different works of Pauline Smith, William Plomer, Alan Paton and Doris Lessing, while the complex, contemporary fictions of Marlene van Niekerk and Eben Venter testify to the enormous importance and protean reinvention of the *plaasroman* in Afrikaans.

Yet in the popular imagination, and perhaps the global imaginary, one suspects that the African farm stubbornly remains the site of a romanticised flight from history. In a 1961 limited edition of Schreiner's masterpiece illustrated by Paul Hogarth, Dinesen provides an introduction which indulges in the kind of rhetoric so accurately parodied by Binyavanga Wainaina in his 'How to Write about Africa'.³⁶ Confessing that it was one of her favourite books as a child, she suggests that 'In Africa the air dominates the scenery, and has a life of its own, more than in other continents... This book about an African farm has captured the air of the land, and it gives forth from its pages the atmosphere of the great widths'.³⁷ Getting into her stride, she continues:

The African landscape has a tragic note in it. Even the big game of Africa seem to move in the tragic sphere more than their brothers of other continents: the lion more than the bear, the

³⁵ Olive Schreiner, *The Story of An African Farm*, [1883], ed. Joseph Bristow, (Oxford University Press, 1992), 44.

³⁶ Binyavanga Wainaina, 'How to Write About Africa', *Granta 92: The View from Africa*, ed. Ian Jack (Winter 2005), 91.

³⁷ Olive Schreiner, *The Story of an African Farm* [1883], with an introduction by Isak Dinesen and illustrations by Paul Hogarth, (Westerham, Kent: The Limited Editions Club, 1961), vi.

wild African elephant more than the rounded domestic elephant of India, the gentle noble giraffe more than our fallow deer. All African Natives have a strong feeling of tragedy. (viii-ix)

It is the kind of writing which suggests the immense weight of sentimentality, anthropomorphism and elitism which needs to be sloughed off before one can even begin to consider an uncompromised ecocriticism in southern Africa. And yet also, perhaps, why the process of rewriting the relation of human to non-human might require a reinhabiting, rather than simply an external critique, of such overworked literary *topoi*.

On the evidence of his interviews and of the semi-autobiographical *Boyhood* Coetzee, too, has had a farm: 'There is not enough time in a single life to know all of Voëlfontein, know its every stone and bush. No time can be enough when one loves a place with such devouring love' (91). Yet while other accounts of white African upbringings are hedged round with qualifications and explications, here the ordeal of attending school in rural Worcester as a delicate, English-speaking mother's boy unfolds in a bleached and flattened present tense. Turning away from the 'narcissism and prolixity' which endangers self-writing, never permitting the luxury of explanation or the benefit of hindsight, the prose renders the dialectic between mind and place, language and landscape, with peculiar immediacy.

In an unusually candid autobiographical interview, Coetzee describes the contorted historical predicament of being a child from an Afrikaner background being educated in English at a time when nationalist legislation was being drafted to prevent this, a situation which provoked in him 'uneasy dreams of being hunted down and accused; by the age of twelve he has a well-developed sense of social marginality'.³⁸ Yet although his family has chosen English in more ways than one, Afrikaans continues to fascinate him with its hard consonants and fertile vein of obscenities. He scorns those English speakers who deliberately mispronounce its words and on visits to the family farm relishes speaking this indigenous language of the Cape that he learnt there while playing with Coloured children.

The longest, most lyrical section of the book is devoted to Voëlfontein, a sacred personal kingdom that he knows best in the summer, 'when it lies flattened under an even blinding light that pours down from the sky' (91) yet where for various unspoken reasons he will always remain 'an uneasy guest' (79). The deep emotional resonance the Cape landscape has for the young John is countered by his intimations of the farm as a cultural category legitimating colonial and racial dispossession. In the interview, Coetzee remarks that for a variety of reasons, at a certain point in his adolescence, this distanced, third-person version of a younger self ceases to visit 'the place on earth he has defined, imagined and constructed as his place of origin'.³⁹

³⁸ Coetzee, *Doubling*, 393.

³⁹ Coetzee, *Doubling*, 394.

This decision to relinquish the idyll, to leave ‘the farm’ and all it symbolises (even while conceding the imaginative pull of the natural world which runs between and beyond its fences) would seem to be a crucial move, and one which shapes much of Coetzee’s writing. Realised both in intellectual and deeply personal terms, it is a resolution which sets him apart from both disconcertingly weightless metropolitan critics and nostalgically rooted Cape writers. The unsentimental, intellectually hard critique asserts itself as one reads the introduction to *White Writing*, and recalling the strictly nautical definition of ‘doubling’ at this point helps to convey Coetzee’s uncompromisingly materialist historical framing of the Cape settlement: a place always defined in terms of what it was not, only ever regarded by European mariners as a paradise because of the deprivations involved in reaching it, and annexed at the end of the eighteenth century ‘for reasons that had everything to do with geopolitics and nothing to do with the colony itself’.⁴⁰ The result is a powerful demystification of the overworked metaphorical schemas – the ‘dream topographies’ – by which this contested ground has been understood.

Blindness to the colour black is obligatory in such paeans to stony expanse or African farm, Coetzee suggests, since any other option would have dismantled one of the primary arguments through which expansive imperialism justified itself – that those who deserve to inherit the earth are who best make use of it – and erased the necessary guarantee provided by honest toil (asserted ever since Virgil’s *Georgics*) that the isolation of pastoral retreat is not mere sensual sloth. Pastoral in South Africa, then, ‘has a double tribute to pay: To satisfy the critics of rural retreat, it must portray labour; to satisfy the critics of colonialism, it must portray white labour’.⁴¹ Discussing the idleness of Hottentot and Boer which so scandalised European observers as a result, Coetzee extends the insights gleaned from his reading of colonial travelogues into a late twentieth-century context: of overemployment and underpayment on one side of the racial divide; of job reservation and rituals of leisure barely distinguishable from idleness on the other. As suggested by the photograph of the garden which Mrs Curren pores over, if this author has a kinship with Faulkner, it is with the Modernist whose linguistic effects and absolute commitment to style created ‘a white South haunted by black presences’.⁴²

Who laid the melon seeds in their warm, moist bed? Was it my grandfather who got up at four in the icy morning to open the sluice and lead water into the garden? If not he, then whose was the garden rightfully? Who are the ghosts and who the presences? Who, outside of the picture, leaning on their rakes, leaning on their spades, waiting to get back to work, lean also against the edge of the rectangle, bending it, bursting it in? (103)

⁴⁰ J. M. Coetzee, ‘A Betrayed People’, review of *Frontiers: the Epic of South Africa’s Creation and the Tragedy of the Xhosa People* by Noël Mostert, *New York Review of Books*, (14 January, 1993), 8-10.

⁴¹ Coetzee, *White Writing*, 5.

⁴² ‘William Faulkner and his Biographers’, [2005], *Inner Workings: Essays 2000 – 2005* [2007], (London: Vintage, 2008), 199.

Drawing on Coetzee in an even more explicit linkage between the silences of the colonial pastoral and those of the apartheid city, Njabulo Ndebele writes of how 'the South African pastoral was not just a way of writing; it crystallised a way of perception which was studiously cultivated into a way of life':

Pastoral is the clinical tranquillity of the contemporary white South African suburb, with its security fences, parks, lakes, swimming pools, neighbourhood schools, and bowling greens – all in a place that obliterates any suggestion that these are the products of human labour.⁴³

Ndebele's subsequent evocation of how post-apartheid South Africa continues to market itself as a game park – a profoundly artificial space of displaced local populations, voyeuristic 'leisure colonialists' and incongruous luxury – suggests again how any attempt to imagine a less compromised relation between human history and the natural world (or indeed, any dialogue between the postcolonial and the ecocritical) meets here a singularly testing context.⁴⁴

'Forms of life hitherto unperceived'

Yet to halt at this summary of a position which easily hardens into a critical orthodoxy would be to miss the longing that structures the play of absence and presence in a passage like that from *Age of Iron*, a longing more carefully refracted and disguised by the essays in *White Writing*, but present nonetheless. Coetzee, after all, is on record as saying that 'people can only be in love with one landscape in their lifetime', and that he felt no affinity with the hills of Surrey or Texas.⁴⁵ The fraught dialectic suggested in the Jerusalem prize speech between southern Africa's physical expanses and its historical confinements is one that seems to work itself out through much of his writing, but at a remove beyond the 'hermeneutics of suspicion', and in a way which eludes those critical accounts proceeding via a predictable, sometimes self-congratulatory process of demystification. If many other writers of the Cape cannot help but incline toward one of the two poles – unfettered space or abject confinement, the garden or the prison – his work seems to keep both in play

⁴³ Njabulo Ndebele, 'Liberation and the Crisis of Culture', *Southern African Review of Books*, (February / May 1990), 22.

⁴⁴ Njabulo Ndebele, 'Game Lodges and Leisure Colonialists', in Hilton Judin and Ivan Vladislavić eds., *blank_: Architecture, Apartheid and After*, (Cape Town; David Philip, 1999).

⁴⁵ 'J. M. Coetzee: Interview', by Folke Rhedin, *Kunapipi*, 6:1 (1984), 10. Tellingly, his sense of missing 'a certain emptiness, empty earth and empty sky' while in America is linked to the memory of being part of a speech community: 'What I also missed was the sound of a language whose nuances I understood. Speech in Texas seemed to have no nuances; or, if there were nuances, I was not hearing them'. Coetzee, *Doubling*, 52.

throughout, showing even in the smallest units of the prose how these and their conceptual equivalents might even come to be nested within each other.

To ground the argument again in the more narrow question of regionalism and writing the postcolonial city, it seems that while proclamations of natural beauty and pride in the realist contract are of little interest to him – at best dully competent, at worst politically suspect – Coetzee surely does reproduce, or *redouble* a version of the western Cape on the page, and one all the more powerful for just such reasons. Considering Schreiner's attempt to accord imaginative validity to the non-European landscape of the Karoo, Plomer wrote of her having 'given lasting shape to forms of life hitherto unperceived or unrecorded (the proper function of a writer)'.⁴⁶ The same might be said of the oblique angles offered by Coetzee on a cityscape which other writers have tended to see in terms of absolute, and ultimately static, juxtapositions: the alleys and underpasses in *Age of Iron*, the warped doors and wattle scrub of Plumstead in *Boyhood*, the gated apartment blocks in Greenpoint where *Disgrace* begins. Yet if such overlooked, unloved city spaces might be entering the literature for the first time, the germination of *Michael K* in municipal parks originally laid out by the gardeners of the VOC suggests (as does Mrs Curren's reference, when she curls up behind a concrete pillar, to the spacious boulevards named by 'the patricians of Cape Town')⁴⁷ that these narrative moments could just as well be described as a matter of re-inhabiting old places as giving shape to new ones:

The parks he preferred were those with tall pine trees and dim agapanthus walks. Sometimes on Saturdays he failed to hear the boom of the noon gun and went on working by himself all afternoon. (5)

To ask about Coetzee and regionalism is, eventually, to approach the complex patterning of recognition and resistance, intimate complicity and sudden estrangement which inheres in an encounter with his prose. 'Reading is usually a more complex process than we allow for in our theories of it', writes Derek Attridge, 'and one of the pleasures of reading Coetzee is realizing this'.⁴⁸ For even as the close attention to organic life in this work wins a specificity which begins to detach itself from any immediate context, inevitably tempting larger allegories of the creative process itself, at the same time the suppleness of the free indirect narration which weaves in and out of K's consciousness means that any pre-conceived attempt to read allegorically will tend to collapse back into the finely realised literal. As a result of this continual doubling between different orders of signification, the garden in this novel, or rather 'The Idea of Gardening', becomes the site of Gordimer's most

⁴⁶ William Plomer, *Double Lives: an Autobiography* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1943), 133.

⁴⁷ J. M. Coetzee, *Age of Iron* [1990], (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), 143.

⁴⁸ Derek Attridge, *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event*, (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 74.

well known moment of dissatisfaction with Coetzee: a review of 1984 which combines an oddly literal approach ('K' might easily stand for the common Cape surnames Kotze or Koekemoer) with a growing disquiet: 'a revulsion against all political and revolutionary solutions' she suggests, 'rises towards the climax of this novel with the insistence of cicadas'.⁴⁹

Yet despite their obvious differences, it is misleading to place these two Nobel laureates in any simple opposition as committed realist versus placeless postmodernist. If the attention to place and setting in Gordimer's early work did on occasion draw criticism for excessive and irrelevant preoccupation with a world of things – 'an ultimately meaningless accretion of surface vitality to conceal a hollowness of content'⁵⁰ – we saw in the prologue that the power of her 1974 novel *The Conservationist* derives from its self-conscious awareness and accurate delineation of just such dynamics. In this story of an African farm adjoining a violent, poverty stricken 'location', the *style indirect libre* and sensitivity to spatial perception focalised through the wealthy industrialist Mehring allows for one of the most telling anatomisations of a self-interested solipsism with regard to the natural world.

Coetzee draws on *The Conservationist* in one of the most revealing moments of *White Writing*, invoking the black body which floats up from its shallow grave on Mehring's *faux* African farm as he asks 'whether it is in the nature of the ghost of the pastoral ever to be finally laid'.⁵¹ Discussed by Barnard in her fine account of Coetzee's 'Dream Topographies', the passage toward the end of this essay on 'Farm Novel and *Plaasroman*' is worth revisiting for the way in which the language modulates and the angle of enquiry suddenly widens, all of which suggest that the real intellectual matter here has all along been something more than a single literary genre. Identifying himself as attuned to the finely worked, minimal music of Anton Webern – 'substantial silence structured by tracings of sound' – Coetzee nevertheless closes by asking:

Is it a version of utopianism (or pastoralism) to look forward (or backward) to the day when the truth will be (or was) what is said, not what is not said, when we will hear (or heard) music as sound upon silence, not silence between sounds? (81)

This unusual yoking together of an urban, high Modernist aesthetic with a plaintive, disarming simplicity seems to condense the play of the analytic and the lyric which structures Coetzee's work into a single convoluted sentence. This is the style 'forever on guard against

⁴⁹ Nadine Gordimer, 'The Idea of Gardening', *New York Review of Books*, (2 February, 1984), 6.

⁵⁰ Anthony Woodward, 'Nadine Gordimer', in *Theoria* 16, (1961), 12. Within her early descriptions of the mines there is even perhaps an element of the insistence on emptiness found in Schreiner. In a 1954 essay on her childhood, she states of the Witwatersrand: 'considered on its own merits, the landscape is utterly without interest – flat, dry and barren'. Nadine Gordimer, 'A South African Childhood: Allusions in a Landscape' in *The New Yorker* (30), 16 October 1954.

⁵¹ Coetzee, *White Writing*, 81.

itself' in the words of one critic,⁵² doubling back, betraying a sense of impatience with its own theoretical constructs, and yet in the process beginning to suggest why an unwillingness to remain tethered to any single intellectual approach might have a deeply ethical dimension.

Recognising a poetics in excess of the theoretical vocabularies which were so readily applied to it, Gordimer also offers a more generous reading of her rival in a preface to a 1996 collection of essays on Coetzee. It is a piece which she claims is better described as an 'anti-preface', conveying her impatience with the often prescriptive language of academic criticism:

[Coetzee] forgets the language and thought patterns of literary theory when he visualises a man digging in a municipal garden, a man tracing the worm-scroll of a scar on a waif's eyelid, a woman washed up on a desolate shore.... He forges categories, analyses, his modes are organic, they are transformations of the imagination growing out of his consciousness and that of his society, as the persistent nurture of the earth, producing growing things, is a theme which sprouts through the sombreness of his work.⁵³

Gordimer's account is surely too emphatic in its separation of the creative and critical impulses, yet one senses her exasperation with the un-worldliness of those who missed the *grounded* aspect of his writing, and were once content to read Coetzee as 'allegorised theory' at a time when Mrs Curren, travelling with Florence through the violence of Site C in search of Hope and Beauty, could remark that life itself had taken on the aspect of a grim allegory. If his fiction may at first seem less than explicit in its depiction of place, she continues, on closer inspection 'it could not have come from anywhere else in the world' (xi).

So too, the fragile but persistent organicism detected here leaves one unconvinced by a simple forgetting of the critical insight in the creative act; what Stephen Watson describes as Coetzee's continuous attentions to the 'quiet eminence of being' – his 'enduring fascination with the interiority of stones and the entirely passive, self-contained world of nature' – cautions against any simple mapping of the insights of *White Writing* onto the fiction.⁵⁴ Such an intimate relation between the critical and creative suggests that, rather than seeing *In the Heart of the Country* simply as a series of 'ironic five finger exercises in many of the varieties of landscape poetry Coetzee discusses in his critical volume', one might enquire instead about the transformations refracted from the world of the novels back

⁵² Peter Strauss, 'Coetzee's Idylls: The Ending of *In the Heart of the Country*', in *Momentum: On Recent South African Writing*, ed. Margaret Daymond et al., (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1984), 123-128.

⁵³ Preface to Graham and Stephen Watson eds., *Critical Perspectives on J. M. Coetzee*, (London: Macmillan, 1996), ix. In the same piece she quotes from a discussion of *Foe* in one of the essays to register her discomfort with a critical language so drastically at odds with the suppleness of its object: "We could fault Coetzee for not letting a woman have access to both authorship and motherhood". *Could we?* (viii).

⁵⁴ Stephen Watson, 'Colonialism and the Novels of J. M. Coetzee', in *Critical Perspectives*, 30. The phrase 'quiet eminence of being' is taken from the philosopher Abraham Herschel.

onto the essay collection.⁵⁵ It is, after all, a work betraying a selectivity with regard to the 'Discourse of the Cape' that has been questioned in recent years by other readers of the same colonial texts.⁵⁶

'Radical differences of material culture'

Looking back on his opening moves as a critic, Coetzee has implied that parts of the book are 'soured, I think, by a certain relentless suspicion of appearances'; in an interview he registers his discomfort with a kind of criticism whose final gesture is always a triumphal unmasking.⁵⁷ Yet, as the closing passage of his essay on the farm novel suggests, it is precisely such an awareness *in situ* which makes it such a richly complex and sometimes contradictory collection. Even its most explicit links between a politics of imperialism and a poetics of the sublime are hedged by tentative phrasing ('The poetry of empty space *may one day be accused* of furthering the same fiction'), while an awareness of the socially constructed, painterly aspect of the landscapes of a traveller like William Burchell is balanced in the same essay by a profound feeling for the differences in the physical environment as they impinge on the cultural expressions of different societies.

A subdued palette of fawns, browns and greys rather than shades of green; foliage which transpires little in the heat and so lacks lustre; abrupt transitions between light and shade; the preponderance of horizontal rather than vertical forms; the rarity of bodies of still water as a reflective mediums – all these traits of the southern African landmass are noted with a local eye and a sensitivity which ensure that the material fact of the environment is never placed in a secondary position to, or lost behind, the aesthetic categories that are being used to apprehend it:

Light and shadow never stand still for Ruysdael or Constable because, in Holland or England, there is always cloud movement in the sky. Over the southern African plateau, however, skies are blue, light and shadow static (which is why writers repeatedly characterised the landscape as sleeping, torpid, heatstruck)...When we broaden the discussion to take in the general dryness of South African conditions, as opposed to the moistness of English conditions, we come to touch on questions that are not merely technical but produce radical differences of material culture between two societies, even, one might speculate, radical differences of cultural outlook. (43)

⁵⁵ Barnard, *Apartheid and Beyond*, n.180.

⁵⁶ See for example Stewart Crehan, 'Rewriting the Land', *English in Africa* 25:1, (May 1998) which asks if *Dusklands*, for all its deconstructive strategies, and the related discussions in *White Writing*, involve 'some disabling distortions of history', and stresses the difference in tone between the 'frozen rationality, cold aggression, or neurotic desire for mastery' of Jacobus Coetzee and the moments of 'radical egalitarianism' in Kolb (1719), Le Vaillant (1790), Barrow (1801), Campbell (1815), Burchell (1822-4), Philip (1820) and Pringle (1835). (12)

⁵⁷ Coetzee, *Doubling*, 106.

When mapped onto the different medium of writing, the technical challenges faced by landscape art of Burchell's era immediately pass into metaphor and value judgement – 'torpid, heatstruck' – likely to mystify social relations and inevitably implying an unfavourable comparison with Europe. Yet at the same time Coetzee seems to broach a kind of geographical determinism, or at least a common ground, which intimates a more profound sense of what 'the regional' might come to mean. In reading a poet like Sydney Clouts, even while suspicious of his 'Romantic projection of consciousness into the alien', the critic nonetheless remains intrigued (like Magda) by a Modernist ambition to exchange 'the world of things out there – "dewfall / anthole / searock flintlock"' for word tokens that might give some sense of their intense yet self-sufficient, inaccessible presence. In a remark that could just as well be applied to the metaphors of *Michael K*, he writes that 'stone is, throughout his work, the irreducible other'.⁵⁸

An account of the relation between land and language which is unwilling to disavow the physical impress of either term informs the whole of *White Writing*, and surely contributes towards its enduring influence on South African letters. Pursuing this double awareness further, it is intriguing to chart how the opposition which Coetzee sets up between Afrikaans and English literary traditions in their attempts to render the African landscape (an opposition already encountered in his verdict on Breytenbach) plays out in different contexts. In the introduction to the essay collection, Coetzee allows that the dissatisfaction with English would in truth hold for any language; for the nature poet even the authenticity of the indigenous languages of Africa 'is not necessarily the right authenticity', given that 'the language being sought after is a natural or Adamic language, one in which Africa will naturally express itself, that is to say, a language in which there is no split between signifier and signified, and things are their names' (9). Yet, perhaps as a result of appearing in a journalistic context more prone to 'flattening' and 'exasperated simplifications', when this same argument emerges in a combative magazine article of 1983 it is with a somewhat different emphasis:

The English language in particular has a most uneasy relationship with the natural world of southern Africa, whose parts it has never so much as succeeded in naming. Afrikaans, in every structural respect a European language, has naturalised itself in southern Africa with minimal reliance on older, more native (*inheems*) South African languages. English, on the contrary, has had to fall back on Afrikaans to name the most elementary parts of the landscape in which it finds itself: *koppie, krans, kloof*.

It is as though South Africa 'is' Afrikaans while to the English it 'reads like a foreign language'.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ 'Sydney Clouts', [1974], rep. in *English in Africa* 11:2, Special Issue on Sydney Clouts, (October 1984), 74-75.

⁵⁹ J. M. Coetzee, 'The Great South African Novel', *Leadership* 2:4, (1983), 79.

Coetzee's criticism often proceeds by carefully rehearsing existing arguments before departing from them, but in this case the distance between paraphrase of what has gone before and his own authorial contribution seems curiously blurred. As with those moments in *Doubling the Point* where he entertains the Sapir-Whorfian notion that each language might construe the world entirely differently, there even seems to be a certain sympathy with this nativist position.

The piece dates from a period when, by his own admission, he allowed himself to succumb to the role of spokesman and interpreter of South African affairs: a role he normally resisted, but which he could hardly avoid in taking it upon himself to adjudicate between the efforts of Brink, Gordimer and Breytenbach in their failed attempts to write 'the Great South African Novel'. And given the abundant evidence to the contrary provided by the *Dictionary of South African English*, what is one to make of wilfully old-fashioned claim that 'English seems to remain a language of *downs* and *woods*, of *badgers* and *stoats*, of *cuckoos* and *robins*'? He goes on to ask: 'Is it possible to write a book that will deal not only with relations between people but with relations between people and the landscape they move in, in so foreign a tongue as this?' (79) The question is eventually given a kind of answer by David Lurie:

More and more he is convinced that English is an unfit medium for the truth of South Africa. Stretches of English code whole sentences long have thickened, lost their articulations, their articulateness, their articulatedness. Like a dinosaur expiring and settling in the mud, the language has stiffened. (117)

It is a moment interpreted by many readers of *Disgrace* as a distinctly personal intervention on the part of Coetzee, perhaps even a farewell to his 'home ground'. Yet beyond the metropolitan hauteur of Lurie's phrasing, the metaphors of fossils and geology suggest that, just as he cannot help but see Lucy's smallholding in terms of an African farm 'in old Kaffraria', Lurie cannot free himself of that other, dystopian dream topography; not that of the African farm but rather the literature of empty landscape – 'older than the dinosaurs whose bones lie bedded in its rocks'⁶⁰ – where human history and an inanimate landmass are collapsed into each other in a poetics of absence and sterility.

Toponymica Hottentotica

⁶⁰ Coetzee, *White Writing*, 7.

What one sees playing out in these various critical forays, then, are two differing versions of an argument about land and language. One begins a general enquiry into how verbal forms go about approximating the natural world and remaking it on the page; the other posits a more local, historically inflected judgement about the suitability of specific languages to depict the environment in which they seek to naturalise themselves. The first might be approached (in the company of a critic like Jonathan Bate) via philosophers of poetic dwelling like Martin Heidegger and Gaston Bachelard, inheritors of a Romantic critique of the Enlightenment which stresses the primacy of the creative imagination, yet risks in this context a weightlessness, an abstraction where (to adapt Edward Said) the universal is always achieved at the expense of the native.⁶¹ The second carries with it the danger of remaining overly rooted, partisan and tautological – who after all, could adjudicate between the claims of different languages to name the land? – yet has at the same time proved vital for those African (here taken to include Afrikaner) intellectuals unwilling to forget the historical price paid for the matter of naming and belonging.

The extent to which these two approaches become entangled within the work of so many Cape writers – and in such a way that the ‘ecocritical’ and ‘postcolonial’ are all but inseparable – is a matter which the remaining chapters hope to explore, mindful too of the caveats voiced by Lewis Nkosi in a 1989 review of *White Writing*. A novelist and critic who has acknowledged his own fascination with a Faulknerian ‘South’ created from a complex play of sensuous description and suppressed history, Nkosi comprehends the unwillingness to address black writing directly for the most part, but claims that it is an omission which eventually becomes ‘severely distortive in parts of Coetzee’s analyses’. His demurrals are worth quoting at length for the way in which they shift the terms of the debate, and suggest a dialogue beyond the entrapment voiced in the Jerusalem prize speech:

There is no way, for example, in which Coetzee can find answers to some of the questions he has been asking except by drawing upon the evidence of traditional oral literatures and contemporary writing of the indigenous populations – questions such as: is the African landscape readable only through African eyes, writeable only in an African language? It is not true, as Coetzee tries to argue, that ‘among black writers, even those of dual African-English linguistic culture, the mode (landscape poetry), without precedent in the vernaculars, has barely been practised’. (174) True, in traditional African poetry poetic celebration of nature is integrated with other concerns, and in that sense does not constitute a separate genre of poetry, and as far as contemporary writing is concerned we have to know just how much weight we are to place on Coetzee’s use of the modifier in ‘barely practised’.⁶²

⁶¹ Edward Said, Bonnie Marranca, ‘Criticism, Culture and Performance: An Interview with Edward Said’, *Performing Arts Journal*, 13:1, (January, 1991), 37.

⁶² Lewis Nkosi, ‘White Writing’, *Third World Quarterly* 11.1 (1989), 157-60. Rep. in Liz Gunner and Lindy Stiebel eds., *Still Beating the Drum: Critical Perspectives on Lewis Nkosi*, (Johannesburg: University of Witwatersrand Press, 2006), 295. Nkosi’s reading of Coetzee’s ‘South’ in tandem with that of Faulkner can be found in ‘Luster’s Lost Quarter’, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 41:2 (2005), 166 -178.

The 'traditional African poetry' which Nkosi holds up (somewhat unproblematically) to Coetzee is surely that from the Zulu, Xhosa, Sotho and other Nguni language groups; but he shifts some way toward the ecocritical when he goes on to pose the question: 'In any case, is it only in the art of verse as understood in Europe that nature is to be "read" in the works of black writers?' (295)

In the western Cape, however, the oral tradition to which several contemporary poets have turned in seeking a way beyond this impasse has been that of the /Xam narratives recorded by Lucy Lloyd and Wilhelm Bleek in the late nineteenth century. This move towards the transcribed and translated remnants of a language no longer spoken is of course not without an entirely new set of dangers. The 'Bushman', as Coetzee remarks in the closing paragraphs of *White Writing*, is a figure 'whose romance has lain precisely in his belonging to a vanishing race' (177). As a result, when constructed as a harmless, child-like presence, this personage somehow removed from the course of colonial history could safely be seen as 'the truest native of South Africa' by imperial writing from William Burchell to Laurens van der Post. Somewhat submerged in his occasional pieces of the 1980s, a bracing scepticism with regard to any easy, quasi-organic link between the materiality of land and language resurfaces in Coetzee's review of Mostert's *Frontiers* (1992), and brings the debate into a post-apartheid context where the 'First Peoples' have been loaded with such cultural significance.

Discussing the original Khoisan designations of place in the Cape, Mostert writes of how 'cadences of the wild, of water and earth, rock and grass, roll onomatopoeically along the tongue'. Yet for Coetzee such purple passages are 'hokum', resembling 'van der Post at his most darkly Jungian'.⁶³ Clearly, in seeking to move beyond such scepticism, one risks being returned again to the mystified, psychologised nature of Conrad and Campbell which, as we saw in the first chapter, Brink struggles to free himself from even in his most playful rewritings of the Adamastor myth. Going on to evoke the eastern Cape frontier wars in a work of over 1000 pages, Mostert can hardly be accused of evading historical conflict, even if, as P. R. Anderson shows, his overblown scene-setting shots tend to pre-empt and encode the shape of the narratives to follow.⁶⁴

Yet often, an attention to Khoisan nomenclature collaborates with a covert refusal of other African ways of construing the land. In their introduction to the bizarrely named reference work *Toponymica Hottentotica* (1977), the editors Nienaber and Raper make some brief remarks about the historical implications of the *inboorlingstamme* (aboriginal place names) that will be catalogued so exhaustively in the coming volumes. 'Uit die

⁶³ Coetzee, 'A Betrayed People', 8-10.

⁶⁴ P. R. Anderson, 'The Fish River Bush and the Place of History', *South African Historical Journal*, 53 (2005), 23-49.

voorkoms van die name kan allerlei konklusies getrek word'; yet in quoting John Barrow with approval they disclose a nakedly political subtext: "The mountains and rivers in the country...still retain their Hottentot names: a presumptive proof that the Kaffirs were intruders upon this nation". Ons wil direk hierby aansluit'.⁶⁵ Here then we are abruptly returned to the most crude form of nationalist historiography: the lovingly articulated litanies of place (already encountered in Brink's *The First Life of Adamastor* and *Praying Mantis*) become accessory to one of the most pernicious distortions of the African past.

Writing from Sydney in response to a sceptical editorial in *Granta*, Peter Carey remarked that looking at the contemporary Australian fascination with Aboriginal space and seeing only white liberal guilt, was to 'misread...the political landscape as confidently as the Europeans misread the physical land of 1788'.⁶⁶ Yet as *Toponymica Hottentotica* suggests, the case of South Africa diverges from the Australian context, presenting not one but *multiple* versions of indigeneity, and versions that have often been placed in competition or used for different political ends. It is a country whose 'textured postcoloniality' combines, in Attwell's summary, the colonial histories of, say, Australia and Nigeria.⁶⁷

Nonetheless, as the ongoing fascination with the multiple, difficult languages of the Bleek and Lloyd Collection will come to suggest, and despite the almost endless deformations (or defamations) of place here, 'There remains the song which names the earth'.⁶⁸ That is, there remains the elemental poetic impulse to seek out an adequate relation between the word and the world, a kind of naming which allows a sense of place and presence even as it acknowledges the violence of the historical record which really explains the 'vanishing' of so many indigenous cultures. A body of work continually expanding to include secondary materials and literary afterlives which do not so much explicate from afar as become part of the archive itself, the textual abundance of the Bleek and Lloyd Collection represents the destination of this work as it seeks to move beyond the unreadability and unwriteability which remain the dominant motifs of *White Writing*. Yet equally, the various controversies surrounding the ethics of adapting these records will again bring into relief a faultline between the different imaginative claims of English and Afrikaans poetic traditions.

'Snails clustered under the waterpipes'

⁶⁵ G. S. Nienaber and P. E. Raper, *Toponymica Hottentotica* (Pretoria: Raad vir Geesteswetenskaplike Navorsing, 1977), 16

⁶⁶ Peter Carey, *Thirty Days in Sydney*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2001), 50.

⁶⁷ David Attwell, *Rewriting Modernity: Studies in Black South African Literary History*, (Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2005), 1.

⁶⁸ The line from Heidegger is used by Bate as the epigraph to *The Song of the Earth*, [2000], (London: Picador, 2001).

For now one might say how all of the above suggests how Coetzee's pathbreaking account of space in southern African literatures is provocatively partial, often speculative, and inevitably implicated in the more personal project of creating a place for his own fiction. So too it becomes involved in the more public matter whereby his novels have undoubtedly been read for their power in evoking an arid heart of the country even while they might be debunking just such well-worn motifs (at least by all those international reviewers whose verdicts about wildernesses in the heart of man and a style 'as spare and lean as the Karoo flatlands which form its backdrop' adorn the Vintage paperback editions).⁶⁹ It is at this point, then, that this chapter seeks to diverge from the work of a critic like Barnard, who has offered via Coetzee a richly detailed account of South Africa's literary spaces, moving from the unquiet ghost of the colonial pastoral to a vision of apartheid (and perhaps, global capitalism) as 'operating from day to day as a means of distributing people in space, and in the process, of controlling the way they see the world'.⁷⁰

Like several of the most influential critical accounts, hers emerges as an apologia for Coetzee, a reply to those once inclined to dismiss him as 'either politically non-accountable or simply a local variety of global postmodernist fashion'.⁷¹ And surely, within the context of spatial distortion evoked by 'Into the Dark Chamber', the hermit crab-like approach to generic form – Coetzee's 'deliberate analytic unsettledness' – comes to have a profoundly political dimension.⁷² The erratic narrative movements of *Michael K* and *Age of Iron*, then, are surely a series of transgressions across socially engineered sightlines and blind spots, bringing into relief the structural illogic of the apartheid city which insisted on racial separateness but relied on cross-racial labour. So too, Coetzee's longstanding and ambivalent meditation on the African farm is seen to culminate, or rather, dissipate, in the 'placelessness' resulting from the curious generic mixture of *Disgrace*: half academic novel and half anti-pastoral, or even post-pastoral, since the country and the city can no longer be used to judge or explain each other, just as the physical difference between them is 'on the verge of being effaced by demographic exigencies'.⁷³

Yet as now seems obvious, this is a body of work which hardly needs defending. In the first instance, Coetzee's own reply to those dissatisfied with K's decision to tend his vegetable patch and remain faithful to the 'idea of gardening' is virtually unanswerable:

⁶⁹ *Daily Telegraph* quoted on the dustjacket of *Boyhood*, (London: Vintage, 1998).

⁷⁰ Rita Barnard, 'Dream Topographies: J. M. Coetzee and the South African Pastoral', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, (Durham, NC. 93:1, Winter 1994), 35.

⁷¹ Graham Pechey, 'The Post-apartheid Sublime', in Derek Attridge and Rosemary Jolly eds., *Writing South Africa: Literature, Apartheid and Democracy, 1970-1995*, (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 66.

⁷² Barnard, 'Dream Topographies', 38.

⁷³ Rita Barnard, 'Coetzee's Country Ways', in Derek Attridge and Peter D. McDonald eds., *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 4:3, Special topic: J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, (Oxford: Routledge, 2002), 393.

One writes the books one wants to write. One doesn't write the books one doesn't want to write...The book about going off with the guerrillas, the book in the heroic tradition, is not a book I *wanted-to-write*, wanted enough to be able to bring it off, however much I might have wanted to have written it – that is to say, wanted to be the person who had successfully brought off the writing of it.⁷⁴

The condition of *wanting-to-write*, he suggests elsewhere, is only the beginning of process where one might only discover what it was one really wanted to write after having written it. Following the irrational promptings and indirections of one's own imagination is the only guarantee that the book might become what all great novels are: 'a matter of awakening the counter-voices within oneself and embarking upon speech with them'.⁷⁵ As ever, the convoluted expression above emerges from a respect for the ultimate authority of the creative process, and an extreme caution in probing its inner workings. Yet while sentences like these (or those which bring the essay on the farm novel to a close) have their doubling back built into them, in *Michael K* the qualifications and corrosive self-awareness are wholly displaced into the second part narrated by the medical officer. Many critics have expressed reservations about this oddly superfluous section; as in some of Coetzee's more recent works, what seems at times to be an obtrusively postmodern, overly analytic intelligence ruptures the surface of the text in a way that feels, give the refinement of his narrative technique elsewhere, somehow gratuitous.

In *Michael K*, however, what this larger, structural separation of the two impulses permits is the mesmerising prose within the main narrative, where we read of K's life as a cultivator. Wondering if he is 'living in what is known as bliss' in a place where time is 'poured out upon him in an unending stream', K thinks back to his time in Wynberg Park, remembering 'an earth more vegetal than mineral...an earth so soft that one could dig and never come to the end of the softness'. The narration goes on to evoke a shift from the dampness and lushness of city's parks and colonial gardens to a much drier, lonelier aesthetic, one which seems to require a move away from the pastoral in any of its forms as a category with which to investigate the relation between natural history and the literary imagination at the Cape. If anything, it is the wilderness narrative and 'desert solitaire' of the American west, or else the 'red centre' which haunts Australian literature, that might prove more valuable points of comparison when considering more recent attempts at writing nature here:

I have lost my love for that kind of earth, he thought, I no longer care to feel that kind of earth between my fingers. It is no longer the green and the brown that I want but the yellow and the red; not the wet but the dry... (92)

⁷⁴ Coetzee, *Doubling*, 199.

⁷⁵ Coetzee, *Doubling*, 64.

In a close reading of the 'luxuriance' of these passages, Attridge discusses the paragraphs where K imagines how his pumpkin seedlings will wilt while he is in hiding, and how there was 'a cord of tenderness that stretched from him to the patch of earth beside the dam' (90). While conceding that Coetzee is able to convey 'as few other writers have done the intensity which the bond between human and plant life can acquire', he remarks that 'it would be crudely reductive to say that Coetzee here (and in the many related passages in the novel) celebrates or advocates an ecological sensitivity'.⁷⁶ Certainly, to enlist *Michael K* in a different political project (that of environmentalism) would certainly be to produce a new set of inappropriate (and uninteresting) demands on the literary. Yet in returning to the distinction between texts which adopt ecological themes, and those which *do ecological work*, it seems that one finds throughout Coetzee's writing a singular openness to what George Steiner calls 'the teeming strangeness and menace of organic presences'; and paradoxically, the intensity of K's (or Magda's, or Lurie's) bond with the non-human is generated precisely because of an intimation of this 'irreducible weight of otherness, of enclosedness, in the texture and phenomenality of the material world'.⁷⁷ That is to say, it is an awareness accomplished not in spite of but *because of* a self-conscious, rigorous textuality which refuses any of the sentimentality, mysticism or stretched metaphors that often weaken avowedly ecocritical writing.

For if ecocriticism explores possibilities of a hazily conceived 'literary ecology',⁷⁸ but if ecology is a non-human science concerned with (in Ernst Haeckel's original definition) 'the economy of nature', there is great scope for conceptual slippage as such terms pass between different contexts. Economy is after all a curiously double-edged term in politicised literary criticism; behind its lay sense of writerly skill there lurks a suspicion about what might have been excluded or consigned to the margins to achieve such a prose. Beyond this, perhaps, is vaguely Marxian dissatisfaction with unjust or unsustainable surplus which sits uneasily with a notion of the literary as the site of pleasure and an unruly proliferation of meaning. Given such insistent, overlapping figurations – all of them framed in a stubbornly *economic* language – one might suggest that Coetzee's *oeuvre* shows a rare and remarkably sustained ability to resist making 'nature' imaginatively efficient. And it is an approach which again finds its clearest critical articulation in a discussion about someone else.

⁷⁶ J. M. Coetzee and the *Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event*, (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 53.

⁷⁷ George Steiner, *Real Presences*, (London, Boston: Faber and Faber, 1989), 139, 140. Stephen Watson draws on this passage in his essay, 'Bitter Pastoral: The Meaning of the Cederberg'. *English Academy Review*, 22:1 (2005), 146-159.

⁷⁸ Gary Snyder, *The Real Work: Interviews and Talks, 1964-1979*, ed. W. Scott McLean, (New York: New Directions 1980), 173-4.

Reviewing the recently published letters of Samuel Beckett, he draws attention to remarks on Paul Cézanne, appreciative of the uncompromising materialism that the playwright discerns via the painter's attention to a single, singular landform. 'What a relief the Mont Ste. Victoire after all the anthropomorphised landscape', writes Beckett in a letter of 8 September 1934, 'after all the landscape "promoted" to the emotions of the hiker, postulated as concerned with the hiker (what an impertinence, worse than Aesop & the animals...)'.⁷⁹ Cézanne, Beckett goes on 'seems to have been the first to see landscape & state it as material of a strictly peculiar order, incommensurable with all human expressions whatsoever' (223). Glossing the letter and that which follows on 16 September, Coetzee regards this new way of looking as 'a moment of breakthrough' in Beckett's aesthetic *bildung*:

His guide here is Cézanne, who came to see the natural landscape as 'unapproachably alien', an 'unintelligible arrangement of atoms', and had the wisdom not to intrude himself into its alienness. In Cézanne 'there is no entrance anymore nor any commerce with the forest, its dimensions are its secret & it has no communications to make', Beckett writes. A week later he pushes the insight further: Cézanne has a sense of his own incommensurability not only with the landscape but – on the evidence of his self portraits – with 'the life... operative in himself'. Herewith the first authentic note of Beckett's mature, post-humanist phase is struck.⁸⁰

Surprisingly, it is through a meditation on landscape – that template so susceptible to imperial prospects and cultural investments of meaning – that this post-humanist lesson is learned. Coetzee salutes what he finds lacking in his South African contemporaries: an ability to push a line of thought as far as possible, so that this sense of 'the inviolate enigma of otherness in things'⁸¹ expands to disqualify any *commerce* (again the refusal of the economic metaphor) not only with 'life of such a different order as landscape but even with life of his own order, even with the life...operative in himself'.⁸² The biological vocabulary and the exasperation with man's impertinence is reminiscent of the radical materialism broached by Darwin in his notebooks; yet this is materialism extended as far as is possible, becoming a kind of thought experiment which presses on the limits of the sayable, and which, crucially, does not (as in the work of so many lesser Darwinians) claim any equivalence between such different 'orders of life', or conflate one species of otherness with another. Instead of displacing it into a brooding, vengeful 'dream topography', this is a poetics which brings such

⁷⁹ Beckett to Thomas McGreevy, 8 September 1934, *The Letters of Samuel Beckett: Volume I: 1929-1940*, eds. Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, Lois More Overbeck, (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 222.

⁸⁰ J. M. Coetzee, 'The Making of Samuel Beckett: *The Letters of Samuel Beckett: Volume I: 1929-1940*', *New York Review of Books*, (30 April 2009), 15.

⁸¹ Steiner, *Real Presences*, 139.

⁸² Beckett to McGreevy, 16 September 1934, *Letters of Samuel Beckett*, 227.

alienness into the workings of the individual consciousness, so that Coetzee's vision (in Gordimer's well-chosen words) 'goes to the nerve-centre of being'.⁸³

As such, the unique combination of homelessness and historical rootedness – the 'drifting habitation' – of Coetzee's work, might constitute a response, or at least the beginning of a response, to the fundamental difficulty underlying any ecocritical approach to the written word. For 'if writing is the archetypal place of severance – of alienation – from immediate situatedness, then how', asks Bate, 'can it speak to the condition of ecological belonging?'⁸⁴ This quality of doubleness is very difficult to abstract from the weave of the textual world in which it is constituted, but in the case of Michael K at least, certain emblems seem to offer themselves up for meditation and safekeeping. The attention to shells, nests and other fragile dwelling places which Bate explores in Bachelard and John Clare seems a singularly appropriate way of apprehending a figure who evades both camp and farm, yet pays close attention to plant life, to stones and invertebrates, 'snails clustered under the waterpipes' (52), the molluscs and anemones in the rock pools at Sea Point 'living lives of their own' (241).

Such invertebrates, Bachelard writes in his classic work on the intimacies of dwelling, are not carved from the outside, but exude themselves from within, their geometries embodying 'the mystery of form-giving life, the mystery of slow, continuous formation'.⁸⁵ As such they might figure an aesthetic that able to admit both a perpetual 'analytic unsettledness', and yet also give full weight (even in the act of relinquishing it) to the wonder and strict formal beauty of nature. Following Paul Valéry's account of *Les coquillages*, Bachelard remarks that this reference to slow formation is only one stage of his meditation:

The collection is illustrated with watercolours by Paul-A. Robert who, before he started to paint, had prepared the object by polishing all the valves. This delicate polishing laid bare the roots of the colours, which made it possible to participate in a will to colour, in the very history of colouration. And at this point the house turns out to be so beautiful, so deeply beautiful, that it would be a sacrilege even to dream of living in it. (107)

'The bitter, unsayable end'

To finish by extending a metaphor which he is evidently fond of, it seems that Coetzee has played the long game, gambling that that his distanced fictional spaces would remain resonant while other, more timely versions of southern Africa risked obsolescence. The

⁸³ Rep. on dustjacket of *Waiting for the Barbarians* [1980], (London: Vintage, 2000).

⁸⁴ Jonathan Bate, *The Song of the Earth*, [2000], (London: Picador, 2001), 251.

⁸⁵ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* [*La poetique de l'espace*, 1958], trans. Maria Jolas with foreword by John R. Stilgoe (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 106.

highly theoretical readings to which his work has often been subjected – those which emphasise its generic unsettledness and reluctance to place the narrating subject – risk slighting the architecture of these fictional worlds, the care and precision with which they have been constructed to mean and to go on meaning in a place where the apartheid era was only one layer in a long history of dispossession and subjugation, and where successive colonial administrations prefigured the relentlessly corporate aspect of the globalised, postcolonial city.

Paradoxically then, an *oeuvre* which is best approached in terms of the regional rather than the national lends itself more to the global: to read a novel like *Waiting for the Barbarians* today is, in the words of one critic, ‘to receive a remarkably direct presentiment of the mingled violence and idealism that operates inside the minds of American viceroys busy in Iraq’.⁸⁶ One might even suggest that the many wanderers who people fiction and non-fiction about the Cape today – Henk van Woerden’s brilliant reconstruction of the life of Demetrios Tsafendas in *A Mouthful of Glass* (2001), perhaps, or even Nigel Penn’s ‘microhistories’ of eighteenth-century vagabonds and *drosters* fleeing the VOC – are in some sense the literary descendants of Michael K.

And yet, precisely because of this ubiquity and the sense of a controlling sometimes ‘palpable design’ on his readers, there emerges the obscure imperative to read against him: to speculate about ‘the more telling attacks that might be made’ which he alluded to in an interview.⁸⁷ In his essay on ‘Idleness in South Africa’, Coetzee considers the challenge offered to a discourse of proto-anthropology by the Khoikhoi, the radical silence which contemporary accounts are at pains to contextualise and explain away. As Sleight’s version of the Cape under the VOC has already intimated, however, moving too easily to the defence of a historical subject so distanced in time, so wholly Other, is to risk traducing it: ‘in the very open-mindedness we might like to imagine extending toward the Hottentot from the modern science of Man’, Coetzee writes, ‘lies the germ of an insidious betrayal of the Hottentot’.⁸⁸ The turn of this phrase surely owes a debt to Michel Foucault, as does the whole of *White Writing*: it is a volume which, its author admits, owes a large debt to the great theorist of prisons and archives, of ‘total institutions’ and ‘carceral archipelagos’.⁸⁹ The insight could surely be adapted to refer to Foucault’s distinctive, prickly intellectual style, and perhaps even to that of Coetzee himself: to sympathise too readily with such writing is to betray it.

⁸⁶ Ronald Suresh Roberts, *No Cold Kitchen: a Biography of Nadine Gordimer*, (Johannesburg: STE Publishers, 2004), 24.

⁸⁷ Coetzee, ‘Two Interviews’, 459.

⁸⁸ Coetzee, *White Writing*, 34.

⁸⁹ ‘Foucault’s shadow lies quite heavily over my essays about colonial South Africa (I think in particular of the essay on anthropological writings about the Hottentots that forms part of *White Writing*).’ Coetzee, *Doubling*, 247.

With this in mind, it seems that, beyond the dated and easily dismissed attacks which were once levelled at him – attacks which were, in effect, demanding a different kind of writing altogether – the critiques voiced by those like Gordimer and Watson still carry weight. A poet with little patience for theoretical jargons or reductive Marxian analysis, the latter nonetheless discerns a ‘failed dialectic’ at the heart of the *oeuvre*, a fundamental ill-fit or unmatchedness between Coetzee’s prose and the local subject matter to which it was applied:

There are times when one cannot escape the impression that J. M. Coetzee is struggling, albeit behind an extraordinary control and stylistic elegance, to combine his Western modernist literary culture with an African historical reality which is hardly welcoming to it.⁹⁰

For the belated, transplanted Modernist, a primary commitment to style then becomes a means of managing such contradictions, resulting in texts so tightly controlled and self-involved that they might well be attuned to Webern but deaf to other, more ordinary locations of culture – the spoken, the colloquial, the improvisatory – which are largely beyond the scope of this work but which any comprehensive account of Cape Town’s literary culture would have to explore at length. Both Coetzee and Watson, perhaps, regard this as a contentious place where the white writer is not permitted to follow: the former’s essay ‘Simple Language, Simple People’ suggests that a misplaced archaism and unintended belittlement results from Alan Paton’s transliteration of Zulu idioms into English; the latter regards Clouts’ attempts to reproduce the vocal inflections of *Kaaps* in his ‘Hotknife’ poems as the most embarrassing part of his output.⁹¹ Nonetheless, it is precisely such a facility for rendering the hybrid, spoken energies and code-switching of Cape speech which distinguishes the work of those authors whom Coetzee finds wanting in terms of style – La Guma and Breytenbach – as well as the more recent voices of writers like Cronin and Wicomb.

In a different way, it seems that Gordimer’s unease still has currency, not with regard to the matter of ‘political and revolutionary solutions’, but rather issuing from word which appears in the first half of her sentence: ‘revulsion’. Encoding an almost unbearable level of violence in the language of the early novellas; regarding a version of one’s younger self with a near inexplicable degree of distaste; injecting an anatomisation of personal disgrace into the public domain in a way which always risked being regarded as racially inflammatory – all these suggest how a large measure of revulsion is something that any account of Coetzee must grapple with, the obverse of that submerged lyricism which has proved enticing so far.

⁹⁰ Watson, *Critical Perspectives*, 34.

⁹¹ Stephen Watson, ‘Sydney Clouts and the Limits of Romanticism’, *Selected Essays: 1980-1990*, (Cape Town: Carrefour Press, 1990).

Recalling how 'I wrote nothing of substance before I was thirty', Coetzee remarks how he began assembling the materials for *Dusklands* as early as 1962. In an attempt to evoke the stasis and cultural marginality from which his first work emerged, and to account for the peculiar intensity which resulted, he wonders:

Was it paralysis? Paralysis is not quite the write word. It was more like nausea: the nausea of facing the empty page, the nausea of writing without conviction, without desire. I think I knew what beginning would be like, and balked at it. I knew that once I had truly begun, I would have to go through with the thing to the end.⁹²

What one wonders, *is* the end of this life-long project, in the sense of both its destination and its wider import as a total body of work? In an early essay devoted entirely to 'The First Line of Yvonne Burgess' *The Strike*', Coetzee quotes André Breton, who in the *First Surrealist Manifesto* approved Valéry's suggestion of 'anthologizing as many first sentences of novels as possible, from whose imbecility he expected a great deal'.⁹³ A similar exercise could be conducted with the last lines of Coetzee's fictions, but with very different results: as many critics have noted, there is a particularly expansive, indeterminate quality to his endings. On the one hand they register the desire (as in Kafka, Faulkner, Beckett) to push stretches of linguistic code further than they would normally go, to follow a thought, a plotline, the trajectory of a life to the 'bitter unsayable end'.⁹⁴ *Disgrace* continues to be read as an attempt to imagine the very worst;⁹⁵ yet equally, its closing paragraphs, like those of *In the Heart of the Country* and *Foe*, embody a powerful dilation of the prose that is all the more moving for the guardedness which has preceded it. It surfaces most powerfully in the closing passages as Michael K lies in his hutch under the stairs – dying of hunger within the world of the novel, an impossible cipher at a further remove – yet still imagining another attempt at setting out from the city, building another barrow, returning to the plot by the dam, repairing the water pump and beginning again to coax some small sign of life from the earth:

He would clear the rubble from the mouth of the shaft, he would bend the handle of his teaspoon in a loop and tie the string to it, he would lower it down the shaft deep into the earth, and when he brought it up there would be water in the bowl of the spoon; and in that way, he would say, one can live. (250)

'I thought the prose had been subdued enough for 250 pages to earn that last gesture', Coetzee replied when asked about such modulations of tone.⁹⁶ Perhaps to end on this note

⁹² Coetzee, *Doubling*, 19.

⁹³ Coetzee, *Doubling*, 91.

⁹⁴ Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*, 32.

⁹⁵ See for example the acclaimed journalist Jonny Steinberg's account of the novel in his *Notes from a Fractured Country: Selected Journalism* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2007), where Lucy Lurie's decision is invoked in a discussion of apologies for Thabo Mbeki's AIDS dissidence.

⁹⁶ Coetzee, 'Two Interviews', 457.

is misleading, not doing justice to the sense of inhumanity and mortality that pervades his work. Yet as he remarks, despite its subject matter, despite the claims made on it by history and every other constraint, 'The *feel* of writing fiction is one of freedom, of irresponsibility, or better, of responsibility toward something that has not yet emerged, that lies somewhere at the end of the road'.⁹⁷

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⁹⁷ Coetzee, *Doubling*, 246.

4

‘ALL LIKE AND YET UNLIKE THE OLD COUNTRY’

KIPLING IN CAPE TOWN, 1891-1908

We were dreamers, dreaming greatly, in the man-stifled town;
We yearned beyond the sky-line, where the strange roads go down...

Rudyard Kipling, ‘The Song of the Dead’, (1893).

There is nothing more tedious than listening to other people’s dreams.

Zoë Wicomb, *Playing in the Light*, (2006).

Walking up the slopes of Table Mountain on Woolsack Drive, one soon reaches the Cape Dutch cottage the road is named after: whitewashed gables and teak shutters just visible behind the security gates of what is now a postgraduate residence. The Woolsack was commissioned by Cecil John Rhodes: mining magnate, sometime Cape prime minister and fervent builder of the British Empire. Designed by Rhodes's protégé, the architect Herbert Baker, this sunny atrium protected from the winds that buffet Devil's Peak was first occupied by that empire's most famous chronicler: Rudyard Kipling. From 1900 to 1907, the Kipling family holidayed at the Woolsack, enjoying 'the colour, light, and half-oriental manners of the land' and avoiding the English winter after an attack of pneumonia in 1899 that had almost cost Kipling his life and claimed his six-year-old daughter: 'The dry, spiced smell of the land and the smack of the clean sunshine were health restoring'.¹

At a glance, in nine years of wintering here Kipling produced only a handful of increasingly shrill poems and short stories set during the Anglo-Boer (or South African) War in which the country serves as little more than a backdrop for various political bugbears, recruitment drives and imperial lessons. 'My half year at the Cape is always my "political" time', he wrote in a letter of 1906, 'And I enjoy it'.² As a result of aligning himself so completely with Rhodes's dream, in a new South Africa he is simply ignored, like the many statues of his idol, as a relic of a past best forgotten. Apart from the fulsome verse inscribed on the Rhodes Memorial, an excerpt from Kipling's 1893 imperial hymn 'A Song of the Cities' can also be found below a statue of the Colossus in the central concourse of the University of Cape Town. [Fig. 22] Here an entire Peninsula is conflated with the incorrigible imperial dreamer:

I dream my dream by rock and heath and pine
Of Empire to the northward. Ay, one land
From Lion's Head to Line!³

George Orwell remarked that Kipling is a writer whose verse refrains – 'the White Man's Burden', 'somewheres East of Suez' – became part of the everyday colonial idiom; even today he is a writer who is unconsciously quoted whenever there is talk of the unforgiving minute or the female of the species being more deadly than the male. The stanza below Rhodes – along with a clutch of more innocuous fragments about white sands of Muizenberg spun before the gale, Constantia vineyards and aching bergs 'throned and

¹ Rudyard Kipling, *Something of Myself* [1937], ed. Thomas Pinney (Cambridge University Press, 1990), 87.

² To Edmonia Hill, 27 June 1906, *Letters III*, 112.

³ 'The Song of the Cities' [1893], *Rudyard Kipling's Verse: Definitive Edition*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1940), 177.

thorned' under a speckless sky – was once the stock Kipling verse for Cape Town.⁴ Positioned at this collusion of natural and imperial grandeur, it does little to debunk the popular caricature of a tub-thumping imperialist, a jingoistic supporter of the South African War who put Rhodes on a pedestal as a British hero with an almost divine right to oversee the development of southern Africa, and never wavered. 'Even writing in 1935, he sounds like nothing so much as a high-paid publicity agent', Edmund Wilson remarked in 'The Kipling that Nobody Read', an essay of 1941 which summarised the charge against him: in having resisted his own sense of life and discarded his own moral intelligence in favour of the view of a dominant political party, Kipling had committed 'one of the most serious sins against his calling which are possible for an imaginative writer'.⁵

There is, however, something missing from the monument. The first line of the stanza – about the Cape being 'Snatched and bartered oft from hand to hand' – is omitted, throwing out the rhyme. No doubt it would have troubled the notion of a tranquil, pastoral Cape Dutch past after which the British imperial presence could be seen as the natural continuation of an earlier colonial stewardship. Such was the tradition which Rhodes, Alfred Milner and their circle were keen to promote after the disaster of the South African War: a reconciliation of Boer and Briton which excluded the African majority and shaped much of the grim century to come. But in considering a writer as complex, prolific and (borrowing from Freud to address this peculiar insistence on imperial dreaming) as *overdetermined* as Kipling, one wonders what else might have been passed over in the common verdict about his failed South African years.

A visit to the Kipling Room, located in the basement of the university library at the top of the steps, gives a sense of just how diverse his written output was. Ranged in the cabinets are the early stories from India, the *Plain Tales from the Hills* and barrack room ballad collections narrated by soldiers and sailors, along with journalism, travel writing, and the *Jungle Books*: an extraordinary early flowering that had made him a world-famous literary celebrity by the time he arrived in London from India at the age of twenty three. Writing in 1911, H. G. Wells remembered how 'in the middle nineties this spectacled and moustached little figure with its heavy chin and its general effect of vehement gesticulation, its wild shouts of boyish enthusiasm for effective force, its lyric delight in the sounds and colours, in the very odours of Empire...became almost a national symbol'.⁶ 'It is difficult now to get back to the feelings of that period', he continued: 'Kipling has since been so

⁴ 'The Flowers', *The Seven Seas*, [1895], *Rudyard Kipling's Verse*, 190.

⁵ Edmund Wilson, rep. in Andrew Rutherford ed. *Kipling's Mind and Art*, (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1965), 48.

⁶ H. G. Wells, *The New Machiavelli* [1911], rep. in Roger Lancelyn Green ed. *Kipling: The Critical Heritage*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971), 305.

mercilessly and exhaustively mocked, criticized and torn to shreds – never was a man so violently exalted and then, himself assisting, so relentlessly called down’.

Nonetheless, as one pages through his own illustrations to the *Just So Stories*, the riddles, rebuses and verbal games seem appropriate symbols for this extravagant, almost unnervingly fecund imagination. [Fig. 23] And given his unequalled facility in chronicling the total experience of the British colonial project, this account, rather than revisiting the nakedly propagandist Boer War output, examines his correspondence and lesser known writings from the Cape to trace the discontinuous, fractured or displaced elements of the dreamwork: all the things that his imperial elevation made unsayable, but which press in through the margins and metaphors of the texts. In this reading, it is unsurprising that perhaps the most disquieting and certainly the most cryptic of all Kipling’s short stories, ‘Mrs Bathurst’, washes up on the shoreline near the naval base at Simonstown, a place that he knew ‘like the inside of my own pocket’.⁷

For while often dismissed an embarrassment by the literary establishment in England, Kipling has also been defended by some of its greatest figures in T. S. Eliot, W. H. Auden and C. S. Lewis, each drawn to his facility with language, the almost uncanny sharpness of his visual sense, his sheer writerly talent. In the words of a recent champion, Craig Raine, Kipling is England’s finest practitioner of dialect and the spoken voice, ‘a writer whose ear for inflection and accent is not just ebullient technique, a prose virtuosity, but the expression of a profoundly democratic artistry’.⁸ So then how, one wonders, did he miss so much here; how did he fail to hear the accents or register the human traffic of a city which rivalled the Bombay of his childhood in its mingling of language, local colour and culture?

Taken as one chapter in a cultural history of Cape Town, the case of Kipling presents an intriguing example of literary failure: the failure to give the city a credible literary identity, to make it a place in the mind. Yet at a further remove, it broaches the question of what, if anything, such a sense of place could mean in a linguistically divided city still haunted by its colonial past. More than the stories or poems, it is Kipling’s letters from the Woolsack that give a vivid picture of the high imperial moment at the Cape, showing the strain that resulted when a creative imagination (and political ideology) nurtured in northern India was transplanted to an entirely different colonial situation. Over the course of a decade they provide portraits of a place in flux and sketch the shift from carefree enchantment in the 1890s to disappointment and bitterness as the death of Rhodes, post-war settlements and election defeats quashed any remaining imperial hopes, resulting in his departure in 1908,

⁷ Kipling, *Something of Myself*, 58.

⁸ Craig Raine ed., *A Choice of Kipling’s Prose*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1987), 1.

never to return: 'I will go to the Cape in December to see the burial, but I must then hunt for another country to love'.⁹

'A truly monumental time'

Kipling had first seen Cape Town in 1891, stopping in briefly on world tour prescribed by doctors after a nervous breakdown put down to overwork, but undoubtedly also connected with his experience of arriving in the imperial centre, London, and the slight but deeply felt rebuffs he received there. His first impression of a town as yet untouched by the building booms of the 1890s was of a 'sleepy, unkempt little place', where the *stoeps* of the older Dutch houses still jutted over the pavements, and his sense of racial diversity is tellingly filtered through the memories, mythology (and racist vernacular) of an Indian childhood: 'Occasional cows strolled up the main streets, which were full of coloured people of the sort that my *ayah* had pointed out to me were curly haired (*hubshees*) who slept in such posture as made it easy for the devils to enter their bodies'.¹⁰

He caught his first glimpse of Rhodes dining in an Adderley Street restaurant and was guided around Simonstown by a friendly captain, an experience which triggered abiding fascination with the naval base here, and would provide the setting for several short stories. He stayed in a Wynberg hotel on the advice of friend H. Rider Haggard, the bestselling author whose image of a gaudy, violent Africa lives on in the latest Wilbur Smith stacked in Cape Town International airport. Yet Kipling also met Schreiner, a writer whose near obsessive relationship with Rhodes would take a very different path. If her great achievement was, as Plomer remarked, to have 'given lasting shape to forms of life hitherto unperceived or unrecorded (the proper function of a writer)', then this perhaps is the exact formulation of what had made Kipling famous in India, but which could never be fulfilled in southern Africa.¹¹

At the end of 1897, now at the height of his fame, having been elected to the Athenaeum Club in London and dined there with Rhodes and Milner, Kipling returned to South Africa with the family for a summer holiday. 'It will be a rest for the wife: and Cape Town is a paradise for the children' he wrote in December 1897 to James M. Conland, a correspondent in New England who, perhaps because of his political distance, habitually elicits the most focused and personal accounts of the Cape from Kipling. The family stayed in the Vineyard Hotel in Newlands, 'an ideal place to work at: but kept by three

⁹ To Duckworth Ford, September 1907, cited in Angus Wilson, *The Strange Ride of Rudyard Kipling*, (London: Secker & Warburg, 1977), 227.

¹⁰ Kipling, *Something of Myself*, 57.

¹¹ William Plomer, *Double Lives: an Autobiography* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1943), 133.

thoroughpaced female devils – one with a moustache and no figure’ who ‘spread miseries and discomforts round her in return for good monies’.¹² Kipling escaped this domestic scene by embarking on an epic railway journey organised by Rhodes: ‘Cape Town – Kimberley – Bulawayo – Kimberley again – Johannesburg – and so back to the Cape. You look those places up on a map and see if I haven’t put in a big work while I’ve been here’, he wrote to Conland. This grand tour of British power in the subcontinent was a formative experience for Kipling – a ‘truly monumental time’ – especially since the opportunity for a long solo journey was an increasingly rare event and must have evoked memories of his earlier, rootless life as a journalist and travel correspondent.¹³

Like Haggard’s heroes and so many other European adventurers in Africa, he conflated spatial immensity with largeness of purpose, his mission imbued with a sense of unstoppable momentum provided by the railway. Travelling alone by Cape cart in the summer heat of 1877, Anthony Trollope had seen a Dantean vision of hell at the origin of South Africa’s industrial revolution in Kimberley;¹⁴ but Kipling, the special guest of the Chartered Company, glosses over ‘the huge guarded enclosures where the native labour is kept’,¹⁵ rattling onwards in his private carriage to Rhodesia and demonstrating his lifelong obsession with technology in dwelling more on the details of the rolling stock, the gauges of the railway and the ‘rank bad colonial coal’.¹⁶ He explored Bulawayo on bicycle, and visited the Matopos, ‘a wilderness of tumbled rocks, granite boulders and caves where the white man fought the Matabele in ’96’, and where Rhodes was eventually entombed: ‘You never dreamed of such a country’.¹⁷

But in many ways, by the time Kipling arrived Rhodes’s British dream was on the wane. 1896 had been a particularly bad year for the Colossus: ‘What with the Raid, rebellion, famine, rinderpest, and now my house burnt down, I feel like Job’, he remarked, ‘All but the boils’.¹⁸ Stripped of political credibility after the fiasco of the Jameson Raid and with his health failing, Rhodes was turning his energies more to the consolidation of his legacy at the Cape, restoring old buildings and indulging a latent passion for landscape gardening on his mountain estate. Yet even here the revival of Cape Dutch architecture being engineered through Herbert Baker had suffered a major setback when a mysterious fire gutted his Groote Schuur mansion – the renovated ‘big barn’ dating back to the days of the Dutch East India Company – and left Rhodes camping out on the lawn.

¹² To James M. Conland [early April 1898], *Letters II*, 335.

¹³ To Frederick Norton Finney, 11 April 1898, *Letters II*, 334.

¹⁴ Anthony Trollope, *South Africa* [1878], (Cape Town: A. A. Balkema, 1973), 362-3.

¹⁵ To Conland, *Letters II*, 336.

¹⁶ To Finney, *Letters II*, 334.

¹⁷ To Conland, *Letters II*, 336.

¹⁸ Cited in Robert I. Rotberg, *The Founder: Cecil Rhodes and the Pursuit of Power*, (Oxford University Press, 1988), 391.

Undeterred, he decreed a full restoration, resolute in his attempt to forge a tradition that would fuse British and Dutch colonial heritage at the Cape. 'What is the form of the impress we are stamping on the soft clay mould, which will be burnt into the architectural style of the future?' asked Herbert Baker in a speech to mark the occasion, a disciple who had been duly sent on a tour of the Mediterranean to absorb some architectural grandeur. He would go on to design the Highveld acropolis of the Union Buildings on a kopje outside Pretoria in 1909, and later fall out spectacularly with Sir Edwin Lutyens in their attempt to raise an Anglo-Indian Rome for the British Raj in New Delhi.¹⁹ Taking his cue from this vogue for heritage and restoration, in a letter of December 1898 Kipling enthused about 'the vestiges (artistic and architectural) that remain of the Dutch occupation', dismissing the modern colonist's belief that 'a sheet of corrugated iron is, of necessity, the architectural unit of the Cape' and sketching a mountain pastoral that (despite the best efforts of revisionist historians) still enjoys wide currency in tourist brochures and property portfolios:

So much of course depends on the clear air in which the least line or moulding shows its full value, the heavy oak foliage about the *stoeps* and the raw purple hills behind the roof that no photograph or pencil can render them fully. Looking at the houses one realises how...the Cape had a quiet and dignified past in which the old houses took deep root... They are good to live in – as I can testify.²⁰

Yet when he next returned to Cape Town in February 1900, Kipling was in many ways changed, 'a sadder and harder man' in the words of a relative.²¹ His 'Best Beloved' daughter Josephine was gone and the Boer War had begun in a series of humiliating sieges and reversals for the British forces, with Rhodes himself, 'the lion of Africa' caged in Kimberley. In a pattern he showed throughout his life, Kipling displaced personal stress onto public events, and threw himself into the war effort: 'I'm dancing about among hospitals and running from one end of Capetown [sic] to the other trying to be of some use',²² he wrote in February 1900 from the Mount Nelson hotel, described by biographer Carrington as 'a huge red-brick caravanserai on the slope of Table Mountain...crammed with war reporters, sightseers, adventurers, contractors, officer's wives and hordes of the non-combatants who crowd upon the heels of an army. All the world passed through it on the way to the front'.²³

At first Kipling clearly relished the sight of Cape Town as host to Empire and the gateway to British hopes in Africa, yet as the war unfolded he witnessed the weaknesses of the British army at close hand in a conflict that gave a grim foreshadowing of the twentieth

¹⁹ Cited in Phillida Brooke Simons, *Groote Schuur: from Great Granary to Stately Home*, (Vlaeberg, 1996), 21.

²⁰ To John St Loe Strachey, 25 December 1898, *Letters II*, 335.

²¹ *Kipling Papers 32/34*, Sussex University, cited in Harry Ricketts, *The Unforgiving Minute*, (London, 1999), 251.

²² To William Charles Scully, 14 February 1900, *Letters III*, 12.

²³ Charles Carrington, *Rudyard Kipling: His Life and Work*, (London, 1955), 304.

century in its trenches, barbed wire, automatic weaponry and the spectacle of a tiny guerrilla force inflicting huge losses on the world's greatest military machine. The 'soldier's friend' came under fire for the first time in his life when a small skirmish and some shell fire disrupted a picnic at Karee Siding just north Bloemfontein, the details of which were still finely focussed in his memory when he came to write his autobiography thirty years later: 'a small piece of hanging woodland filled and fumed with our shrapnel much as a man's moustache fills with cigarette smoke'.²⁴

Despite the customary descriptive precision, his reactions to the war were confused, extreme and often callous. The spectacle of the self-proclaimed 'mother of democracy' attacking two remote, self-governing republics that had remained virtually unknown to the world before the discovery of gold on the Rand resulted in pro-Boer sympathies throughout Europe and England. Yet firmly under the spell of Rhodes, and, in Orwell's verdict, never seeming to realise that empire was 'primarily a money-making concern', Kipling found himself advancing the government's case for war based on 'the plain issue of elementary political freedom for all white men', a justification that was enough to make the emerging novelist Joseph Conrad (described a few years earlier in the British press as the 'Kipling of the Malay Archipelago') die laughing: 'If I am to believe Kipling, this is a war undertaken for the cause of democracy. *C'est à crever de rire*'.²⁵

Because of his immense popularity and the unprecedented media attention given to this climactic nineteenth-century conflict, Kipling dealt with these contradictions in the public eye, and as Malvern van Wyk Smith points out in his fine account of Boer War poetry, the conflict came at a relatively early stage in his career as laureate of Empire. [Fig. 24] An acutely focused depiction of the eccentrics and curiosities – the 'strange roads' – of the colonial frontier was just beginning to shift to a celebration of nebulous imperial dreams and panoramas which proved too brittle to outlast a real imperial conflict: 'trapped in a mould of expectation that he had allowed to form too easily...the rude awakening which the British underwent impinged on Kipling as a personal failure'.²⁶ One might wonder, with Van Wyk Smith, if he was ever fully aware of the burden placed upon him (or which he placed upon himself) as a writer, and choose to read the South African War stories collected in *Traffics and Discoveries* (1902) as 'an oblique, even subliminal, record of Kipling's progressively

²⁴ Kipling, *Something of Myself*, 94.

²⁵ Frederick R. Karl and Laurence Davies eds., *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, vol. II, (Cambridge University Press, 1986), 207.

²⁶ Malvern van Wyk Smith, *Drummer Hodge: The Poetry of the Anglo-Boer War 1899-1902*, (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1978), 98, 103.

collapsing faith not only in the rationale and conduct of the war, but also, and more broadly, in the imperial idea itself as a viable or even defensible enterprise'.²⁷

An adequate account of this short fiction is beyond the scope of an enquiry into Kipling's strictly Capetonian output; yet one might suggest how this subliminal ebbing of imperial confidence is displaced and refracted into the scenic description of stories like 'The Captive' and 'A Sahib's War', with their shifts between vast expanses and claustrophobic enclosure. As Edmund Wilson remarked, the abiding image one takes from them is that of the British forces carrying out futile manoeuvres against a dry, dusty South African landscape:²⁸ a startling encounter, then, between modern military technology and the immemorial 'dream topography' of the colonial imagination. By the time of *Something of Myself*, with its savage descriptions of dysentery, 'Bloeming-typhoidtein' and the 'stench of human carrion', the whole affair is glimpsed briefly, in Conradian terms, as a malign intrusion on the continent: 'Till we planted disease, the vast and sun baked land was antiseptic and sterilised'.²⁹ Considering Kipling's responses to the war in their entirety, the grating public voice is largely submerged by a sense of profound failure and disappointment. Reflecting on his experience from Sussex in a letter to Conland as early as July 1900, the once 'truly monumental' rail journey through the Karoo interior has taken on the detachment and disorientation of a bad dream:

I sort of drifted up country looking at hospitals and wounded men and guns and generals and wondering as I have never wondered before at the huge size of the country. Try to imagine a railway journey (on a 3 '6" track) of seven and eight hundred miles before you can get within spotting distance of your enemy. It was like a journey in a nightmare.³⁰

'A mantle of belonging'

'Into these shifts and changes we would descend yearly for five or six months, from the peace of England to the deeper peace of "The Woolsack" and life under the oak-trees overhanging the patio', wrote Kipling in one of many strained descriptions of the Rhodes Estate: 'Where mother-squirrels taught their babies to climb, and in the stillness of hot afternoons the fall of an acorn was almost like a shot'.³¹ [Fig. 25] From 1900, Rhodes's lush and fantastic estate became the Kiplings' personal playground while Muizenberg – 'the

²⁷ Malvern van Wyk Smith, 'Telling the Boer War: Narrative Indeterminacy in Kipling's Stories of the South African War', *South African Historical Journal* 41, (1999), 349-50.

²⁸ Wilson, 'The Kipling that Nobody Read', 50.

²⁹ Kipling, *Something of Myself*, 91.

³⁰ To James M. Conland, 24 July 1900, *Letters III*, 26.

³¹ Kipling, *Something of Myself*, 97.

Brighton of South Africa' – was only a short train ride away. 'Chuck public affairs', Henry James urged him in 1901, correctly diagnosing the deterioration of his friend's prose style, 'Which are an ignoble scene'.³² But from the Woolsack Rhodes's house was only a brief stroll away via 'a path through a ravine set with hydrangeas, which in autumn...were one solid packed blue river'.³³ On its marble flagged veranda, surveyors, railway builders and mining experts mingled with missionaries, big game hunters and journalists: men of action who hogged their bristles short, and whose company the bookish, studious Kipling preferred to the men of letters who were increasingly turning against him.

From the Main Road in Rondebosch today one can only catch glimpses of Groote Schuur homestead, a white flickering behind the foliage and security stockades of what is now the presidential enclosure of Jacob Zuma. Rhodes left his house to the future premiers of the country and its grounds to the general public, but as South Africa became a police state in the second half of the twentieth-century, the estate was fenced off from the picnickers who had once enjoyed its gardens and equipped with secret passageways and bomb shelters. Approaching the front entrance one reaches a curiously eclectic piece of architecture:

The hand of Northern Europe has twisted this house into a misalliance of shapes and styles. Whitewashed Dutch gables, tapering Palladian columns and Jacobean barley-sugar chimneys reflect the brilliance of African sunshine and dazzle the eyes, so that on entering the vestibule one is quite unable to see the carefully constructed Dutch interior until one's visions has adapted to the sudden darkness.³⁴

This verdict comes from a more reluctant participant in Rhodes's dreams, the narrator of Ann Harries' 1999 historical novel, *Manly Pursuits*. Professor Francis Wills, a reclusive Oxford don and ornithologist, is responsible for supervising the release of two hundred English songbirds into forests of the Groote Schuur estate, a fictionalised account of a real project that was part of Rhodes's drive to 'improve the amenities of the Cape', and transplant the sound of English woodland at the tip of Africa before he died. Confused by the change of hemisphere and season, the nightingales and chaffinches refuse to sing, but during the course of this doomed project, Harries' sceptical protagonist draws pen sketches of the many colonial heavyweights who passed through these rooms and casts a jaundiced eye on the house and the taste of its furnishings. For Wills, and many other commentators, the place is a museum piece: 'As if building your house (twice) on the ruins of an old barn that stored the First Settler's crops gives you some sort of sacred power – a mantle of belonging' (131).

³² Cited in *Letters III*, 7.

³³ Kipling, *Something of Myself*, 97.

³⁴ Anne Harries, *Manly Pursuits*, (London: Bloomsbury, 1999), 50.

Determined to promote, or if necessary invent, a white heritage for the Cape, Rhodes crammed the house with anything that the original settlers had made or imported, so that humble farm furniture strung with leather thong *riempies* rubs shoulders with intricately carved tropical hardwoods shipped from Batavia. 'I want the big and simple, barbaric if you like' he said of interior decor, but left the details of furnishing and fitting to various underlings who were required to do their work in a hurry after the fire of 1896.³⁵ His premature death disqualified him from becoming a real connoisseur, with the result that Groote Schuur is more art warehouse than art gallery. Like the collections housed in the Slave Lodge and the Castle museums, the result is hardly an embodiment of Cape Dutch simplicity but rather an opulent and sometimes garish display of all the different cultures that collided here: a Cape Indo-Dutch, Sino-Javanese, Franco-British style that veers uneasily from settler rusticity to imperial booty.

An omnivorous reader, Rhodes also created a remarkably eclectic library at Groote Schuur, the teak shelves lined with navigational charts of early Portuguese explorers, medieval chronographia, thick-spined volumes with titles like *Rariorum Africanarum Plantarum 1738* and *What I Saw in Matabeleland* – a collection representing the whole spectrum of Europe's early contact with Africa, many of them works of voyeuristic fascination or sheer fantasy masquerading as hard fact or disinterested anthropology. It is here that Wills comes across what can only be the 1897 edition of Schreiner's *Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland*, finding it open on a book rest, the brutal frontispiece on display: 'a truly shocking photograph of a number of dead Negroes dangling from ropes in a foreign-looking tree, while a larger number of white men pose for the picture beneath it, smoking, and at ease, as if unaware of the corpses in the boughs above them' (51). The image was subsequently suppressed in future editions until as late as 1974; perhaps its sheer actuality – cutting through so much of the debate around Rhodes's legacy to show what occurred in the creation of the country that bore his name during the 1890s, a graphic aberration amongst so many other texts used to authorise power – goes some way to explaining why this work has, as Laura Chrisman suggests, been largely overlooked as the origin of serious Western literary critique of empire in favour of Conrad's masterpiece of two years later.³⁶

In another section of the library are 440 volumes bound in square-sized red morocco, produced especially for Rhodes by Hatchard and Company of Piccadilly. Obsessed with Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* yet unable to read the sources in the original Greek and Latin, he commissioned one typed translation of each, complete and unabridged, to be undertaken by team of scholars working in the reading room of the British Museum. All involved were sworn to secrecy, told only that they were employed

³⁵ Basil Williams, *Cecil Rhodes*, (London: Constable, 1921), 221.

³⁶ Laura Chrisman, *Rereading the Imperial Romance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 121.

by 'a millionaire who does not wish his name to appear'. Baker remembered him reading lives of the Emperors on the grand marble *stoep*, with a trace of mythomania emerging even in the account of this most devoted disciple: 'Rhodes had an undoubted likeness to one bust of the Emperor Titus in the Vatican museum. I wonder if he half consciously knew it, as he was fond of turning over the pages and coming to that of Titus, I have heard him say, "He has a fine forehead", as his hand passed over his own'.³⁷ [Figs. 26-7].

Despite Kipling's ongoing reverence for Rhodes – in correspondence he occasionally referred to Him using the capital letters normally reserved for God – something of his oddness surfaces in *Something of Myself* when we read that although he communed with Jameson by telepathy, the Empire builder was 'as inarticulate as a school-boy of fifteen':

My use to him was mainly as a purveyor of words...After the idea had been presented – and one had to know his code for it – he would say: 'What am I trying to express? Say it, say it'. So I would say it, and if the phrase suited not, he would work it over, chin a little down, till it satisfied him.³⁸

In the light of such single-mindedness, Plomer considered that his literary potential might be limited: 'As a character put faithfully into a novel, Rhodes might impress but would no doubt fail to "convince" the reviewers. They would complain that a character must develop and it is perhaps difficult to find traces of real development in Rhodes's nature'.³⁹ Nonetheless, he has been the subject of at least eight fictional treatments, from an 1896 *roman à clef* by social activist F. R. Statham entitled *Mr Magnus* to Harries' darkly comic novel, in which Professor Wills' intricate bird whistling in a desperate attempt to make his charges perform is only one of many types of colonial mimicry and awkward cultural grafts afoot on the mountain slopes.

Perhaps the most blatant icon of Rhodes's self-styled oddity was the grey green soapstone bird hacked from the ruins at Great Zimbabwe that he appropriated as a personal totem. Carved by the ancestors of the Shona, it was termed the 'Phoenician Hawk' by archaeological experts of the time who were determined to attribute the ruins to an earlier wave of European colonisation, connecting it with the centuries-old legend of a gold rich kingdom in the African interior that Rider Haggard had harnessed with such success in his romances. Using technical details of the workings at Kimberley to shore up a myth associating Great Zimbabwe with the biblical city of Ophir, he was surely the literary translator of the Rhodes myth if ever there was one, playing perhaps as great a role as the Colossus himself in creating 'an imagined continent that was made to serve as an imperial sign system', in the words of Peter Merrington, 'a geographical space that was to be

³⁷ Baker, *Cecil Rhodes by his Architect*, 133.

³⁸ Kipling, *Something of Myself*, 87.

³⁹ Plomer, *Cecil Rhodes*, 46.

mysterious, a *temenos* or shrine, a sequence of monuments (natural or man-made) from the Gizeh Plateau to the Ruwenzori to Great Zimbabwe and Cecil Rhodes's Matopos, the Union Buildings, and the numinous natural acropolis of Table Mountain'.⁴⁰

The bird took Baker's fancy and became a design motif throughout the house, reproduced at regular intervals along the wooden banisters, where, in the judgement of the aesthetically fastidious Wills, 'it causes considerable inconvenience to the trailing hand' and its accusing glare 'converts visitors into trespassers'.⁴¹ It emerges in mouldings, leers over windows as a gargoyle and even reappears atop the roof domes of the old Groote Schuur hospital, where Christian Barnard perfected the transplant surgery that might have been able to prolong Rhodes's life had he lived a century later. His atrial septal defect – a hole in the heart – meant that from the late 1890s he was forced to lie down for long periods of the day, conducting his affairs from a couch. 'In its own way, Rhodes's heart was almost as significant an organ as Cleopatra's nose', Plomer reflects, 'Had it been weaker, or stronger, the whole aspect of Africa would have been changed'.⁴²

Today the Muizenberg cottage where Rhodes died is devoted to a multimedia celebration of his life courtesy of the Anglo De Beers corporation (which advises against playing the 'blame game' with regard to his legacy); but the bedroom at Groote Schuur remains virtually unchanged since his death: a high uncomfortable bed wedged in the corner, elephant tusks in the fireplace, spartan washbasins. On a shelf is a death mask, taken within hours of his demise for future sculptors to work from, but the most palpable sense of the man seems to linger in the bathroom next door, with its enormous scooped out stone block carted all the way over the mountains from Paarl at great expense. Here the Colossus would recline in true Roman style, bloated and overweight towards the end of his life, surrounded by Italian marble coloured like blue cheese and taps styled as roaring brass lions. 'What a bath!' wrote Will Stuart, Olive Schreiner's young nephew who had the run of the house as a teenager during the late 1890s, 'Always the horrid cold of the marble as one sat down, a bath full of hot water despite'.⁴³ Rhodes preferred cold water for his ablutions, but what, one wonders, about the later occupants of the house? Generals Botha, Smuts and Herzog, farmers and soldiers who felt ill at ease here in the wet Cape winters and left little trace of their tenures; after 1948 the dour, bowler-hatted architects of apartheid: Daniel François Malan, Hendrik Frensch Verwoerd, Balthazar Johannes Vorster, alone with themselves in the bath.

⁴⁰ Peter Merrington, 'A Staggered Orientalism: the Cape-to-Cairo Imaginary', *Poetics Today*, 22:2, (2001), 324.

⁴¹ Harries, *Manly Pursuits*, 59.

⁴² Plomer, *Cecil Rhodes*, 53.

⁴³ Will Stuart, 'Private History of the Schreiner Family', (c.1946), cited in Rotberg, *The Founder*, 383.

Its last occupant, our guide speculated, was Frederik Willem de Klerk, who resided here when the Groote Schuur Minute of May 1990, negotiated between a beleaguered nationalist government and the recently unbanned African National Congress, opened the way for South Africa's transition to democracy. Thirty years after Harold Macmillan had dined with a stonily silent Verwoerd after speaking about the 'winds of change' blowing through the continent, Mandela and De Klerk were photographed together for the first time at an international press conference on the front lawns, while state police and Umkhonto weSizwe found themselves working together ensure security protocol. More recently, it saw the launch of the Mandela Rhodes Trust in 2002, a yoking together of two names which is either an extraordinary gesture of reconciliation, or else an amnesic exercise in corporate branding (the luxury high-rise living and leisure complex in central Cape Town, 'Mandela Rhodes Place', suggests the latter).

Today though, President Zuma, like President Mbeki before him, uses another Cape Dutch mansion downslope fitted with mod-cons rather than this house of valuable colonial relics where young children are not permitted to play. Descending the stairs after a guided tour, turning off lights and passing again all the intricate mouldings and carved wood that seemed to speak silently of Asia, distant places and forgotten craftsmen, we noticed that a white cat was following behind, overweight and suffering from chronic hair loss. A pet of the De Klerk's that has stayed on through regime change and renovation, this animal was now, according to our guide, the only permanent resident of Groote Schuur.

'A closed economy'

The death of Rhodes in 1902 signalled the passing of high imperialism in South Africa; for Kipling it was as if 'half the horizon of my life had dropped away'.⁴⁴ For a while he retained a cautious optimism, writing to Conland in January 1903 that 'The strain of the war has been taken off and all the country is going ahead by leaps and bounds. They are building five miles out from Cape Town in every direction that they can; landboom is following landboom'.⁴⁵ He considered buying property in South Africa to become more than an annual tourist, and in 1904 even joined the election campaign of the Progressive party, addressing 'mechanics, loco-drivers, fitters and boiler men...at Salt River on roaring hot nights in the open by the light of flare lamps'.⁴⁶ But over the following years, robbed of the figurehead who had given the imperial dream a fictional, fantastic dimension, disgusted by Liberal advances

⁴⁴ To Edmonia Hill, 8 March 1905, *Letters III*, 180-81.

⁴⁵ To James M. Conland, 27 January 1903, *Letters III*, 123.

⁴⁶ To Leslie Cope Cornford, 24 February 1904, *Letters III*, 147.

in London, suspicious of the Afrikaner Bond at the Cape, Kipling found himself in a changed position. Where once he had been an honoured guest, strolling across to Groote Schuur to mingle with Jameson or Milner's imperial lieutenants, he now became, in the words of one biographer, 'the court poet of a dynasty that was at its end'.⁴⁷

Sketching the view from Cape Town in a letter of 1905 to a long-time correspondent in India, Kipling describes how:

The plains between Table Mountain which, so to say, rises out of our back yard, and Hottentots Holland are all dancing in the heat mist and the Cape doves are making just the same noise as their Indian sisters among the figs and loquats in the garden. There are hibiscus bushes in full bloom and pomegranates and aloes. It's all like and yet unlike the old country...Flamboyant Malay women in rose pink and old gold skirts stiffly starched and yards in circumference fetch the washing and Malays in fezzes drive carts full of fish and blow a tin horn to announce their coming.⁴⁸

Here one can almost sense him prospecting for another rich imaginative seam like the India of his youth, dutifully sketching in local colour, the washerwomen and *snoek* wagons, yet being ultimately frustrated in his quest. Oscar Wilde, an acquaintance of the foppish ornithologist Professor Wills, famously pronounced that in reading Kipling's early Indian stories, 'one feels as if one were seated under a palm-tree reading life by superb flashes of vulgarity. The jaded, second-rate Anglo-Indians are in exquisite incongruity with their surroundings'.⁴⁹ It is just this sense of ill-fit and absurdity, so well caught by Plomer and Harries, that is missing from Kipling's accounts of Groote Schuur; for in identifying so completely with Rhodes and his entourage, he permitted himself none of the ironic distance that is at the heart of his best work.

Instead his primary imagination at the time seems to have been occupied with distant worlds. As Angus Wilson remarks, there is no more paradoxical picture in Kipling's life than that of him visiting the South African Library (the same route travelled each day by Wilhelm Bleek as he worked to catalogue the Grey Collection) 'to check and sharpen his pictures of mediaeval or Elizabethan England' for his *Puck* stories:

His body was at the Cape, his mind wandered over the South Downs of the Neolithic age or the Romney marshes of sixteenth century smuggling...[I]n truth his imagination was busily building up a cyclic past history of man's fight against disaster to compensate for the collapse of his present dream, of which South Africa was only a part, but a rapidly crumbling part. (221)

The Cape Town years also saw him immersed in the sprawling India of the imagination in *Kim*, where prejudice and the politics of the 1857 Mutiny are (as Edward Said showed),

⁴⁷ Wilson, *The Strange Ride of Rudyard Kipling*, 225.

⁴⁸ To Edmonia Hill, 8 March 1905, *Letters III*, 180-81.

⁴⁹ Oscar Wilde, 'The True Function and Value of Criticism', *The Nineteenth Century*, vol. I, XXVIII, July-September 1890, rep. in *Kipling: the Critical Heritage*, 104.

meticulously, magically effaced;⁵⁰ that 'great chronicle of primal fables' the *Just So Stories*,⁵¹ conveying a sense of felicity which begins at the linguistic level with the toothsome descriptions of the 'musky, tusky mouth of the crocodile'; 'the great grey-green greasy Limpopo River, all set about with fever trees'; a

...forest full of tree trunks all 'clusively speckled and sprottled and spotted, dotted and splashed and slashed and hatched and cross-hatched with shadows. (Say that quickly aloud, and you will see how very shadowy the forest must have been).⁵²

Yet perhaps the Rhodes Estate enters the architecture of his writing in an unexpected way here, its paddocks and menageries allowing daily contact with large African fauna which emerge in the stories 'not as types and numbers in an elaborate biological scheme of knowledge', as G. K. Chesterton put it, 'but as walking portents, things marked by extravagant and peculiar features' (272).⁵³ In *Something of Myself*, Kipling describes how they adopted a lion cub named Sullivan (after the Matabele M'Slibaan) which Carrie would feed using motoring gloves; at another time a sedated 'Koodoo' broke free of its enclosure in the estate and was ritualistically surrounded by the family: 'coming home after dinner, we met him at the foot of the garden, gigantic in the moonlight, and fetched a compass round him, walking delicately, the warm red dust in our shoes...You can imagine the speechless joy of the kids'.⁵⁴

Contrasted with this childlike sense of wonder, the adult stories collected in *Traffics and Discoveries* can seem all the more savage and unpalatable. But examined closely, those parts which rise above Boer War propaganda are rescued by a similar sense of imaginative enclosure, of a narrowing in focus within the vastness of the African landscape. In 'A Sahib's War', it is the claustrophobic interior of the Boer homestead which lends the story its power, while 'The Captive' takes place in a prisoner of war camp 'below those stone-dotted spurs that throw heat on Simonstown'.⁵⁵ Perhaps the most concentrated of all Kipling's stories, and certainly the most famous for sheer obscurity, 'Mrs Bathurst' uses the same stretch of coast – an area that Kipling knew 'like the inside of my own pocket' – and opens in a small bay strangely sealed off from the panoramic seascape:

Moulded dunes, whiter than any snow, rolled far inland up a brown and purple valley of splintered rocks and dry scrub. A crowd of Malays hauled at a net beside two blue and green boats on the beach; a picnic party danced and shouted barefoot where a tiny river trickled

⁵⁰ Kipling, *Kim*, ed. with introd by Edward W Said, (London: Penguin Books, 1989).

⁵¹ G. K. Chesterton, signed review from the *Bookman*, London, vol. I, XXIII, 57-8, November 1902, rep. in *Kipling: the Critical Heritage*, 273.

⁵² Kipling, *Just So Stories* [1902], (London: Penguin, 1987), 63, 61,51.

⁵³ Chesterton, *Critical Heritage*, 273.

⁵⁴ To H. A. Gwynne, 10 April 1903, *Letters III*, 131.

⁵⁵ Kipling, 'The Captive', *Traffics and Discoveries*, 36.

across the flat, and a circle of dry hills, whose feet were just set in sands of silver, locked us in against a seven-coloured sea. At either horn of the bay the railway line, cut just above highwater mark, ran round a shoulder of piled rocks, and disappeared.⁵⁶

'Mrs Bathurst' is one of the first and most powerful examples of Kipling's late style, when he would take a plot complex enough to fill a novel and strip it down, believing that 'a tale from which the pieces have been raked out is like a fire that has been poked'.⁵⁷ Any attempt at a synopsis is likely to betray a work in which narrative matter is released grudgingly and cryptically by several different characters. Nonetheless, it begins when the first speaker, on an aimless outing to Simonstown, meets Hooper, an old friend who works on the railways. He has recently returned from a long trip up-country, reporting on damaged rolling-stock as far away as Rhodesia. They crack open some bottles of Bass, and the inspector is just about to show his friend 'a curiosity' brought back from beyond Bulawayo when they are joined by another two acquaintances. With the garrulous, abrasive Pyecroft in attendance, the piece takes the bewildering form of anecdotes that overlap and interrupt each other, most of them concerned with sailors deserting for women in various parts of the world.

Gradually they come round to the case of Vickery, a warrant officer with ill-fitting false teeth, and his mysterious passion for a New Zealand widow called Mrs Bathurst whom all the men have encountered at one time in their travels. Nobody knows what passed between them but Pyecroft tells of meeting him at the Cape Town docks many years later and being made to accompany him to the cinematograph (still a novelty in the colonies) for five nights in a row, sitting through a reel showing passengers disembarking at Paddington rail station. The reason for Vickery's manic attention becomes clear when, for a few flickering seconds of footage taken at Paddington Station, Mrs Bathurst appears on the screen: 'There was no mistakin' the walk in a hundred thousand', Pyecroft confirms, 'She come forward – right forward – she looked at straight at us...She walked on and on till she melted out of the picture – like – like a shadow jumpin' over a candle' (279).

Each screening is followed by a bitter, disorientating pub crawl from the Molteno Reservoir down through the Gardens and back to the Docks: 'The evolution never varied. Two shilling seats for two; five minutes o' the pictures, an' perhaps forty-five seconds o' Mrs B walking towards us with that blindish look in her eyes an' the reticule in her hand. Then out-walk – and drink till train time'. Once Pyecroft makes the mistake of probing for information:

That was in the Gardens again, with the South-Easter blowin' as we were makin' our desperate round. 'She's lookin' for me', he says, stoppin' dead under a lamp an' clickin'. When he wasn't drinkin', in which case all 'is teeth clicked on the glass, 'e was clickin' 'is four false teeth like a Marconi ticker. (281)

⁵⁶ Kipling, 'Mrs Bathurst', *Traffics and Discoveries*, 268.

⁵⁷ Kipling, *Something of Myself*, 78.

Shortly after their odd encounter, Vickery is despatched north to recover munitions for the Bloemfontein fort, and nothing is heard of him again. Yet in the final, unforgettably ghastly moments of the story, Hooper the railway inspector recalls something he has seen up north near the Zambezi: the corpses of what he took to be two tramps by the side of the tracks:

There'd been a bit of a thunderstorm in the teak, you see, and they were both stone dead and black as charcoal. That's what they really were, you see – charcoal. They fell to bits when we tried to shift 'em. (285)

A tattoo of crown and anchor was visible like 'writing that shows up white on a burned letter' and pair of false teeth 'shining against the black', a memento that, the reader guesses, Hooper is now carrying in waistcoat pocket, and decides to keep concealed.

Kipling admitted to taking great pleasure in scoring out as much as possible from his early drafts with the blackest of Indian inks, but here it seems the severe pruning has created a work where, despite the efforts of generations of critics, the background story is ultimately undecipherable. Is the charred figure with Vickery Mrs Bathurst; did she find him in Africa and die with him? Or did she kill herself through unrequited love but continue to haunt him, preserved on film after her death? Is Vickery a bigamist, an adulterer or a murderer? Despite the shifting anecdotes and the grim evidence in Hooper's pocket, the kernel of the story remains out of reach, and precisely in such gaps the story intimates the frightening geographical expanse of high empire, how easily men can drop away from the brotherhood that these speakers are so keen to affirm. 'Every digression contributes to the total meaning', writes Raine, employing an apt, war-time simile in his explication of the piece: 'It is like a closed economy, as parsimonious as a city under siege, despite its air of beery reminiscence'.⁵⁸ The knowing, jokey manner of the speakers is steadily undermined by the disturbing, discontinuous narrative their anecdotes disclose, a tale 'passed from teller to teller like a parcel no one quite wants to open' as Kipling's imagination is drawn, as it was in India, to boundary crossers, wanderers and exiles.⁵⁹

As in the letters to Conland or the haunting war poem 'Bridge Guard in the Karroo', here the transcontinental railway that Kipling had once delighted in becomes more a symbol of isolation and malfunction than imperial progress, while the technological detail brilliantly portrays Vickery's obsession as a mechanical loop, a frantic viewing of the same reel of film, clicking his teeth 'like a Marconi ticker' which nonetheless fails to transmit a clear message. In the savagery of the final image – the remoteness of the two figures, their shocking

⁵⁸ Craig Raine, ed., *A Choice of Kipling's Prose*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1987), 17.

⁵⁹ Hermione Lee, Introduction to *Traffics and Discoveries*, 24.

brittleness, the mystery of the mangled narrative that brought them there – there seems something appropriately emblematic of Kipling’s contact with Southern Africa, a characteristic mixture of cruelty and tenderness, the opaque residue of all the follies of modern warfare, the misunderstandings and brutality that he had witnessed in Africa but could not quite give voice to. Even as it does not address the Cape colonial situation directly, the windblown city bowl, the Simonstown shoreline and the sea routes stretching beyond emerge all the more powerfully, with their possibilities for strange meetings, desertions and strokes of fate on the far reaches of the British Empire. [Fig. 28]

‘A series of City Studies...’

On 28 August 1920, in a sad postscript to Kipling’s residence in the Woolsack, the 34-year-old architect of the university’s Upper Campus, J. M. Solomon, committed suicide there, shooting himself in its main bedroom. He had been given the use of the cottage while working on the project, but a long series of financial and bureaucratic wrangles, combined with the technical challenge of building on so steep a gradient, all but brought the project to a standstill. The Rhodes bequest had provided land for a university, but no funds, and the grand designs of high imperialism lingered on uncertainly in a new twentieth-century climate of post-war depression and growing nationalism. The architects who finished the job ten years later retained the main lines of the original design – a terraced tripartite structure echoing the shapes of the immense rock walls above – but compromised by scaling down dimensions, omitting a dome that was to crown the Jameson Hall and arranging the buildings on either side in a gradual curve following the natural contours of the slope, instead of the classically straight lines that Solomon had insisted on.

At the edge of the campus, which seems all the more elegant today for its gently curving promenades, there are eroded paths leading up to the highest and most blatant imperial monument on the Estate. Beneath a stand of Corsican pines, tacked onto the slope beyond the overflow parking bay, is the Rhodes Memorial itself, erected on the site of an old bench that was his favourite place for hinterland gazing. A ruined blockhouse further up below the cliffs signals the strategic importance of this viewpoint, the only place on the slopes with a view of both Atlantic and Indian oceans. ‘We here broaden’, Rhodes would say to Baker, ‘Because we are always looking at the mountain’.⁶⁰ Inevitably, it was Baker who was commissioned to build a structure ‘that should last forever but not exceed the cost of 20,000 pounds’. He used hard local granite for the task – ‘stone quarried from the very ribs

⁶⁰ Baker, *Cecil Rhodes by his Architect*, 34.

of Table Mountain' according to a *Cape Times* account of the opening ceremony of July 1912, but the rest is an Mediterranean pick-and-mix of Grecian peristyle and porticos, Roman bulk, Pharaonic columns and recumbent lions flanking giant steps, one for each year of Rhodes's life.⁶¹

As a fellow custodian of his legacy, Kipling conferred at length with Baker over the location and design. In a letter of February 1905, he debated other suggestions of the time, including a (mercifully abandoned) 'gigantic statue to Rhodes on the Lion's Head...that...might be seen not only by all Capetown but by incoming ships', but agreed that Baker's site on the Mowbray ridge would be 'a compromise to all'. Noting the 'the thick blanket of grown pine woods – dark even at mid day and ebon dark when the shadow slopes from the mountain', he considered how to maximise the monument's visual, reverential impact – 'Cut your avenues of approach through these and you have the pilgrim tuned to the proper note before he has gone a hundred yards'. He agreed that it should be designed 'after the insolent Egyptian fashion. Something that to the vulgar suggested Cape to Cairo and to others – other things'.⁶²

Today it is difficult to read this as anything other than a monument to brute imperial might, incongruous and overbearing above the scrubby indigenous fynbos. George Watts' statue of a rider reining in his horse, 'Physical Energy', has long been suspected as anatomically defective (once described as 'a eunuch astride a gelding') while a modern observer astutely diagnoses the entire assemblage as 'a forerunner of the totalitarian sculpture of pre-war Russia and Germany ...It has a feeling of sheer power'.⁶³ On Heritage Day in 1999, when contemporary artists were given leave by city authorities to interfere with and creatively deface public memorials in Cape Town, two of the lions found themselves caged under a banner reading 'From Rape to Curio' while a statue of Rhodes in the Company Gardens was strung with brick weighted-ropes, 'a ghost-image of the riggings of the early mining enterprises in Kimberley' that made his fortune.⁶⁴ [Figs. 29-30] A huge pink heart inscribed with the names of territory annexed by his Chartered Company was dangled from the enormous bust of him at the top of the memorial stairway, where a stanza from Kipling's 1902 poem 'The Burial' is duly carved in below:

The great and brooding spirit still
Shall quicken and control;
Living he was the land, and dead
His soul shall be her soul

⁶¹ *Cape Times*, 5 July 1912 (Unacknowledged staff reporter).

⁶² To Herbert Baker, 9 February 1905, *Letters III*, 177-9.

⁶³ See Paul Maylam, *The Cult of Rhodes: Remembering an Imperialist in Africa*, (Cape Town: David Philip, 2005), 53.

⁶⁴ Denise Penfold discussing works by herself, John Nankin and Brendan Dickerson, 'PTO: Public Monuments Reconsidered', <<http://www.artthrob.co.za/99oct/reviews.html>>

Again the lines display the absurd, public Kipling, his imagination seduced by the spaces of Africa into a mystical fusion of Rhodes with an amorphous female continent, which seems all the more inappropriate given this empire builder's marked lack of interest in women. Within the (routinely defaced) inner sanctum, the Colossus looks bloated and irritable as he leans on his arm gazing over the Cape Flats. 'It was not his fault, poor fellow, that he called a high hill somewhere in South Africa "his church";' wrote Chesterton, 'It was not his fault...that he could not see that a church all to oneself is not a church at all. It is a madman's cell'.⁶⁵

Today though, the silence and solipsism of that imperial dreamscape can hardly be maintained: the panorama of greater Cape Town from the Rhodes Memorial is covered with human settlement, and has been filling up ever since apartheid's 'influx control' methods collapsed under the weight of their own contradictions in the 1980s. And if the surrounding mountain slopes constitute a peculiarly literal dreamed topography, it is one where the imperial sublime soon gave way to the ridiculous, and has become a place of all manner of postcolonial hybrids. The structures of an earlier order – Rhodes Scholarships, Cape Dutch mansions, libraries – are now used in ways that would have been unimaginable to earlier custodians, while zoologists have even tried to recreate the extinct quagga by cross-breeding zebras and horses amid the pines. Professor Wills' songbirds may never have taken, but the troubled ecological imperialism of the late nineteenth century did unleash a plague of starlings on the Cape Peninsula, as well as a herd of *tahrs*, small Himalayan antelope recently gunned down from helicopters by conservationists intent on maintaining indigenous *klispringer* populations. A refuge for deserters and escaped slaves under the Dutch East India Company, the origin of devastating fires both 'natural' and deliberate, the mountain chain beyond the monument, as the next chapter seeks to show, has always represented all that could never be segregated or controlled in an increasingly divided city. It is place that has been the Cape's symbolic identity, yet also its subconscious.

It is intriguing, then, to read the very last letter that Kipling wrote from the Woolsack, on 10 April 1908. Addressed to Stephen Black, a journalist and playwright whose pen sketches and police court studies in the *Cape Argus* newspaper had caught the new Nobel laureate's eye, it suggests a series of City Studies 'which might be good practice for you and very interesting for the readers. Personally I want the following suggestions to be considered':

- 1) *Sophie Hajji* (the Malay laundress who went to Mecca – her account of her adventures told on her own stoep, on a hot evening to her brother the cab driver).
- 2) A night walk among tramps in the tombs of the old cemetery...
- 5) The kaffir train going out to Uitslught location – the talk along the train

⁶⁵ G. K. Chesterton, 'The Sultan', in *A Miscellany of Men*, (London: Methuen, 1912), 203.

- 6) A sale in Market Square – study of Jews, broken down horses and riff raff generally in the wet
- 6) Winter in the Kloof – loafers among the bushes
- 7) The experiences of a child born on top of Table Mountain, looking down on the city (his father in charge of the reservoirs) for years and at last actually seeing the mysterious train cabs, etc. that he had watched so long – a sort of young savage Crusoe close to civilization
- 8) A dock study – crimps and boarding houses and the great silence and emptiness of the docks behind all...
- 9) A morning at the tram power station – talk of drivers and conductors and the great cars sliding in and out
- 11) Adventures of small boys along the foreshore by the Woodstock drainage pipe – the cheerful way they risk their necks and lives clambering among the piles and what they imagine themselves to be in the way of pirates. Call it 'the Second Landing of Van Riebeeck'. [sic]⁶⁶

After pages of shrill and impenetrable political gossip in the collected letters, this comes as a reminder of the fascination that cities like Lahore had once held for Kipling, and how his restless creative intelligence must have played over Cape Town's unusual geography. As if harking back to the thick description of a story like 'The City of Dreadful Night', the list breaks out of the imperial court to dwell on contested, liminal urban sites which still hold fascination today: the cemeteries and unmarked slave burial grounds being unearthed by modern seafront development; the mountain *kloofs* (gorges) which have always sheltered the homeless; the startling isolation and wildness of the back Table in such close proximity to a city being reshaped by international influxes of capital. Even while his verse about 'Great spaces washed with sun' is enshrined in a temple to high empire, Kipling's letter to Black shows that a portion of his imagination was inevitably drawn to the 'microplaces of our segregated land'.⁶⁷

Of course, Kipling must have penned this curious recommendation because he realised that he could not do these subjects justice himself, that his brand of orientalism could not find adequate purchase in this 'half-oriental land'. In another letter to Black (who obviously needed some convincing) he concedes: 'I quite agree with you that a man *must* follow his own mind in the subjects which he chooses to write about and that another man's notions are very seldom any good'.⁶⁸ In South Africa he found himself unable to take his own good advice, trusting instead to the likes of Rhodes, Milner, Jameson and all the young imperialists they gathered around them whose goal, as Angus Wilson points out, was to remake South Africa in a *new* shape. Accepting this underlying premise, Kipling inevitably lost the ability to create out of the land as it was; yet after reading this list, one can hardly agree with Wilson's claim that 'He simply did not see the Africans, the people of the country, let alone wonder about them'.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ To Stephen William Black, 10 April 1908, *Letters III*, 317.

⁶⁷ Jeremy Cronin, *Inside* [1983], (London: Jonathan Cape, 1987), 11.

⁶⁸ To Stephen William Black, 30 July 1908, cited *Letters III*, 318.

⁶⁹ Wilson, *The Strange Ride of Rudyard Kipling*, 228.

This 'series of City Studies' seems strangely prescient, even predictive of what Cape Town's most celebrated authors *did* write about in the twentieth century. The dialogue of 'loafers among the bushes'; 'talk along the train'; the narratives related on *stoeps* – each of these might be said to prefigure the laconic stories of District Six writers like Alex La Guma (particularly the 1967 tale by a rail siding, 'A Matter of Taste') and Richard Rive. The 'Second Landing of Van Riebeeck' suggested here is not dissimilar to the kind of playful, postcolonial rewriting of the European arrival undertaken by writers like Brink, while the imaginative attention to vagrant figures subsisting in the 'porous edges' of the city anticipates the fictions of K. Sello Duiker, Henrietta Rose-Innes and even Coetzee himself.⁷⁰ The vignettes represent, surely, what Kipling could sense but, because of his literal proximity to power, could not express; hence the note of ridicule that creeps, eventually, into his depictions of Rhodes the impetuous, child-like dreamer: 'What am I trying to express? Say it, say it'. To have circumvented this – to have truly said it, or rather, let it be said – he would of course need to have been a young child in the 'Tavern of the Seas' rather than Bombay, worked as an unknown journalist on the Eastern Cape frontier rather than Lahore, been fluent in Afrikaans and isiXhosa rather than the Hindi vernaculars. Yet the Cape Colony was a very different place to northern India – younger, vaster, more scattered, more violent – and no such writer emerged.

⁷⁰ Henrietta Rose-Innes, 'Five Sites' in Watson ed. *A City Imagined*, (Johannesburg: Penguin, 2005), 2.

'PINE DARK MOUNTAIN STAR'

NATURAL HISTORIES AND THE LONELINESS OF THE LANDSCAPE POET

That the number of specific forms has not indefinitely increased, geology shows us plainly; and indeed we can see reason why they should not have thus increased, for the number of places in the polity of nature is not indefinitely great, – not that we have any means of knowing that any one region has as yet got its maximum of species. Probably no region is as yet fully stocked, for at the Cape of Good Hope, where more species of plants are crowded together than in any other quarter of the world, some foreign plants have become naturalised, without causing, as far as we know, the extinction of any natives.

Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of the Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*, (1859).

Behind the house we feel
the mountain's friction against our backs.
Deep fissures are predicted by the almanac

Ingrid De Kok, 'Ground Wave', (1997).

To accompany his account of ascending the mountains above Table Bay in 1634, Peter Mundy sketched 'the prospect of them from the Shipp as neere as I can remember'. [Fig. 31] Despite employing labels for Lion's Head and Devil's Peak that were soon to be outdated, this quick seaman's rendering is a departure from the many engravings which adorn seventeenth and eighteenth-century travelogues, staged tableaux which present fabricated versions of the Khoikhoi below fantastically exaggerated landforms:

My selfe and two others went upp by a great openinge or division which the Hill makes, betweene being like a valley but wondrous steepe, the rocks on each side upright like monstrous walls, from whome there is continuall distillinge Water... We found it aloft like a plaine downe, many great flatt stones lyeing levell with the earth... Soe haveinge left a Token of our being here (3 stoness erected) wee returned, and halfway found the rest of our Company who stayed for us, and because it was dark or (as some said) to drive away Lyons etts. wilde beasts had made a mightie fire. Soe wee altogether returned towards the Tent. In one of the Ryoletts that wee passed was a huge smooth declineing Rocke over which the water glided, waxed, retorted and purled, verie pleasant to see toe.¹

Hard empirical information is, for the moment, more important than allegorical embellishment, and in recording 'The Buttresses or supporters under the Table being of the Nature of Charles his Mounte, seemeing artificiall', Mundy even captures an effect of shading and perspective which can still be shared by any one living below the mountain today.

Even so, this relatively restrained account signals the profound shifts in perception with regard to non-arable landscapes – and in particular, mountains – which have taken place in the following centuries, at least within the West. The 'monstrous Clefte or openinge' shown on his drawing is of course Platteklip Gorge, a route which remains most direct way of reaching the top of the mountain on foot, and one now taken by thousands of day-trippers each year. From perilous, 'unnatural' ravine to eroded thoroughfare for countless recreational users of nature – the two images might stand as start and end points in an introductory survey of how differently the mariners, botanists, imperialists and poets who climbed it have conceived of the mountain chain, and how in turn, these diverse natural histories can hardly separate themselves from that of the divided settlement below.

Taking his title from a line by Gerard Manley Hopkins which suggests how such vertical phenomena are as much constructs of the human imagination as self-evident realities, in *Mountains of the Mind* (2003) Robert Macfarlane retells the well-known narrative of how the qualities for which mountains were once reviled – steepness, desolation,

¹ Peter Mundy, 1634, rep. in Major R. Raven-Hart ed., *Before van Riebeeck: Callers at South Africa from 1488 to 1652*, (Cape Town: Struik, 1967), 141-2.

perilousness – have come to be numbered among their most prized aspects.² For the cultured mind of northern, seventeenth-century Europe, such ‘considerable protuberances’, as Dr Johnson termed them, ‘were not only agriculturally intractable, they were also aesthetically repellent: it was felt that their irregular and gargantuan outlines upset the natural spirit level of the mind’.³ Yet by the mid-nineteenth century, John Ruskin had distilled the aesthetics of high Romanticism and the massive physical forces implied by Charles Lyell’s new geology to produce *Of Mountain Beauty* (1856), in which the peaks and glaciers of the Alps were celebrated for just such sublime disorder. In turn, one can trace the strained exportation of this Alpine aesthetic to Europe’s high-lying colonial possessions, particularly the ranges of the African continent.⁴ Following Kipling’s residence at the Woolsack and his collaboration in the Rhodes Memorial, there could hardly be a more blatant example of how a politics of expansion could make use of what Ruskin (himself the idol of a youthful Rhodes) called the ‘endless perspicuity of space; the unfatigued veracity of eternal light’.⁵

Yet equally, the troubling counter-voices which were seen to surface even in the work of this self-appointed poet of the imperial sublime seem to call for a more nuanced account of how the many different dimensions of the concept ‘nature’ interact within the literary work: it is after all, a word that has ‘gathered around itself paradox and ambiguity ever since the fifth century B.C.’ to become one of the most complex in the English language.⁶ And Table Mountain, or to use its original Khoi name, *Hoerikwaggo* (Sea-Mountain), must always present a unique test for any rigid theory seeking to explain the uses of nature for culture: for centuries its latitude, its location as a geopolitical marker and its curious shape have simultaneously invited and resisted a single symbolic identity. In a process known as *istotacy*, or ‘emerging relief’, the hard granite base on which it has for some 280 million years been raised up from the ocean floor deflects downwards the forces which would otherwise cause folding in the shales and sandstone above. The result is one of the world’s oldest, most weathered mountains, combining stately regularity when viewed in distant prospect

² The classic account of this shift in taste remains Marjorie Hope Nicolson’s *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory: The Development of the Aesthetics of the Infinite*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1959).

³ Robert Macfarlane, *Mountains of the Mind: a History of Fascination*, (London: Granta, 2003), 14.

⁴ See for example Lance Van Sittert, ‘Seeing the Cederberg: Alpinism and Inventions of the Agterberg in the White Urban Middle Class Imagination c.1890-c.1950’, *Kronos* 31, (2005), 152-83; Saul Dubow, *A Commonwealth of Knowledge: Science, Sensibility and White South Africa 1820-2000*, (Oxford University Press, 2006) which includes a section on ‘Aesthetic Visions’ in the *Cape Monthly Magazine* and a close reading of Rev. Thomas Fuller’s ‘Table Mountain: An Art Study’ in the 1869 literary anthology *The Cape and its People*. See also Hermann Wittenberg ‘The Sublime, Imperialism and the African Landscape’, Unpublished D Litt Thesis, University of the Western Cape (May 2004) which traces depictions of areas like the Ruwenzori and other African ranges in writers from John Buchan to Alan Paton.

⁵ Cited in Macfarlane, *Mountains*, 16.

⁶ Nicolson, *Mountain Gloom*, 3.

with abundant, bizarrely formed evidence of the depth of geological time when approached on foot.

'The conspicuous innocence of the naturalist'

Encountering this paradox, the 1655 account of another early climber echoes the unsteady progress and fearful language of Mundy. In the early days of the Dutch station, Gijsbert Heeck recorded a difficult ascent where members of his party lost their footing and ruined their stockings amid the 'terrifying overhanging rocks' and the *liesagtige gras*, (slippery grass) of Platteklip, and were eventually forced to lick moisture oozing from the slopes 'since the terrible heat here between the rocks was unbearable'.⁷ On reaching the top they were, like so many to follow, afforded an unmistakable reminder of the tenuous geometric imprint of the European presence, a 'very horrifying view downwards, the Fort *The Hope* looking quite small, and the garden as if laid out in rectangular plots by lines'. Like so many others too, the party underestimated the time and effort involved in mastering a dangerous, deceptive mountain, one which, in its present-day proximity to a city full of foreign visitors, has seen more deaths on its slopes than the major Himalayan peaks. Night fell on the expedition, causing near panic, but later 'the new moon gave us so much light, that we were let into the Fort (at our request) quite late in the evening, thanking Almighty God for his protection' (42).

The unsteadiness in these early accounts can be explained not only by the rough terrain, perhaps, but also by the fact that these seafaring chroniclers were attempting a new kind of land-based narrative, one that was unpractised and unformed. In a survey of how the literature on the Cape is a particularly fruitful one for studying the discursive shifts in travel writing in the eighteenth and nineteenth-centuries, Mary Louise Pratt contrasts Peter Kolb's 1719 account of *The Present State of the Cape of Good Hope* with later travelogues on the other side of the 'Linnaean watershed'. For Kolb, writing before the narrative models for interior travel and exploration had emerged, navigational paradigms still prevailed: 'the only part of his experience Kolb does present as narrative is his six-month sea voyage to arrive at the Cape' while 'what was to become landscape and natural history is conspicuous...by its absence'.⁸

Instead, as with Mundy and Heeck (and indeed, Shakespeare), we are given a landscape as a composite of pre-rehearsed, ideally constructed motifs. If autumn tints are, in

⁷ Rep. in Major R. Raven-Hart ed., *Cape of Good Hope: the First Fifty Years of Dutch Colonisation as seen by Callers*, vol. I, (Cape Town: A.A. Balkema, 1971), 41.

⁸ Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 43, 45.

the words of one ecologically attuned reader of the European canon, 'a leap of perception as rare in Renaissance literature as they are inescapable in Romantic poetry', one could sketch a comparable history of how aesthetic categories seem to shape cognition here.⁹ The play of light on the mountain which will fascinate artists in later centuries [Fig. 32] is entirely absent from these early depictions: instead there is a repeated combination of monstrous rocks, meadows or downs and gurgling brooks in which the water (and here the writing becomes more assured) 'glided, waxed, retorted and purred'. Yet following the publication in 1735 of *The System of Nature* by the famous Swedish taxonomist and the launching of Europe's first major international scientific expeditions, from the mid-eighteenth century the seagoing descriptive modes concerned with circumnavigation and the mapping of coastlines came (in Pratt's account) to be superseded by a far more ambitious and intrusive project, one attendant on the growing networks of European expansion yet at the same time seeking to present itself as an 'utterly benign, abstract appropriation of the planet' (39).

In a contemporary context where 'natural history' connotes a minor, amateurish interest – the domain, perhaps, of birdwatchers and butterfly nets – it is difficult to recover the immense reach of this global undertaking. By the mid-nineteenth century the study of animal and plant geography by European powers had become, in the words of Charles Darwin's biographer Janet Browne, 'one of the most obviously imperial sciences in an age of increasing imperialism'.¹⁰ As Pratt describes it:

Natural history maps out not the thin track of the route taken, nor the lines where land and water meet, but the internal 'contents' of those land and water masses whose spread made up the surface of the planet. These vast contents would be known not through slender lines on blank paper, but through verbal representations in turn summed up in nomenclatures, or through labelled grids into which entities would be placed. The finite totality of these representations or categories constituted a 'mapping' not just of coastlines or rivers, but of every visible square, or even cubic inch of the earth's surface.¹¹

Like Coetzee's work on the same period (and owing a similar debt to Michel Foucault), *Imperial Eyes* is everywhere concerned with how spatial depictions of the Cape are linked to assumptions about its indigenous inhabitants; it traces the unspoken political economy of this 'urban, lettered, male authority' which 'extracted specimens not only from their organic or ecological relations with each other, but also from their place in other people's economies, histories, social and symbolic systems' (31). This masculine, mechanistic, and extractive

⁹ Chris Fitter, *Poetry, Space, Landscape: Toward a New Theory*, (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 9

¹⁰ Janet Browne, 'Biogeography and Empire' in Nicholas Jardine, James A. Secord and Emma C. Spary, *Cultures of Natural History* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), 305.

¹¹ Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 30.

attitude to the natural world, then, is seen as the inception of, and continuous with, the environmental crises and postcolonial disparities of the twenty-first century.¹²

Several environmental historians, however, have since complicated this familiar narrative. The title of Richard Grove's *Green Imperialism* (1995) captures the paradox whereby it was precisely the exploitation of natural resources, particularly on isolated, enclosed ecosystems like St Helena, Mauritius and the Cape, that precipitated an environmental awareness – a 'green language' – at the colonial periphery that was far in advance of state policy in the European metropole. The growing interest in mechanistic analysis and comparison, he suggests, 'actually enabled rational and measured observations of environmental change, as well as encouraging an organised conservationist response'.¹³ While never entirely convincing one that such conservation strategies were intended as any more than *post hoc* damage control to colonial possessions, his account is fascinating in the way it traces how ideas of both environmental limit as well as planetary interconnectedness begin to enter the writings of the maverick naturalists who fanned out across the globe:

In hindsight it can be seen that the acquisition of a global knowledge of plant and faunal occurrence and distribution constituted a first step towards an ability to determine the influence of man on the environment, particularly where his activities impinged on the existence of species whose rarity, and thus particular value, could only be assessed in the context of a reasonable degree of knowledge gleaned on a global basis. (93)

So too, William Beinart suggests in his discussion of Enlightenment travellers at the Cape that there is a danger of oversimplifying this tradition of writing: 'Knowledge was built from a multiplicity of indigenous and colonial agents, each with different languages, modes of living, and views of nature'.¹⁴ And although travellers relied on the hierarchical relationships of Cape society, their expeditions nevertheless 'demanded continuous negotiation rather than simple requisitioning of people and nature' (30). In turning to Anders Sparrman's *Voyage to the Cape of Good Hope*, published in Sweden in 1775 and translated into English decade later, Beinart discusses the critique of slavery and Dutch cruelty offered by this pupil of Linnaeus, as well as the surprising delicacy and even effeminacy of this particular narrator in an age often characterised as an era of compulsive, appropriative masculinity.

¹² Carolyn Merchant voices a stronger version of this argument in *The Death of Nature: Women Ecology and the Scientific Revolution*, (London: Wildwood House, 1980).

¹³ Richard Grove, *Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens and the Origins of Environmentalism, 1600-1800*, (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 51.

¹⁴ William Beinart, *The Rise of Conservation in South Africa: Settlers, Livestock and the Environment, 1770-1950*, (Oxford University Press: 2003), 29.

Nonetheless, this very innocence and androgyny of such figures – so different to the earlier colonial archetypes of conquistador or hunter – may also point towards the silences and strategies of their remarkable, copious texts. In the narratives of such Enlightenment apostles, problems of agency and representation – how the naturalist-hero might go about classifying himself, for example – are barely voiced in what becomes an almost messianic ambition to affix labels to all of creation. When Sparrmann describes himself at one point as ‘a-botanizing... in the same dress as Adam wore in his state of Nature’, the image of the primordial garden is, Pratt remarks, an image of Adam before the very creation of Eve: ‘As the prefaces of their books often suggest, the desire that takes the Linneans abroad involves a choice...against heterosexual conjugal life and women. This absence is undoubtedly a precondition for Adam’s infatuation and innocence’ (56). As such, when considering recent attempts to reclaim Enlightenment figures like Sparrmann, Le Vaillant and Burchell as literary progenitors and early social reformers,¹⁵ it seems apt to retain a suspicion toward this ‘conspicuous innocence of the naturalist’.¹⁶ It is an innocence which acquires meaning in relation to an assumed guilt of conquest, ‘a guilt the naturalist figure eternally tries to escape, and eternally invokes, if only to distance himself from it once again’ (57).

‘Setting the whole affair forth in its natural colours’

In Sparrman's first sighting of the Cape, the shifting emphases which play out within the very word ‘nature’ suggest the impossibility of easily summarising any kind of literature which takes this protean word as its object. Offshore in Table Bay, shortly before arrival, his description of the plankton blooms and mass spawning in the oceans around him evinces an excitement at the sheer scope of his enquiry, a sense of wonder at how a ‘small corner only of the sea, viz. *Table-bay*, at this time afforded nourishment to more animals at once, than perhaps are to be found on the whole face of the earth’.¹⁷ Here then we are presented with nature as denoting the non-human world, at once subject to yet also threatening to exceed the taxonomies of science. Wonder at oceanic biodiversity shifts to the commodity of whale oil (which helped launch Europe’s industrial revolution) within the course of a single sentence; distanced reverence co-exists with a desire to penetrate life’s innermost processes:

¹⁵ See also Ian Glenn’s account of Francois Le Vaillant in a Van Riebeeck Society edition of 2007. *Travels into the Interior of Africa via the Cape of Good Hope*, vol. I [1790], trans. and ed. Ian Glenn with Catherine Lauga du Plessis et al. (Cape Town: Van Riebeeck Society, 2007).

¹⁶ Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 57.

¹⁷ Anders Sparrman, *A Voyage to the Cape of Good Hope, Towards the Antarctic Polar Circle, and Round the World; but Chiefly into the Country of the Hottentots and Caffres, from the Year 1772 to 1776*. [Sweden, 1775]. Translated from the Swedish original [by G. Forster], (London, 1785), 6.

This opened to me a door, if I may be allowed the expression, to nature's copious storehouse in the deep; so that at one hasty view I could get a glimpse of that amazing superfluity, which feeds millions of fishes, and at the same time lines the inside of the whale, that great Colossus of the deep, with that oily fatness, with which it abounds. (6)

Once on land, however, any enthusiasm for mountain beauty on Sparrman's part remains markedly absent, while the description of the 'miserable appearance' of the 'bushes and trees (if they may be so called) which here and there grow wild, stunted partly by their own nature, and partly by the South-east and North-west winds' suggests a nature which, although denoting some innate, given quality, is nonetheless found wanting in comparison to more European forms of greenery. The fynbos now celebrated as a distinct floral kingdom is deemed 'universally deficient in that lively verdure which adorns the oaks, vines, myrtles, laurels, lemon trees, &c'. at the bottom of the slopes. (9) The uncertainty about whether Table Mountain is worth climbing at all persists, but eventually, after much fretting about the possibility of getting wet, Sparrman resolves to investigate the cloud which forms on its upper cliffs and disperses without precipitation, 'a circumstance that, without doubt, like all other natural phenomena, has its real and certain foundations in nature' (34).

The tautological phrasing suggests the ability of this intellectual apparatus to absorb any given variable to its purpose, yet the wilderness beyond the rectilinear enclosure of Company Gardens leads the author away from abstract speculation and back to the social. The mountain top botanising is eclipsed by a nervous account concerning 'a troop of slaves, that had sometime before run away from their masters, and who were suspected at the time to have their haunts about *Table-mountain*. A fire that I found there newly extinguished, was probably some of their reliques' (37). Following on from his perilous (though no doubt exaggerated) expedition, Sparrmann evokes a settlement where everybody 'is obliged to bolt the door of his chamber at night, and keep loaded firearms by him, for fear of the revengeful disposition of his slaves' (38).

Nonetheless this first 'Residence at the Cape of Good Hope' concludes on what seems today to be a revealingly comic note. Sparrman visits a Cape botanist and physician in the hope of an edifying evening of scientific discussion, but 'of some hundred plants that I laid before him pasted in a book, we had scarcely turned over the third part, before he began every now and then to gape' (49). Despite all efforts to interest his host in the comparative merits and medicinal properties of various 'natural orders, &c.', the local eminence 'continued yawning and gaping' until conversation turned to the subject of commerce and shipping and became much more lively. Sparrman concludes his account by thanking his host for his hospitality, yet at the same time completes that semantic shift which moves 'natural' from the realms of scientific classification to assumptions about what is socially

acceptable in the guise of disinterested observation; he suggests that such behaviour 'discovers the reason of this small progress made by the sciences in Africa, and, perhaps, in some other parts of the globe: he will likewise pardon the freedom I have taken, in setting the whole affair forth in its natural colours, just as it appeared to me' (49).

A similar sense of how it is left to the foreign observer to do justice to the native flora and fauna is found in the ascent of Lady Anne Barnard, recorded in a letter of July 1797 to Henry Dundas, though this blithe account intent on legitimating the first British occupation can hardly acknowledge the obverse of this claim: that the very compulsion to record the topography in such detail could be read as a sign of distance and separation from it. Playfully imagining that she might have been the first woman to reach the summit (although acknowledging that 'this was not *literally* true') she records the difficulty in procuring advice on how to reach the top from the inhabitants of the town, 'all of whom wished it to be considered as next to an impossible matter to get to the top of it, as an *excuse for their own want of curiosity*'.¹⁸ Her account of taking the Platteklip path 'necessarily squinted in the zigzag Z way' is a string of rhetorical set-pieces where the personified topography, adorned with necklaces of cloud and tablecloths of 'white damask', welcomes the attentions of the British administration at every turn: the 'loyal mountains' repeat the singing of the anthem to 'Great George our King' while even the 'wide desart' encircling the Cape is described in the cadences of the pastoral as 'capable of cultivation from the soil which submits a easily to the spade & gratefully repays its attention' (49).

It is hardly surprising then, that in her 1989 collection which seeks a poetic inhabiting of and dialogue with this literary predecessor, Antjie Krog should register growing frustration with the transplanted Scottish noblewoman: 'ek wou 'n tweede lewe deur jou leef / Lady Anne Barnard, wys jy is moontlik'.¹⁹ In his earlier recreation of 'Lady Anne Bathing', Antony Delius had evoked the mountain slopes as disclosing a numinous, private world of eroticism presumably sublimated by the public voice of the letters and diaries:

I stand here pale upon the mountain, dream
In panic at the bare baptismal step,
See water take my body without shame
And merge the shadow as substance in its lap,

Wait poised above the sky within the shock,
The ecstasy caught in this cornered river,
And in exploding quiet watch the rock,
The tree, the peak and all beyond it shiver.²⁰

¹⁸ *The Letters of Lady Anne Barnard to Henry Dundas from the Cape and Elsewhere, 1793-1803...*, introd. and ed. A. M. Lewin Robinson, (Cape Town: A. A. Balkema, 1973), 46.

¹⁹ Antjie Krog, *Lady Anne* [1989], (Cape Town: Human & Rousseau, 2004), 40.

²⁰ Antony Delius, *A Corner of the World*, (Human & Rousseau: Cape Town, 1962), 12.

More attuned to the 'resistant form' of this private archive – the 'total, radiant uselessness' of her chosen subject – the hopes of Krog's persona to find a sympathetic observer who might record particulars below the notice of male writers of the time are at first frustrated by the frivolous, glib tone of the letters.

Yet gradually, the attention to the servants, guides and ironically named 'free blacks' which hover at the edges of the text – in one case 'Gaspar the slave holds the umbrella' as Lady Anne completes a watercolour at Genadendal – sends one back to the original account with renewed sensitivity to the troubling human traces which appear even in this most domesticated version of Table Mountain: the 'cave cut in the rock which is occasionally inhabited by run away Negroes, of which they were traces', 'the marks of the Human footstep in the great quantity of *old soles & heels of shoes* Wc I saw every here and there'. Like all such self-important expeditions, it is a reminder that, as Anne McClintock puts it, 'Discovery is always late'; this was a space that was already thoroughly criss-crossed by the trails of slave and woodcutting parties.²¹ The result is a 'political text in the process of disrupting itself,' as Krog describes *Lady Anne* in an introduction to her works in English translation,²² and one in which such disruptions interact with both representations of nature and the natures of representation as the Platteklip *kloof* is envisioned as unframeable and unpaintable, 'a gritty trench of words'. Yet it is an ascent which, like the litanies of place in the first chapter, emerges as curiously flat in English translation, holding its power in the play of gutturals and fricatives within the original Afrikaans:

skilder kan jy dit nie verf sal faal
in die oploop onder watervalle wat rag
van ravyn en klip rondom ons
pootstamp en stuif die berg sag
in die mis alles geborge mekaar by naam
gaan
tog gaan hoekom wag
want small lyk ineens ons grinterige loopgraaf van taal (41)

Barren promontories, isthmuses, unconformities

In Lady Anne Barnard's original ascent, we are also afforded a parodic glimpse of the colonial official and amateur geologist who was soon to offer his own famous verdict on 'this remarkable promontory': 'wherever we saw questionable stone or ore Mr Barrow attackd it with a Hammer I had luckily brought for the purpose, but he found the mountain thro all its stratas, of which there are innumerable, composed of *Iron stone*' (46). With John Barrow's

²¹ Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, (New York: Routledge, 1995), 28.

²² Antjie Krog, *Down to My Last Skin: Poems*, (Johannesburg: Random House, 2000), 3.

Travels into the Interior of Southern Africa in the Years 1797 and 1798 (1802), one reaches perhaps the most blatant example of the imperial travelogue in which the degree to which the land can be made imaginatively useful is inevitably an index of its desirability as a political possession. And just as Sparrmann had dismissed the 'great many prodigies and uncommon appearances' found in Kolb, so Barrow is at pains to authorise and distinguish his project from earlier versions of the Cape, a site inevitably produced as a textual entity for consumption by a global audience. He concedes that the Swede might have 'supplied a very extensive account of the natural productions', but nonetheless repeated absurd stories with regard to the indigenous inhabitants, while the most scornful remarks are reserved for Le Vaillant, perhaps the most influential interpreter of the Cape to Europe at the time, and the one likely to provoke the greatest anxiety of influence in any new travelogue.²³

In the travels of this lone Romantic, 'valuable matter' is 'so jumbled together with fiction and romance, that none but those who have followed his steps can pretend to separate the one from the other. It is of little importance to mankind to know what exquisite amusement *Monsieur Le Vaillant* could derive from caressing his favourite ape...' (xii). The sarcastic, utilitarian prose suggests how the critique of the Enlightenment begun in 1754 with Rousseau's second *Discourse on Inequality* would find little purchase in nineteenth-century southern Africa (despite the fact that this very text draws on Kolb's portrayal of the Hottentots), and why any strain of Romanticism which survived transplantation here would be largely stripped of the social and environmental conscience which underpinned it in Europe. If Romanticism can be described as a project in which writers sought out more meaningful relations with rural and non-human worlds even as such relations were being dismantled in the industrialising heartlands of Europe, then at the settler-colonial periphery, this paradox (which surely energises and complicates the major texts of high Romanticism) was likely to be lost sight of: as Dirk Kloppe remarks in an account of Thomas Pringle, in the 'colonial pastoral' the opposition between country and city is mapped on to that between colony and metropole.²⁴ In the hands of those more provincial and less progressive than the abolitionist Pringle, the likely result was then an inflation of the private, escapist and rhetorical elements of the Romantic tradition: visions of nature uncomplicated by the growing industries and enclosures of, say, the north of England (social changes which poets as different as Wordsworth in the Lakes or John Clare in Helpston could hardly ignore). As anthologies from Stapleton's inaugural *Poetry of the Cape of Good Hope* (1828) onwards testify,²⁵ in a nineteenth-century British colony like South Africa, literary Romanticism was,

²³ John Barrow, *Travels into the Interior of Southern Africa*, Second Edition, (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1806), ix.

²⁴ Dirk Kloppe, 'Politics of the Pastoral: The Poetry of Thomas Pringle', *English in Africa*, 17:1 (1990), 21-59.

²⁵ R. J. Stapleton ed., *Poetry of the Cape of Good Hope, Selected from the Periodical*

as Stephen Watson puts it, 'far more damagingly romantic than almost anything in the mother country herself'.²⁶

Nonetheless, in his long poem '1818. M. Francois Le Vaillant Recalls His Travels to the Interior Parts of Africa 1780-1785', Patrick Cullinan is still drawn to reinhabit this disciple of Rousseau, imagining him sitting in a room full of stuffed birds, reflecting on his journey to a place where the colonists were 'Certainly not schooled enough / To leave the wild unploughed', and which would prove particularly unreceptive to his ideas of noble savagery:

A normal country, rather like paradise
In places, a garden
Camouflaged by scandal,
Darkened by a kind of history.²⁷

For the contemporary poet it is precisely Le Vaillant's cavalier treatment of the categories of natural history which proves compelling: Cullinan explains how some of his specimens were "unofficial", in other words composite creatures created by his own imaginative taxonomy, and passed off as genuine in his *Oiseaux d'Afrique* [1796-1808], the first work to be devoted solely to African birds' (138). Yet as we saw in the introduction, Barrow's impatience with poetic licence in his predecessors results in the famous, satirical depiction of the Cape as veering between two extremes: 'a terrestrial paradise, where nature spontaneously yielded all that was necessary' set against a 'useless and barren peninsular promontory, connected by a sandy isthmus to a still more useless and barren continent' (vi).

At the moment when Barrow begins traversing the terrain he has framed so confidently, however, errors of his own begin to intrude. Crossing the 'sandy isthmus' on his way inland, Barrow rejects the theory that the Cape Flats were ever covered by the oceans, despite the deposits of shells clearly visible en route: 'by admitting their existence we prove nothing, as whole strata of them are found buried in the sides of Lion's Hill, many hundreds of feet above the level of the sea. These shells were not brought into that situation by the waves of the ocean, but by birds' (8). Not only wrong about the ironstone of Table Mountain, Barrow is also unable to apprehend the immense pre-history recorded in these middens, which were indeed deposited when the oceans covered not only the Flats also but the mountain flanks which were once a coastal shelf. He of course did not have access to that expanse of geological time which began to reach to a wide European readership with Lyell's *Principles of Geology* (1830-35) and Darwin's *Journal of Researches* (1839). Yet even

Journals of the Colony, (Cape Town: Greig, 1828). The next anthology of Cape poetry was that edited by A. Wilmot, *The Poetry of South Africa*, (Cape Town: Juta, 1887). In both, Pringle is venerated as the founding figure of South African poetry.

²⁶ Stephen Watson, *Selected Essays: 1980-1990*, (Cape Town: Carrefour Press, 1990), 60.

²⁷ Patrick Cullinan, *Selected Poems: 1961-1964*, (Cape Town: Snailpress, 1994), 52.

today, given that the rock faces above Platteklip were shaped by wave action against an ancient cliff face, a challenge to the imagination of an entirely different order reasserts itself, and one that cannot be reduced simply to the suppressions and silences of colonial representation.

Throughout the nineteenth century, the process of looking *forwards* to imperial prospects and possessions would increasingly be counterpointed by the enormous imaginative exercise of reading landscapes *backwards*. 'The mind seemed to grow giddy by looking so far into the abyss of time', wrote John Playfair of a geological explanation by James Hutton on the Berwick coast near Edinburgh;²⁸ the final lines of the latter's *Theory of the Earth* (1785-99) would, as Macfarlane writes, 'toll through the centuries': 'The result of our enquiry is, that we find no vestige of a beginning – no prospect of an end'.²⁹ And long prior to Lyell's famous work, the geological unconformities of Table Mountain would play a role in tipping scientific opinion in favour of the 'Uniformitarians': those who insisted that the physical history of the earth could be explained by reference to gradual forces still acting rather than some biblical, diluvian catastrophe.³⁰ In a paper delivered to the Royal Society of Edinburgh in 1813, Playfair quoted at length the letter of Captain Basil Hall which described an ascent of Table Mountain to inspect how igneous granite dykes had intruded into the sedimentary shales of what is now called the Malmesbury formation. [*Figs. 33-4*] It was, he claimed, an *instantia crucis* in proving that the baked shales (or 'killas') were older than the intrusive granite, and that that the latter was thus undoubtedly of volcanic origin, not (as the 'Catastrophists' and 'Neptunists' claimed) the distillate of some primeval ocean.³¹

In the wording of Hall's letter as he describes the violence and extent of this contact – 'the finest thing of the kind I ever saw' – it is difficult not to read the intricate physical

²⁸ John Playfair, *Illustrations of the Huttonian Theory of the Earth*, (London: Cadell and Davies, 1802), cited in Macfarlane, *Mountains*, 34.

²⁹ The lines even come to haunt the protagonist of Athol Fugard's *Statements After an Arrest Under the Immorality Act* (1974), a play which, like much of his writing, moves between the subcontinent's deep time and its present-day social injustice, although the unnamed 'Man' mistakenly attributes the lines to Lyell. *Statements: Three Plays*, (London and Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1974), 84.

³⁰ In geology, an 'unconformity' refers to a contact between two rock types which are obviously discontinuous with regard to time of deposition, direction or plane of stratification: that is, 'they represent a gap or hiatus in the rock record'. Tafelberg Road and Chapman's Peak Drive are built along contacts 'striking because of the strong discontinuity in the type and orientation of the rocks on either side of them'. John S. Compton, *The Rocks and Mountains of Cape Town*, (Cape Town: Double Storey, 2004), 55-6.

³¹ John Playfair, 'Account of the Structure of the Table Mountain, and other Parts of the Peninsula of the Cape. Drawn up by Professor Playfair, from Observations made by Captain Basil Hall' [Read May 1813]. *Transactions of the Royal Society of Edinburgh*, vol. VII, (1815), 269-78. Radioactive dating confirms that the Malmesbury group, absent of fossils, are indeed the oldest visible rocks of the Peninsula, having accumulated as sediment between 560 million and 540 million years ago in an ancient ocean basin (named Adamastor) which was subsequently closed by the Pan-African Event: the tectonic collision resulting in the formation of the super-continent Pangea.

ramifications described here as imaging the larger, latent insights that were beginning to fissure these confident, supposedly disinterested accounts of the physical world:

The number of veins that we could distinctly trace to the main body of the granite was truly astonishing; and the ramifications, which extended on every side, were of all sizes, from the breadth of two yards to the hundredth of an inch. Masses of killas, cut off entirely from the main body of that rock, floated in the granite, without number, especially near the line of contact, and the strata appeared there broken, disordered, and twisted in a most remarkable degree.

Near this place I found a mass of killas in a state of decomposition; it had crumbled away, and left the granite dykes with many of the slender ramifications standing. The word *ramification* does not, however, properly express the nature of these smaller dykes; which are not branches, but plates or thin slender walls. (273)

Hall then moves on from what would now be termed a *contact unconformity* between the granite and shales to the *angular unconformity* between the shales and sandstone:

After ascending about 300 yards farther, I came to a line where the granite ceased, and was succeeded by strata of superincumbent Sandstone. These strata were horizontal, and without any symptom of disturbance or violence whatsoever. There was not a *shift* nor a vein; and this junction formed a most marked contrast with that which we had left below.

Looking round from the point where I now stood, to all the parts of the amphitheatre, in the centre of which I was placed, I could trace the same line of junction, extending horizontally on every side. (274)

Here then is the paradox of natural history in the nineteenth-century colony: underwritten by the sea routes, growing social networks and intellectual circuits of empire, the privileged surveyor divines the greater scientific narrative embedded in this grand, elevated amphitheatre. But in the very same moment he is preparing the ground for a most radical decentering of the human subject, or as Freud put it, the greatest outrage upon 'the naïve self-love of man', since the Copernican revolution.³² The kind of intense distaste for anthropocentric accounts of the material world that Darwin would struggle so hard to bring into the language available to him also begins to surface in the prose of William Burchell, so different to that of the dour map-maker Barrow:

In the wide system of created objects, nothing is wanting, nothing is superfluous... Each has its peculiar part to perform, conducive ultimately to the well-being of all. Nothing more bespeaks a littleness of mind, and a narrowness of ideas, than the admiring of a production of Nature, *merely* for its magnitude, or the despising of one, *merely* for its minuteness: nothing more erroneous than to regard as useless, all that does not visibly tend to the benefit of *man*.³³

³² Sigmund Freud, 18th Lecture, *A General Introduction to Psycho-Analysis* [1920], (New York: Washington Square Press, 1960), 296.

³³ William Burchell, *Travels in the Interior of South Africa*, (London, 1822), 1: 161.

So too his writing is suffused with a sense of plenitude and wonder which points beyond itself, and which is often passed over in standard critiques of abstractions like ‘Enlightenment rationality’ or ‘the colonial gaze’. Tracing Burchell’s early career as the Colonial Botanist on the St Helena, Grove remarks that if ‘the growth of a “green language” as a form of social response to the alienating social and economic consequences of capitalism has been eloquently described by Raymond Williams’, then ‘at the colonial periphery this “language” was even more conspicuous’.³⁴ His St Helena Journal of 1805 to 1807 is repeatedly troubled by linkages between deforestation and cruelty to slaves; in one passage he even writes in almost animistic language of regarding ‘the demolition of one of these ancient gum trees with a superstitious concern, and the feeling of a fellow creature’:

[F]or in all probability, unless St Helena should be deserted, these trees would never again be suffered to attain so great an age, and (as this tree is peculiar to the island) this was sacrilegiously destroying the largest of the kind that would ever again be in the world’.³⁵

Carrying forward this early understanding of endemism, Burchell’s account of the Cape is marked by an awareness of southern Africa’s Khoisan peoples in a way which suggests how the close attention to the non-human world in such texts invariably leads back to a more social geography. Historically poised between a natural theology relying on *creation* and *design* and the natural selection premised on *production* and *mutation*, the ‘wide system of created objects’ in the paragraph above even seems to anticipate ‘the inextricable web of affinities’ that would emerge as the master metaphor in Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* (1859),³⁶ and for which Wilhelm Bleek’s cousin Ernst Haeckel would coin the word *Oekologie* in 1866:

By ecology we mean the body of knowledge concerning the economy of nature – the investigation of the total relations of the animal both to its inorganic and to its organic environment; including above all, its friendly and inimical relations with those animals and plants with which it comes directly or indirectly into contact – in a word, ecology is the study of all those complex interrelations referred to by Darwin as the struggle for the conditions of existence.³⁷

‘The law of higgledy-piggledy’

³⁴ Grove, *Green Imperialism*, 482.

³⁵ William Burchell, St Helena Journal [1807: unpublished] cited Grove, *Green Imperialism*, 350.

³⁶ Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of the Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*, (London, 1859), 415.

³⁷ Haeckel coined the word in his *Generelle Morphologie der Organismen* (Berlin, 1866), giving this more extended gloss in a paper of 1870. Trans. W. C. Allee et al., *Principles of Animal Ecology* (1949), rep. Robert P. McIntosh, *The Background of Ecology: Concept and Theory* (Cambridge University Press, 1985), 7-8.

On the bicentenary of Darwin's birth, the 150th anniversary of the *Origin*, and with a major reappraisal of his legacy underway in Europe, the question of whether natural selection 'tend[s] to the benefit of man' or else radically displaces *Homo sapiens* into a world of absolute materialism and random accidents still remains at the heart of the difficulty in grasping the full implications of the theory of evolution (or in Darwin's initial, less weighted phrase, 'descent with modification').³⁸ The emphasis given by Haeckel to economy and struggle in nature allies him with that social Darwinism intent on deriving a single teleology for and moral from natural selection: a linear progression which 'reaches its point of satisfaction in the present': the European scholar-naturalist.³⁹ As adjunct to and even justification of a colonial project based on the same founding principles of historical progression and difference, it manifests itself most blatantly in this work through the jarring preface written by Haeckel for Bleek's *On the Origin of Language*: an 1868 monograph which attempted map Darwinian theory onto comparative philology, yet in a way rendered entirely obsolete by today's models of linguistics and evolutionary biology.⁴⁰

'Darwin has grown younger in recent years', writes Gillian Beer in a new preface to her landmark study tracing the language and literary consequences of the *Origin*;⁴¹ and indeed it is important to remember him not just as an eminent Victorian but also as the questing young naturalist of the southern hemisphere who in May 1836 stopped over at the Cape during the homeward leg of his voyage on the *Beagle*. No longer 'the authoritative old man with a beard substituting for God' (xvii), his work and life are once again in contention and debate across a range of disciplines from microbiology and genetics to feminism and narrative theory:

Darwin *could not* fully formulate all that his ideas might mean, or come to mean, though from edition to edition he sought to steady their implications. He continued to try to establish boundaries between the scientific meaning and the possible application of his work – but the language he had chosen and the story he had unfurled did not allow such rigid delimitation. The whole movement of *The Origin* is towards expansion, not stabilisation. (100)

³⁸ See Stephen Jay Gould, *Ever Since Darwin: Reflections in Natural History* [1973-7], (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980). Gould points out that neither Darwin, nor Lamarck nor Haeckel used the word evolution in the original editions of their great works. Instead it entered the language as a synonym for 'descent with modification' through the propaganda of Herbert Spencer's *First Principles* (1862) and *Principles of Biology* (1864-7), in the process acquiring its fallacious equation with a concept of progressive development. 'Ironically...the father of evolutionary theory stood almost alone in insisting that organic change led only to increasing adaptation between organisms and their environment and not to an abstract ideal of progress defined by structural complexity or increasing heterogeneity.' (37)

³⁹ Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth Century Fiction* [1983], Second edition, (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 14.

⁴⁰ W. H. I. Bleek, *Über den Ursprung der Sprache (On the Origin of Language)* [1868], rep. and trans. in *Linguistics and Evolutionary Theory: Three Essays by August Schleicher, Ernst Haeckel, and Wilhelm Bleek*, ed. Konrad Koerner, (J. Benjamins: Amsterdam and Philadelphia, 1983).

⁴¹ Beer, *Darwin's Plots*, xvii.

As a result, passages once taken as arguments for competition now read more as delicate ecological parables, testament to the extraordinary and often contradictory range of meanings that can be derived from evolutionary theory. The 'insular discourse' of Burchell and other solitary naturalists then anticipates a riven, contradictory language where the 'struggle for existence' is as much a struggle for survival as for conquest, its thought experiments rendered via 'metaphors whose peripheries remain undescribed' (100):

Darwin can be seen either as providing a grounding vocabulary for colonialism, or...equally as resisting 'intrusion' and idealising the closed environment of island spaces because they give opportunities for the most 'natural' form of natural selection in which the indigenous inhabitants uncover among themselves more and more ecological niches through the act of variation'. (xxi)

So too, the significance which human society cannot help but give to evolutionary theory depends entirely on which entity is taken as the prime unit of meaning: is it the gene, the organism, the species, the ecosystem, bioregion or (as in James Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis), the planet itself? The overdetermined language of the *Origin*, then, is one in which a Malthusian limit to resources – 'the number of places in the polity of nature is not indefinitely great' – interacts with the limits of human cognition itself: '*not that we have any means of knowing*' (as he wrote about the Cape's unprecedented botanical diversity) 'that any one region has as yet got its maximum of species'.⁴² And although he could never rid himself of the residue of agency and intention that inheres in all language (the sense, that is, of natural selection being somehow purposive and directed), Darwin's preferred metaphors were not ladders or linear trajectories but trees, 'entangled banks' and corals: a multi-dimensional branching of life forms in space and the unimaginable reaches of time unlocked by Lyell's new geology.

It is after all for mainly geological reasons that Darwin is associated with Cape Town, a place that he evidently did not much like. In 1836 he visited the Sea Point Contact, a portion of the same unconformity described by Hall, and once marked by a plaque (now stolen) below the luxury apartments of the Atlantic seaboard.⁴³ He also met and dined with one of his heroes, the astronomer John Herschel, then engaged in his momentous four year survey of the stars of the southern hemisphere.⁴⁴ Many years later, following the publication

⁴² Darwin, *Origin*, 154. Emphasis mine.

⁴³ Charles Darwin, *Geological Observations on Volcanic Islands visited during the Voyage of the Beagle, together with some Brief Notes on the Geology of Australia and the Cape of Good Hope*, (London: Smith Elder and Co., 1844).

⁴⁴ The phrase 'that mystery of mysteries' which appears in the first paragraph of the *Origin* was in fact derived from a letter by Herschel to Lyell of 20 February 1836 (just three months before Darwin's visit to the Cape); thus it is Herschel who is being referred to as 'one of the greatest of our philosophers'. Back in England Darwin read his *Preliminary Discourse on the Study of Natural Philosophy* (1830) in

of the *Origin* and the deluge of criticism and correspondence that ensued, Darwin confessed to Lyell that it was a remark by Herschel about his book being ‘the law of higgledy-piggledy’ which he found one of the most dispiriting reactions to his work: ‘What this exactly means I do not know, but it is evidently very contemptuous. If true this is a great blow and discouragement’.⁴⁵ Yet for the literary Darwinian, it is precisely this ‘unruly superfluity’ – an initial impression of ‘superfecundity without design’ – which remains the most powerful aspect of the *Origin* as it attempts (to transplant Coetzee’s formulation from an historical to a biological context) ‘to imagine the unimaginable’. As Beer remarks, ‘Only gradually and retrospectively does the force of the argument emerge from the profusion of example. Such profusion, indeed, *is* the argument’ (42).

As we shall see when encountering the discourses surrounding the /Xam records in the final chapter, Wilhelm Bleek’s proximity to Haeckel and theories of scientific racism have led some critics to be wary of the ethical status of this archive. But accounts which remain at the level of authorial intention and intellectual caution risk missing the latent insights embedded in evolutionary theory and their consequences for a ‘future unconscious’ inherent in the process of cultural selection; they also duck the challenge of reclaiming the radically egalitarian implications of evolutionary biology.⁴⁶ Even though he is now largely forgotten as a philosopher-biologist, Haeckel’s extraordinary lithographs of *Kunstformen der Natur* (1904) [Figs. 35-6] might stand as emblems for the ramifications, the ‘endless forms’, both physical and conceptual, which reach far beyond the intention of the original authors of evolutionary theory.

An approach which moves too quickly from Darwin to social Darwinism, then, risks ignoring a potentially rich source of metaphors for literary production, adaptation and reception. Perhaps the most well known attempt to advance a theory of cultural rather than natural selection is the notion of ‘memes’ put forward by Richard Dawkins: segments of self-replicating cultural or ideological data which emerge as the correlative of ‘selfish genes’.⁴⁷ Yet in an address by Gary Snyder, it is a vision of evolution as based on the pull towards

July 1837 while beginning his ‘transmutation of species’ notebook, and happened on the letter in print a year later, writing in Notebook E: ‘Herschel calls the appearance of new species, the mystery of mysteries & has a grand passage on the problem’. See Wilhelm S. Barnard, ‘Darwin at the Cape’, *South African Journal of Science* 100, (May/June 2004), 243-48.

⁴⁵ Darwin to Lyell, 12 December 1859, *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*, vol. II, ed. Francis Darwin, (London: John Murray, 1887), 241.

⁴⁶ The recent book by two acclaimed Darwin biographers makes a compelling case that his intellectual quest was fired and sustained by abolitionism and the desire to affirm a ‘common brotherhood’ of mankind. Adrian Desmond and James Morris, *Darwin’s Sacred Cause: Race, Slavery and the Quest for Human Origins* (London: Allen Lane, 2009). The fact that the young Darwin was also taught taxidermy by a freed Guyanese slave while a medical student in Edinburgh also suggests the biographical challenge to critiques of scientific discourse afforded by such a rich private archive.

⁴⁷ Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* [1976], (Oxford University Press, 1989): ‘Memes: the new replicators’, 189-201.

greater species diversity and complex, 'climax' ecosystems (rather than simple competition between individuals or species) which produces a seductive analogy with literary and psychological processes. In a passage which has been read alongside T. S. Eliot's famous account of recycled, rearranged cultural energies in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', Snyder speaks of how this condition of ecological climax:

...has considerable stability and holds much energy in its web – energy that in simpler systems (a field of weeds after a bulldozer) is lost back into the sky or down the drain'.⁴⁸

Explaining that much of the energy in a such a situation is derived from the recycling of dead biomass (rather than the exploitation of new resources), he goes on to suggest the place in this scheme for the self-conscious 'language animal': 're-viewing memory, internalized perception, blocks of inner energies, dreams, the leaf-fall of day-to-day consciousness, liberates the energy of our sense detritus'. Art then, and in particular poetry, becomes 'an assimilator of unfelt experience, perception, sensation, and memory for the whole society' (174).

The implications of such a vision are alluring for what might be called a literary ecology. Nonetheless, when transplanted to the southern tip of Africa, this melange of American wilderness writing, Freudian theory and Zen philosophy reads as somehow too easy. From fears about escaped slave communities and arson to millennial panic over botanical exotics and alien 'invaders', Table Mountain in the twentieth century is, as we shall see, a terrain where human representations have tended not towards increasing complexity but rather visions of despoilment, erosion and intrusion. As Sleigh's account of an island like Mauritius under the VOC shows, the history of the Company and the natural world is one of niche habitats being overrun, of deforestation, rapidly spread disease, sudden predation, extinction.

All are processes admitted by the slow, indifferent workings of natural selection, but in terms of the human lifespan they can hardly suggest the evolutionary pull toward biodiversity that Snyder celebrates; indeed the entire notion of climax is largely defunct in contemporary ecology.⁴⁹ And as Coetzee's disenchanted Elizabeth Costello reminds us when lecturing on 'The Poet and the Animals', no less than the nineteenth-century picturesque or the prospects of Romanticism, our lay, almost mystical sense of an ecological

⁴⁸ Gary Snyder, *The Real Work: Interviews and Talks, 1964-1979*, ed. W. Scott McLean, (New York: New Directions 1980), 173-4. John Elder draws the comparison between Eliot and Snyder in *Imagining the Earth: Poetry and the Vision of Nature*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985).

⁴⁹ See Dana Phillips, *The Truth of Ecology*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003) for a polemical critique of the over-reliance on metaphor and glib analogy in American ecocriticism, and an impatience with its devotional, even anti-intellectual quality: 'In fact, complexity itself, once thought to guarantee ecological stability, is now seen as, well, more complex than that.' (22)

consciousness – ‘the inextricable web of affinities’ – inevitably turns on the privileged position of the viewing subject. It is a vision only available to a human mind which reasserts its separation and dominance even as it seeks to exist as only one part of the whole. Cautioning against too easy a use of a term, she remarks that ‘Animals are not believers in ecology’.⁵⁰

‘Another bourgeois invention, like the piano?’

Despite his initial reservations, Stephen Black did take Kipling up on at least one of his suggestions for a series of city sketches. The idea for ‘a sort of young savage Crusoe close to civilization’ who has never ventured down to the city above which he was born was developed into ‘The Cloud Child’, a short piece printed in the *Cape Argus Weekly* of 1908. The narrator ascends Table Mountain, ‘not on foot, I confess, but still to the top’ and ‘when the mules were rolling in the sand and bracken...took a stroll round the reservoirs and came across a child who was obviously a European, although as brown as many a Cape boy’.⁵¹ In Black’s hands, a story which, had Kipling been able to write it, might have dwelt more on a wildness at odds with the orderly colonial port becomes an unremarkable, wistful piece. This child of nature’s wonder at the sights below is counterposed with the narrator’s realisation that what he is looking at are the signs of an encroaching industrial modernity; the miraculous ‘little houses on wheels’ are probably municipal dirt carts.

Here then is a conventional use of the pastoral or wilderness narrative: undefiled nature is invoked to pass judgement on culture; and it is telling that as Black attempts to maintain this mountain top as a threatened, pristine vantage point, other dichotomies must also be preserved: ‘It was charming to hear this child of the clouds talk. He was so simple and honest, and so unhuman. Most town children of seven are merely inhuman’ (5). The innocent gaze could hardly be preserved, one senses, if this boy were not distinguished from the all too common street children or the social outsiders who have, as K. Sello Duiker’s novels remind us, taken refuge in the mountain chain.⁵² ‘The Cloud Child’, subtitled ‘An Idyll of Youth and Table Mountain’, is markedly less successful than Black’s sketches of street characters and the Wale Street Police Court in the same newspaper. His ear for idiolect and

⁵⁰ J. M. Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*, (Princeton University Press, 1999), 54. Gould also suggests how while most of Haeckel’s coinages died with him, ‘ecology’ is facing the opposite fate – ‘loss of meaning by extension and vastly inflated currency. Common usage now threatens to make “ecology” a label for anything good that happens far from cities or anything that does not have synthetic chemicals in it’. *Ever Since Darwin*, 119.

⁵¹ Stephen Black, ‘The Cloud Child’, *Cape Argus Weekly*, (27 May 1908), 4. Preserved with other materials on Black in the M. F. Cartwright Collection, South African Public Library, MSB 809.

⁵² K. Sello Duiker, *Thirteen Cents*, (Cape Town: David Philip, 2000).

the spoken word in these urban locales was what had caught Kipling's attention in the first instance, and would lead to the theatrical success of *Love and the Hyphen* in the same year. 'I loved dialect; I loathed snobbery', he remarked when reflecting on his literary career,⁵³ but his Table Mountain Crusoe suggests how twentieth-century nature writing – so often vexed by the relation between the desire for solitary, authentic wilderness and the growth of mass tourism – is always vulnerable to the latter.

If the aristocratic Grand Tour of Europe (and later the railway links which brought the middle classes to Windermere) resulted in the Alps and Lake District emerging as carefully constructed aesthetic objects, then the nineteenth-century naturalist in the colonies surely prefigures the more contemporary, more global tourist. The affable Le Vaillant refers to a 'charming and picturesque spot' on the Platteklip path as early as 1790, but evokes a the weathered plateau of the Table in a language more receptive to sublimity: 'It seems as though time, clouds and wind had worn off the sharpest edges of the rocks, producing a strange landscape where curved lines prevail'.⁵⁴ Barrow and Darwin, however, agree on the matter of the Cape mountains not quite measuring up to other ranges seen on their travels. 'Having seen so much of that sort of country in Patagonia, Chili & Peru, I feel myself to a certain degree a connoisseur in the desert', wrote the latter of the Karoo flats, '& am very anxious to see these'.⁵⁵ Yet in this instance, Darwin felt the Cape to be one of the most dreary places he had ever visited, while Barrow only reluctantly confers a measure of grandeur upon it. Despite invoking the giddiness and threat of imaginative collapse which, following Edmund Burke's essays of the 1750s, has conventionally been associated with the sublime, he is unwilling to grant the mountains of the Cape a status still reserved for the Alps:

None of the mountains of the Cape settlement possesses much of the sublime or the beautiful, but the approach to the bases in some parts, and the entrances of the Kloofs, are awfully grand and terrific; sometimes their naked points of solid rock rise almost perpendicularly, like a wall of masonry, to the height of three, four, and even five thousand feet;...sometimes the inclination of the strata is so great that the whole mass of mountain appears to have its centre of gravity falling without the base, and as if it momentarily threatened to strew the plain with its venerable ruins... (vol. II, 5)

As J. M. Coetzee suggests in a long essay which begins with Burchell's pensketch of Table Mountain, for the nineteenth-century English speaking observer the topography was more easily classed in the more manageable aesthetic category of the picturesque. Despite the efforts of the early twentieth-century poets satirised by Roy Campbell in his 'Veld Eclogue' – 'There is something grander, yes / About the veld, than I can well express' – the language of

⁵³ Stephen Black, 'How I Began to Write', *Cape Argus*, (17 October 1925).

⁵⁴ Le Vaillant, *Travels* ed. Glenn et al., 42.

⁵⁵ Janet Browne, *Charles Darwin. Volume I: Voyaging* [1995], (London: Pimlico, 1996), 328.

the sublime, bringing with it a disorientation and uncertainty able to be relished in central Europe, could not easily be transplanted to such contested ground. For if the frisson of sublimity can be described as a 'shiver of delight' which accompanies the return of those dimensions of experience repressed by the strict dualities of the Enlightenment,⁵⁶ then in southern Africa perhaps this return was too likely to bring with it other submerged elements of the cultural landscape: the reality of an indentured underclass which gave the lie to any idea of an organic pastoralism redeemed by dignifying labour.

Instead (following Coetzee), the vacuum in English-language poetry becomes mired in a circular, doubt-ridden encounter with trackless wastes – 'How are we to read the African landscape? Is it readable at all? Is it readable only through African eyes, writeable only in an African language?' – which in any case hardly impinged on the Cape Peninsula growing in the popular imaginary as an ineffable, but carefully managed version of paradise.⁵⁷ Burchell's 1822 account of how 'the beauties here displayed to the eye could scarcely be represented by the most skilful pencil' is explicitly echoed and updated by Kipling in his letter of December 1898, describing the 'raw purple hills behind the roof that no photograph or pencil can render...fully'.⁵⁸ Even as it insists on the difficulty in representing the object of its gaze, here is the rhetorical gesture which automatically frames and domesticates the landscape, the very word itself always carrying with it the sense of a place apprehended not just visually but pictorially. As Coetzee points out, Burchell's depiction of how 'the last beams of the sun, gleaming over the rich, varied, and extensive prospect, laid on the warm finishing lights, in masterly and inimitable touches' even reveals the medium in which this amateur painter projects the scene: oils (37).

'Am I, / To see the Lake District then, / Another bourgeois invention, like the piano?'⁵⁹ Similar questions to the one posed by W. H. Auden in 1953 have duly been applied to both the Peninsula and the Cederberg by cultural historians tracing the social logic of the picturesque in the twentieth-century, a process of constructing and consuming nature which still lies at the heart of the modern tourist industry. In 'The Bourgeois Eye Aloft: Table Mountain in the Anglo Urban Middle-class Imagination, c.1891-1952', the environmental historian Lance van Sittert shows how the formation of mountain clubs and carefully planned expeditions established the buttresses visible above the southern suburbs as a site of leisure, privilege and cultural affirmation, drawing the gaze away from the starker, eroding north face and the growing, troubled margins of the city.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Bate, *The Song of the Earth*, 122.

⁵⁷ J. M. Coetzee, *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 62.

⁵⁸ William Burchell, *Travels in the Interior of Southern Africa*, vol. I, (London, 1822), 51-2.

⁵⁹ W. H. Auden, 'Bucolics III: Mountains', *Selected Poems*, (London: Faber, 1979), 208-211.

⁶⁰ Laurence van Sittert, 'The Bourgeois Eye Aloft', *Kronos* 29 (2003), 161-191. See also his 'From

1913 saw the creation of the botanic gardens at Kirstenbosch (still containing a portion of Van Riebeeck's divisive hedge of bitter almonds); Rhodes's conception of the mountain as church was opened to a wider congregation by Jan Smuts as patron saint of mountaineers,⁶¹ while the construction of the cable car in 1929 fundamentally changed the relation of the city to its mountain. During the interwar years, the evaporation of distance and time which accompanied the arrival of the combustion engine enabled a middle-class 'discovery' of the Cape fold belt, the automobile 'vastly expanding the recreational hinterland available to the urban bourgeoisie'.⁶² Since then, symbolic understandings of the mountain's relation to the city have proliferated: the mythic identities of Adamastor and the Dutchman Van Hunks smoking with the Devil have been joined by the Umlindi Wemingizimu of the amaXhosa, the Watcher of the South. The Old Grey Father of Colonialism has also become the Silent Witness of Apartheid; or for the journalist John Matshikiza, viewing its distant, hunched shape from the outlying locations in 1998, simply a 'huge, indifferent moderator between the conflicting worlds of Cape Town'.⁶³ In the photographs of David Goldblatt, we see the mountain from Bloubergstrand as petit-bourgeois scenery; in those of David Lurie we see it from Mitchell's Plain, Khayelitsha and Langa as distant, irregular, irrelevant. [Figs. 36-7]

Yet as the media reaction to the devastating mountain fires which broke out two years later in January 2000 reveals, this unsentimental, contemporary idea of nature's indifference has hardly prevented it from being invoked to express submerged social anxieties, particularly those regarding the 'naturalisation' of many in the growing population below. After years of suburban spats between (as one cartoonist had it) 'pro-pine neo-Nazis' and 'anti-pine eco-Fascists', the extent of this millennial conflagration provoked a debate where, some commentators suggest, sentiments unable to be voiced explicitly in a climate officially opposed to all forms of discrimination, came to be displaced onto the natural world. In an article on 'Aliens, Apocalypse and the Postcolonial State', John and Jean Comaroff suggest that the vitriol directed towards the exotic plant species blamed for the ferocity of the blaze – with all the attendant rhetoric of invasion and indigeneity – masked a desire to speak about human aliens from the rest of Africa. And not only here: alien plants 'have become the

'Mere Weeds' and 'Bosjes' to a Cape Floral Kingdom: The Re-imagining of Indigenous Flora at the Cape, c.1890-1939'. *Kronos* 28 (2002), 102-126.

⁶¹ Smuts' famous address at the unveiling of the Mountain Club's War Memorial at Maclear's Beacon on 25 February 1923 is reprinted in full in C. A. Lückhoff, *Table Mountain: Our National Heritage after Three Hundred Years*, (Cape Town: A. A. Balkema, 1951). 'To them the true church where they worshipped was Table Mountain. Table Mountain was their cathedral where they heard a subtler music and saw wider visions and were inspired by a loftier spirit.' (71)

⁶² Van Sittert, 'Seeing the Cederberg', 152.

⁶³ Cited in Bickford-Smith et al., *Cape Town in the Twentieth Century*, (Cape Town: David Philip, 1999).

stuff of melodrama and resonant allegory on a worldwide scale. This, we shall argue, is because they transform and represent diffuse political terrors as natural facts'.⁶⁴

As Rita Barnard remarks, the shape of this argument is not unfamiliar to students of South African literature: in Nadine Gordimer's 1974 novel *The Conservationist*, 'the discourse of the ecological preservation is also exposed as an alibi for territorial possession and policies of exclusion: it offers a way in which the white landowner can express his anxiety about black trespassers and encroaching townships without seeming to be as crudely racist as his less aesthetically attuned Afrikaans neighbours'.⁶⁵ One could add that Gordimer's *style indirect libre* allows her cynical protagonist Mehring an equally searching critique of his liberal mistress, whose belief in the possibility of an alternate 'naturalness' on the farm – 'If I had your money, I'd buy it and leave it just as it is' – reveals her as equally content to move within the country's artificially pristine and privileged spaces.⁶⁶ The Comaroffs, Barnard concludes, 'transpose Gordimer's critique of the ideology of conservation onto a grand international scale, one appropriate to an era of globalisation' (173).

Yet it could be misleading to equate this isolated Highveld farm with the far more complex terrain at the heart of Cape Town, or to read such a layered literary space simply at the level of ideological critique. It is after all Gordimer's own considerable gifts as nature writer and chronicler of place which begin to imbue the organic matter of the plot with an overwhelming excess of meaning, transforming Mehring's assured reading of his surroundings into a disabling paralysis: 'all the farm has flowered and burgeoned from him, sucking his strength like nectar from a grass straw' (237). And having used the iconography of Table Mountain to read across both colonial travelogues and postcolonial critique, it seems that what both the crudely imperial appropriations of nature and late twentieth-century demystifications of it share is a tendency to instrumentalise their object of enquiry: to reduce it predictably and almost narcissistically to a by-product of human representation; to make it conceptually efficient, so losing a sense of its manifold textures and presences; to disqualify a vast body of imaginative, communal *knowing of* and *dwelling in* an environment which might more actively resist the fact of it being enclosed and consumed by private interests.

While changing intellectual schemas and personal agendas inevitably shape the mountain produced in each of the texts discussed above, it seems that in those moments where they register the particular textures and human traces of the mountain, one has a sense of this much overwritten site as a repository for not one but many histories. In the

⁶⁴ Jean and John L. Comaroff, 'Naturing the Nation: Aliens, Apocalypse and the Postcolonial State', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 27:3, (September 2001), 639.

⁶⁵ Rita Barnard, *Apartheid and Beyond: South African Writers and the Politics of Place*, (Oxford University Press, 2007), 173.

⁶⁶ Nadine Gordimer, *The Conservationist*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1974), 60.

words of the Brisbane poet and novelist David Malouf, 'A land can bear any number of cultures laid one above the other or set side by side. It can be inscribed and written upon many times'.⁶⁷ Even if many of these superimposed histories remain unwritten, physical evidence of them remains throughout the Peninsula, from the earliest human remains at Peers Cave to the mountain reservoirs, firebreaks and footpaths which testify to a long history of labour, and make this a space that cannot be easily comprehended by that dream topography which imagines an empty, unpeopled landscape.

Certainly the idea of it simply as luxury or bourgeois invention is one difficult to sustain here: not only does such a claim patronise those it claims to represent, but is flatly contradicted by the hiking clubs remembered in the District Six Museum. In a different way, as Louise Green shows, the oral testimonies of non-white labourers on the slopes of Table Mountain between 1980 and 2000 reveal it as both a carefully managed, worked-over landscape, but also a 'curiously unlegislated' place, a kind of opening and psychological refuge in an otherwise closed society.⁶⁸ And given the perennial intermeshing of constructed place and ceaselessly reimagined space here, perhaps the language drawn forth by the wild fires of 2000 is best regarded not as a displacement or alibi, but rather the latest chapter in a history of the city's collective unconscious which would include the arson attacks of escaped slaves which altered the architecture of the town, the conflagrations described so vividly in the diaries of John Herschel, the mysterious fire which gutted Rhodes's mansion in 1896 as well as the burning shacks which remain the most potent signal of political strife. Fire has been, in the words of one author, 'the most significant element in Cape Town's secret life...a persistent crackle at the edge of our lives'.⁶⁹

How then have contemporary poets begun to transform this into adequate words, in a climate not only of deepening historical memory, but also of ever-present doubts about the efficacy and ethics of writing the non-human?⁷⁰ If English-speaking South African poets up until Sydney Clouts have (in Coetzee's reading) projected their voices into a stonily silent landscape, waiting in vain for a reciprocal echo, then have contemporary writers been able to adopt a different way of listening? At the very least, perhaps one is afforded the opportunity to set aside the debates about nature as political mystification and read present-day versions of the Cape along the more intimate (yet no less stringent) lines suggested by

⁶⁷ David Malouf, *A Spirit of Play: the Making of Australian Consciousness*, (Sydney: ABC books, 1998), 51.

⁶⁸ Louise Green, 'Changing Nature: Working Lives on Table Mountain, 1980-2000' in Sean Field et al. eds., *Imagining the City: Memories and Cultures in Cape Town*, (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2007), 175.

⁶⁹ Mike Nicol, *Sea-Mountain, Fire City*, (Cape Town: Kwela Books), 10.

⁷⁰ Peter Carey, *Thirty Days in Sydney*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2001), 50.

Oscar Wilde: 'Wordsworth went to the Lakes, but he was never a lake poet. He found in stones the sermons he had already hidden there'.⁷¹

Vivian's lines in 'The Decay of Lying' (1891) deftly capture a metropolitan impatience with what is vulgarly called 'nature poetry': its enclosure, earnestness, its tendency toward a one-sided imposition of meaning. Yet at the same time, both Wilde's formulation and Coetzee's fiction adumbrate the necessary resistance, the extreme otherness which any writer must encounter and find ways of giving voice to in their dealings with the non-human: 'Fish in water, the goat overnight / how can we comprehend their alien hardness?' asks Basil Du Toit.⁷² And Vivian's turn of phrase does, after all, leave open the further question of what a lake poet might be; or in a more local context, a poet of mountains intent on returning to the natural world not prior to, but after a consideration of a long history of social exclusion and division.

As the diverse works collected in the National Gallery exhibition and catalogue *Hoerikwaggo: Images of Table Mountain* (2000) demonstrate with far greater immediacy than all of the above, the mountain has on the one hand been an endlessly malleable and manipulable signifier: dilated or depopulated to allow the enactment of colonial anxieties, decomposed into the receding plains of the picturesque, subjected to self-serving personifications, digitally enhanced and reproduced in the context of countless modern logos. On the other hand it has remained a terrain of wood, water and rock six times older than the Himalayas, confronting the inhabitants below with the elemental to a degree unusual in a modern city, and, as its slopes become more arid due to climate change, signalling the dangers of a critical language has been reluctant to conceive of nature as anything more than a sub-set of human representation. Watson remarks that, despite the catastrophe of its social engineering, Cape Town remains a place which 'inverts the usual relation between the built environment and the environs that the natural world has built...even in the midst of its downtown streets, the stone world has not yet become completely other'.⁷³ Although hardly unaware of how our perceptions of this non-human world are inevitably mediated by language, he is one of many Cape poets unable to forget that there remains something beyond the mediation, unwilling to disavow the urge to reconstitute this ever more finely in words, and it is to their work that one turns for a particularly impassioned, if threatened, meditation on the pleasures and problems in writing nature.

⁷¹ Oscar Wilde, 'The Decay of Lying', *Intentions* [1891], rep. in *The Works of Oscar Wilde*, (London: Collins, 1992), 909.

⁷² Basil Du Toit, *Home Truths*, (Cape Town: The Carrefour Press, 1988), 16.

⁷³ Stephen Watson, Introduction, *A City Imagined*, (Johannesburg: Penguin, 2005), 207.

'THE BUSHMEN'S LETTERS'

THE AFTERLIVES OF THE BLEEK AND LLOYD COLLECTION

The Bushmen's letters are in their bodies. They (the letters) speak, they move, they make their (the Bushmen's) bodies move. They (the Bushmen) order the others to be silent; a man is altogether still, when he feels that...his body is tapping (inside). A dream speaks falsely, it is (a thing) which deceives. The presentiment is that which speaks the truth; it is that by means of which the Bushman gets (or perceives) meat, when it has tapped...

//Kabbo, 'Bushman Presentiments' [February-March, 1873]

Transcribed and translated in Bleek and Lloyd, *Specimens of Bushman Folklore*, (1911).

Our entire possession of ideas is just what we,
placed outside of ourselves, can cause to pass over into others.

Wilhelm von Humboldt to Goethe
Quoted in W. H. I. Bleek, *Über den Ursprung der Sprache*, (On the Origin of Language, 1868).

In the last decades, the Bleek and Lloyd Collection, like the records of the Dutch East India Company, has been classed as part of the UNESCO Memory of the World Register: an internationally coordinated attempt to 'guard against collective amnesia' by calling for the preservation and wide dissemination of vital documentary heritage.¹ It is difficult to imagine more different archives. On the one hand, millions of pages documenting the workings of the world's first multinational: schematic entries in logbooks, official correspondence, the instructions of the Lords Seventeen that the Dutch settlement at the Cape remain temporary, inexpensive, and merely a gateway to somewhere else. On the other, notations of the verbal lore of individuals descended from the aboriginal inhabitants of southern Africa: dense, digressive and multiply translated narratives which occasionally depart from accounts of the mantis /Kaggen, of rain animals, stars and hunting methods to record the brutal intrusion of settlers and pastoralists in an area which had been inhabited for at least twice as long as the European continent when the *trekboers* arrived from the south.

For almost a century these 'Bushman researches' received little scholarly attention from anyone outside the Bleek family; yet in recent decades steadily more of the archive's narrative and visual material has been brought into the public domain by ethnographers, rock art researchers, curators, artists and poets.² As a politically charged, cross-disciplinary and multi-lingual process of cultural recovery, it has not been without its heated moments. In the most recent of several controversies attending the portrayal of indigenous expressive cultures in southern Africa, Stephen Watson accused fellow poet Antjie Krog of plagiarism, claiming that her slim volume of 'selected and adapted' /Xam poetry, *the stars say 'tsau'* (2004) borrowed too liberally from his 1991 'Versions from the /Xam', *Return of the Moon*, as well as the work of Lucy Lloyd. Forming one more link in a chain of literary uses for Khoisan oratures which runs from Olive Schreiner and Eugene Marais to Laurens van der Post and André Brink, such debates make for a provocative entry into the disparate assemblage of text, drawings, artefacts and, at times, sheer fictions that comprise and envelop the Bleek and Lloyd Collection.

In a sense it is unsurprising that the most impassioned engagements with the collection would come from these quarters. The overwhelming impression one takes from the notebooks, from Bleek's *Reports* to the Cape Parliament and the monumental *Specimens of Bushman Folklore* finally brought into print by Lloyd in 1911, is of a fascination with and closeness to language, an awareness of the felicities but also the extinctions which attend the work of translation. It was after all a linguistic sensitivity of a particular kind that

¹ See the 'Memory of the World Register', <<http://portal.unesco.org>>

² A large part of the archive, including all the /Xam and !Kung notebooks, was scanned and placed online by Pippa Skotnes between 2005 and 2007: <www.lloydbleekonline.uct.ac.za>

attracted Bleek to the /Xam in the first place; and although comparative philology, with its grand object of divining linguistic origins as a key to human history, is an obsolete discipline, the diligence of the work and its attention to detail has made the collection an invaluable resource and catalyst for all kinds of academic and artistic endeavours. For even as an encounter with such materials brings one toward the totemic questions of all postcolonial enquiry – how can occulted voices be allowed to speak, by what authority do we assume the right to attempt this, and how much does the process tell us about ourselves rather than the object of study? – it seems that the abstraction or even interminability of such debates find a counterpoint in the particular details and material traces of this exchange. And if initial transcription and translation process has now been well-documented,³ it seems now that the afterlife, particularly the literary afterlife, of the collection constitutes an intriguing object of study in itself.

‘Mutual furthering communication with each other’

‘We move upon a giddy height when we attempt to know the direction of the world’s development’, wrote Bleek in the opening lines of his 1868 monograph *Über den Ursprung der Sprache (On the Origin of Language)*, his cautious tone differing markedly from that of the preface by his cousin Ernst Haeckel.⁴ The terminology of racial hierarchy in this early work and its strenuous comparativism (always underwritten, one senses, by the expanse of the British Empire) make it difficult reading,⁵ as does a subtext which again reveals a political use for one particular strain of southern African indigeneity. As in the influential 1905 history of *The Native Races of South Africa* by the pioneering recorder of rock art George Stow, one quickly senses how an increasing interest in the antiquity of ‘sex-denoting’ Bushman languages entailed a dismissal of southern Africa’s ‘Bantu’ (especially Xhosa) cultures which coincided neatly with the colonial politics of Bleek’s patrons.⁶ The Bushmen, Bleek wrote, were ‘poetical in their ideas, with an extensive mythological traditionary literature’; the Bantu

³ See in particular Andrew Bank, *Bushmen in a Victorian World*, (Cape Town: Double Storey, 2006) for a brilliant reconstruction of the learning process.

⁴ W. H. I. Bleek, *Über den Ursprung der Sprache (On the Origin of Language, as a First Chapter in a History of the Development of Humanity)*. Ed. with preface by Ernst Haeckel [1868], trans. Thomas Davidson, (New York: L.W. Schmidt, 1869), 5.

⁵ In Bleek’s catalogue of the Grey Collection, for example, ‘Kora-Hottentot’ and ‘Trans-Gariepian’ Nama dialects are followed by ‘Se-Rolong Catechisms’ and ‘Zulu Arithmetics’, then ‘Malagasy Natural Philosophy’, ‘New Zealand Phraseologies’, ‘Inland Dialects of Eastern Australia’, ‘Samoan Old Testament’ and ‘Tahitian New Testament’. *The Library of his Excellency Sir George Grey*, (London: Trubner and Co., 1858).

⁶ See Saul Dubow, *Scientific Racism in Modern South Africa*, (Cambridge University Press, 1995) and Shane Moran, *Representing Bushmen: South Africa and the Origin of Language*, (University of Rochester Press, 2009).

peoples were 'addicted to ancestor worship, speaking euphonious polysyllabic Prefix-pronomial languages, eminently prosaic in their ideas and literature'.⁷ Stow's account of Bantu 'intrusion' echoes that of Barrow a century earlier (see chapter 3), and in his otherwise remarkably sensitive discussions of rock art, he quotes Bleek extensively in claiming that such 'title-deeds' of the San (a tellingly inappropriate metaphor for a hunter-gatherer people) are superior to the 'artistic productions' of the Negro races.⁸

The discipline of comparative philology was, as Saul Dubow remarks, one of the earliest and most extensive attempts to adopt evolutionism as a key to human history: 'indeed it has been seen as the first science to regard evolution "as its very core"'.⁹ And as Haeckel and Bleek attempt to map a series of correspondences between the *Origin of Species* and that of language, one is able to sense the perennial danger which dogs even the most sympathetic recuperations of southern Africa's aboriginal expressive cultures in the twentieth century. In all such claims made by history on prehistory there lurks, as the archaeologist Nick Shepherd remarks, the tendency to collapse three entirely different narratives regarding the deep human past in Africa: a biological trajectory of hominid evolution; an anthropological account of cultural development and a much more recent history of those peoples now known as the Khoisan.¹⁰ The result has been a widespread conception of the San as a kind of evolutionary holdover, an example of 'living prehistory' somehow removed from the ambit of colonial struggle and contestation. As late as 1971, Phillip Tobias, Professor of Anatomy at the University of the Witwatersrand, makes explicit the connection with Kipling's magical southern African locales, writing in a foreword to a collection of tales from the Kalahari that these 'preserve for a wider audience than have hitherto enjoyed them the "Just So" stories of a vanishing phase in the dawning of human culture'.¹¹

Tracing back the interest in evolutionism, prehistoric artefacts and 'Bushman paintings' which developed in the *Cape Monthly Magazine* between 1870 and 1920, Shepherd formulates the 'the defining paradox of colonial archaeology' in terms which return us to the challenge of Coetzee's Jerusalem prize address. For even though this was inevitably a discipline concerned centrally with black African experience, 'it was possible – in

⁷ W. H. I. Bleek, 'Report Regarding Photographs' [1871] rep. in Bleek and Lloyd, *Bushman Folklore*, 435.

⁸ George W. Stow, *The Native Races of South Africa: a History of the Intrusion of the Hottentots and Bantu into the Hunting Grounds of the Bushmen, and the Aborigines of the Country* [1905], (Cape Town: Struik, 1964), 5,16.

⁹ Saul Dubow, *A Commonwealth of Knowledge: Science, Sensibility and White South Africa 1820-2000* (Oxford University Press, 2006), 108. The quoted phrase is from Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution*, (London, 1977 edn.), 346.

¹⁰ Nick Shepherd, 'Pre-Colonial Histories: Southern Africa' in Johnson and Poddar eds., *A Historical Companion to Postcolonial Literatures in English*, (Edinburgh University Press, 2005), 397.

¹¹ *The Rebirth of the Ostrich, and other Stories of the Kalahari Bushmen Told in their Manner by Arthur Markowitz*, (Gaborone: National Museum and Art Gallery, 1971), n.p.

fact, it was entirely normal – to practise African archaeology without knowing, or wanting to know, anything about African people *per se*:¹²

In the colonial period, as with archaeology under apartheid, doing archaeology involved a number of suppressions, blind-spots, self-willed strictures on imagination, and chief amongst these was an indifference towards the African present. In fact, in a broadly metaphorical way, but also in the most literal of ways, doing archaeology involved looking through present landscapes, with their clutter of political aspiration and cultural change, to find the traces of an imagined past lying below. (838)

‘One of my hobbies has been to excavate these ruins’, remarks the Magistrate in Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980),¹³ the ‘old greybeard’ who tries in vain to decipher the inscriptions on the mysterious poplar slips which he has found there, all the while realising how absurd this amateur enthusiasm for a vanished world makes him: ‘sustained by the toil of others, lacking civilised vices with which to fill my leisure, I pamper my melancholy and try to find in the vacuousness of the desert a special historical poignancy. Vain, idle, misguided! How fortunate that no one sees me!’ (17) The remarkable persistence of this sparsely peopled, politically suspect dream topography reminds one how the archaeological metaphors which are often used to figure the project of cultural recuperation in the postcolony need to be treated with caution.

Nonetheless, in one of many productive ironies attending the recording process of the 1870s, Bleek’s abstract drive for mythological correspondences and his highly systematised work methods would produce the phonetic script and vocabularies which Lloyd would then use to elicit more personal, and (for modern readers of the archive) more compelling narratives. [Fig. 38] A sense of how practice would diverge from theory here is suggested by a passage Bleek’s well-thumbed copy of Friedrich Max Müller’s *Lectures on the Science of Language* (1862), inscribed by the owner on 21 August in the year of publication.¹⁴ As Max Müller outlines his vast conception of language as ‘the living and speaking witness of the whole history of our race’ – ‘an unbroken chain of speech’ carrying one back beyond cuneiform and hieroglyphic literature to ‘the first utterances of the human mind’ and even ‘the very words which issued from the mouth of the son of God when he gave names to “all cattle, and to the fowl of the air, and to every beast of the field”’ – he pauses to register a brief caveat:

If it were necessary for the comparative philologist to acquire a critical or practical acquaintance with all the languages which form the subject of his enquiries, the science of

¹² Nick Shepherd, ‘State of the Discipline: Science, Culture and Identity in South African Archaeology, 1870-2003’. *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 29: 4 (Dec., 2003),

¹³ J. M. Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians* [1980], (London: Vintage, 2000), 14.

¹⁴ Here I am grateful to Tanya Barben of Rare Books in the University of Cape Town Library, currently engaged in a project of reconstituting the library of Wilhelm Bleek.

language would simply be an impossibility. But we do not expect the botanist to be an experienced gardener, or the geologist a miner, or the ichthyologist a practical fisherman.¹⁵

There could hardly be a more glaring example of how this text-based imperial knowledge-system entailed a rejection of the local, the customary, the conversational. Yet it is precisely such a 'practical acquaintance' with the /Xam and !Kung languages which distinguishes this Cape archive, beginning with Bleek's interviews to establish vocabularies with San prisoners on Robben Island as early as 1857. And in its more secular (and restrained) attempts to model the first principles of linguistic cognition, Bleek's *Origin* touches on matters which are now approached in different idioms by those trying to map the beginnings of symbolic behaviour within human history and our special, shared status as animals with an instinct for language. Disparagement of 'lower' cultures is ineluctably counterpointed by intimations of the contemporary model, in which every linguistic culture can only be regarded as equally complex, grammatically 'correct' and self-consistent. 'The manifestations of thought', Bleek writes, 'are various; but no one of them is of more importance than language':

For it is through language and with language that man as a thinking being has developed himself. It is communication by means of speech that brings his thinking to greater clearness, by bringing the different modes of thought into mutual furthering communication with each other. By means of speech man is able to hold with more tenacity the impressions already obtained, and thus better to combine the old with those whose action is fresher, and generally each one with every other, and to work them up into intuitions. It is the spring of self-consciousness, inasmuch as it is what enables man to distinguish himself and his emotions from the external world, and so to become conscious of both. (43)

Like Coetzee's Elizabeth Costello as she considers to what extent one can think oneself into the being of another, Bleek cites Wilhelm von Humboldt's last letter to Goethe as a touchstone of his endeavour. At once bracingly materialist, yet also imbued with an humanist ideal of true understanding being arrived at through dialogue and (to use a contemporary term) intersubjectivity, it is a dictum which would take on a particularly charged significance when he came to recording a language that was fast disappearing in the Cape Colony of the late nineteenth century: 'Our entire possession of ideas is just what we, placed outside of ourselves, can cause to pass over into others' (44).

For even as the words of the /Xam are invoked in larger and often anachronistic debates about 'First Peoples' and early 'freedom fighters', such enquiries must finally turn on a close attention to the unique, awkwardly beautiful languages of this archive. If disputes about cultural appropriation and recovering lost voices are often framed in ways which can seem overly emotive, or else academically abstract and intangible, then what *can* serve as a guarantee of real engagement with such an archive? Is it annotation, evidence of scholarly

¹⁵ Max Müller, *Lectures on the Science of Language*, (London: Longman, 1862), 25.

rigour and a transformative labour in bringing the poems into a living present; or rather a commitment to literal transcription, gentle editing and the light touch of the anthologist? And what other, less visible South African literary traditions might have made use of the collection? Tracking the shifting incarnations of the some most famous fragments of the collection – among them the ‘Song of the Broken String’ and ‘//Kabbo’s Intended Return Home’ – will hopefully provide a route through such difficult terrain, fragments in which the loss attending transmission finds an analogue in subject matter inflected by a profound sense of physical and psychic dislocation.

Scandal in the postcolony

When surveying how the /Xam and !Kung records have been brought before the public, one is struck by the recurrence of scandal, and to such a degree that it seems worth considering how one might go about using this unstable cultural process as point of entry when considering how such intricate knowledge systems pass from the domain of the specialist to a more general audience. In her account of the circuits of gossip, goods and personnel that linked nineteenth century Cape Town and Sydney, Kirsten McKenzie shows how colonial port cities were spaces of a particular kind of transience, at once intensely parochial and inherently cosmopolitan, where ‘fortunes could be made and new identities forged in the liminal zones between land and sea’.¹⁶ While conceding that scandals are unpredictable affairs which tend to expand beyond the control and intention of both parties, she also reveals how they often signal a particular moment in social transformation, involving the ‘alleged transgression of boundaries that are themselves under construction and contestation’ (9).

As Nigel Penn suggests in his microhistories written out of the eighteenth-century VOC archive, scandal in the colony allows one to trace the connection between the politics of private life and those of larger social structures: from the level of an individual career, household or family to the larger contextual dimensions of shared values, systems of belief or representation.¹⁷ So too, more recent controversies involving the uses of history for prehistory provide an intriguing route into considering how a newly postcolonial state like South Africa has come to define itself. After all, the national Coat of Arms unveiled by President Thabo Mbeki on 27 April 2000 incorporates figures from San rock painting known as the Linton Panel, and carries as its motto a sentence written in /Xam. Preserving the

¹⁶ Kirsten Mackenzie, *Scandal in the Colonies: Sydney and Cape Town, 1820-1850*. (Melbourne University Press: 2004), 9.

¹⁷ Nigel Penn, *Rogues, Rebels and Runaways*, (Cape Town, David Philip, 1999), 167.

nineteenth-century orthography of the notebooks to record its various clicks.¹⁸ *!ke e:/xarra //ke* is officially translated as 'Unity in Diversity'; glossed more carefully from a language no longer spoken by any living South African, it can be rendered as: 'people who are different come together'.¹⁹

As a close friend and champion of John William Colenso, Wilhelm Bleek was of course linked to one of the most infamous religious controversies of nineteenth-century Britain – when a colonial bishop, spurred by the experience of translating the Pentateuch for his Zulu converts, sought to move beyond a strictly literal reading of the creation myths of the Old Testament – while Lucy Lloyd's father was a disgraced clergyman of a very different sort, a man who slipped from the ranks of respectability into financial ruin, and attempted to commandeer his estranged daughter's inheritance. After Bleek's death, Lloyd was involved in another fracas concerning the Grey collection that her brother-in-law had catalogued at the South African library in Cape Town. Outraged at the unprofessional, unpopular dilettante appointed to succeed her in cataloguing this collection of ethnographic material from around the world, Lloyd generated 'a low swell of minor scandal',²⁰ writing numerous letters to the *Cape Monthly Magazine*, to the governor Grey in Auckland as well as scholars in Europe, among them Huxley and Haeckel. In February 1880 this normally reticent woman even staged a sit-in within the Reading Room which drew a personal intervention from the Prime Minister, a moment which suggests the varied claims of patronage, gender and scientific institutions that play out in the history of the collection as a cultural object.²¹

Scandalous too is the fact that, after the death of Bleek's daughter Dorothy, the notebooks were for many years thought to be lost, and only rediscovered when a PhD student from abroad paid a library assistant at the University of Cape Town to locate them in the 1970s.²² The work that resulted, Roger Hewitt's *Structure, Meaning and Ritual in the Narratives of the Southern San* (1976), was the beginning of a wave of scholarly interest from anthropologists, rock art experts and historians. The largely fabricated but immensely

¹⁸ In the orthography adopted by Bleek, ! is the cerebral click now rendered (in written Xhosa, for example) as *q* ('iqhira'); / is the dental click written as *c* ('nceda'); // is the lateral click written as *x* ('amaXhosa'). Bleek gives a description of these in his *Comparative Grammar of South African Languages* (1862), 12-13.

¹⁹ Although this too has been contested: in a revealing coincidence, the phrase *!ke e:/xarra* appears in one of the *kukummi* related by /Han#kass'o in 1878. Midway through a bewildering and violently comic story about 'The Son of the Mantis, the Baboons, and the Mantis,' the phrase 'people who are different' is translated as 'strangers,' referring to the baboons who personify a threatening form of difference in the tales, and who in this variation attack the son of the Mantis, playing a surreal ball game with his eye. See Alan Barnard, '!Ke e: /xarra//ke: Multiple Origins and Multiple meanings of the Motto,' *African Studies* 62:2 (2003), 243-50.

²⁰ Bennun, *The Broken String*, 301.

²¹ See 'The Grey Collection Controversy', *Quarterly Bulletin of the South African Library* 9, (1954).

²² See Bank, *Bushmen in a Victorian World* and Bennun, *The Broken String* (345-6) for an account of this discovery. Hewitt's correspondence with the University of Cape Town is reproduced in Pippa Skotnes ed., *Claim to the Country: the Archive of Wilhelm Bleek and Lucy Lloyd*, (Athens: Ohio University Press: 2007).

influential works of Laurens van der Post; the 'Kalahari Debate' concerning the degree of interaction between hunter-gatherer and colonial societies; the history of rock art studies in southern Africa – all these are contentious topics intimately connected with the narratives, genealogies and historical testimony offered by the narrators in the garden village of Mowbray.

And even here, at the very site of transfer and transcription, it seems that a mythic version of events has inserted itself: an anecdotal narrative of how the informants lived in makeshift huts in the garden of the Bleek and Lloyd household, collaborating in a spirit of reciprocal translation and mutual empathy: '//Kabbo – ideal indigenous informant – presents complex, metaphoric accounts which are painstakingly recorded by Bleek, avatar of western enquiry'.²³ Yet as Andrew Bank has shown, despite it having attained the status of 'an almost taken-for-granted historical "fact" in existing scholarly accounts', there is little evidence to support this vision of an ideal exchange of words for things in the colonial garden.²⁴ His finely detailed reconstruction of the learning process approaches the notebooks as script rather than transcript, seeking to reconstruct the relationships and spaces of the Bleek-Lloyd home and discern a 'grammar of performance' from this diary of life and learning in the homestead.²⁵ And if Kipling's *Just So Story* 'How the Alphabet Was Made' has written language being created in an afternoon through a succession of phonetic correspondences, rebus drawings and felicitous coinages, then the process of establishing vocabulary at The Hill using household objects, children's books, illustrated travelogues and even a visit to the natural history museum was a procedure characterised by frequent misrecognition, and inflected by nostalgia in the somewhat unreliable accounts given by Wilhelm Bleek's daughter Dorothea.

As with much of the sentimentality that colours twentieth-century accounts of the San, it seems that this specific instance of the garden myth can be traced back to Van der Post. As a recent biography reveals, this self-styled colonial sage drew heavily on the material published by Bleek and Lloyd – the titles of his novels *A Story like the Wind* (1972) and *A Far off Place* (1974) are after all fragments extracted and adapted from the testimony recorded in '//Kabbo's Intended Return Home'. In *The Heart of the Hunter* (1961), Van der Post went some way to acknowledging the debt (at one point referring to their works as 'a sort of stone age Bible to me') but placed the stories in the mouths of living individuals whom he claimed to have met, and transferred the wealth of folklore and narrative from its point of

²³ Martin Hall, 'Earth and Stone: Archaeology as Memory' in Carli Coetzee and Sarah Nuttall eds, *Negotiating the Past: the Making of Memory in South Africa*, (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1998), 180-200. Hall is rehearsing the received idea here, not offering his own account.

²⁴ Andrew Bank, 'From Pictures to Performance: Early Learning at The Hill', *Kronos: Journal of Cape History*, 28, (2002), 66-101.

²⁵ Bank, *Bushmen in a Victorian World*, 83.

origin to an entirely different location.²⁶ The account of Bushman mythology dwells on the central role of the Mantis, even though this figure plays much less of a role in the San societies located further north; so too the narrator weaves in the exploits of Heitsi Eibib, a Khoi deity who had little to do with a society which this author always wanted to see as a lost world, a site of spiritual rejuvenation untouched by modernity: 'his understanding of the Bushman beliefs and myths he gleaned in the Kalahari was always confused with the rather different culture of the Northern Cape, which had died out many years earlier'.²⁷ In building an international reputation on steadily less credible versions of the indigenous peoples of southern Africa, Van der Post represents an extreme case of a recurring and unfortunate pattern when modern authors make use of such an archive: a tendency for ahistorical invention or theoretical extravagance to expand unchecked within a largely silent domain.²⁸

Perhaps one can compare such mystic travelogues with the controversy that attended a work like Theodor Strehlow's *Songs of Central Australia* (1972) and its subsequent transformation into Bruce Chatwin's bestselling, wildly comparative foray into the sacred world of the Aborigines, *The Songlines* (1987). As Chatwin's biographer shows, towards the end of his life the (white) anthropologist Strehlow adopted an absurdly custodial role of the songs and objects he had collected, deeming that modern Aboriginal communities were no longer worthy of them. By contrast, Chatwin's last work received mixed reactions from the anthropologists, archaeologists and other professionals who were casually fictionalised within it: 'his ability to encapsulate infuriated white experts whose hard-earned knowledge he relied on'.²⁹ For Toly Sawenko, the mapper of sacred sites on whom the central character of Arkady is based (and who has undergone a succession of backpackers beating a path to his door ever since), Chatwin had not worked through the appropriate protocols, had not sat down and discussed his subject with Aboriginal people, and had not explained that his ethics as a purveyor of a hybrid prose somewhere between travel writing and fiction were not the same as those of an anthropologist. Yet for the palaeontologist Bob Brain (who discovered evidence of the earliest controlled human use of fire at Swartkrans outside Johannesburg while Chatwin was visiting him in February 1984), this uncategorisable author was valuable precisely because of his similarity to a nineteenth-century synthesiser: 'there is a place again for that kind of generalist, someone who can

²⁶ Alan Barnard, 'The Lost World of Laurens van der Post', *Current Anthropology*, 30:1 (1989), 104-140.

²⁷ J. D. F. Jones, *Storyteller*, 230.

²⁸ A similar transposition of the Bleek and Lloyd material can be seen in the Markowitz collection, *The Rebirth of the Ostrich*, whose compiler acknowledges a large debt to the archive in his introduction, yet perhaps under the influence of van der Post, does not seem to realise that its narrators had nothing to do with the Nharo, !Kung, G/wi or G//ana peoples of the Kalahari.

²⁹ Nicolas Shakespeare, *Bruce Chatwin*, (London: Harvill Press, 1999), 412.

wander among specialised fields and pull things together'.³⁰

As with the records of Aranda song cycles, the Bleek and Lloyd Collection poses difficult questions about the suitability of specimens of modern prose and poetry for approaching the autochthonous, the submerged or sacred. Yet it does so in a context where raising awareness through tropes that might be seized on imaginatively could be said to count for more than an overly cautious discourse which remains insulated within the academy. Alan James, another poet who has adapted the words of Diä!kwain, /Han#kass'o, //Kabbo and others, stresses the variability and versatility of narrative motifs within their accounts, the sense of stories 'floating' from community to community, and a generosity in sharing them:

[T]here seems to have been no concept of intellectual property among the /Xam; no narrator could easily claim to be the owner (as opposed to the originator) of a story, and no story was not freely subject to change and development and adaptation in the mouth of another narrator.³¹

James remains a scrupulously cautious about his project – merely 'an introductory negotiation' rather than a substitute for the originals – and reacts with scepticism to the way that certain fragments are pressed into service as 'quotable bits of evidence' in scholarly papers or made to 'perform in the guise of poems'. Yet considering the floating, improvisatory element at the heart of such an oral tradition, does it matter that modern authors recycle and reshape it without explaining precisely what they are doing? And how is one to judge the claims of such compulsive storytelling against specific contexts and ethical constraints?

In 1996 there occurred another well-known scandal in the annals, this with regard to an exhibition at the South African National Gallery in Cape Town, and one which serves to outline the contours of the debate in a local context. Concerned that the well-known diorama of 'traditional' Bushman figures at the nearby South African Museum represented nothing but 'a sanitized translation of nineteenth-century freak shows', guest curator and graphic artist Pippa Skotnes created radically different type of cultural display, citing a familiarity with the Bleek and Lloyd Collection as her prime motivation:

The distance between the beauty and depth of this collection of oral traditions, recorded in the words of the people who owned them, and the image constructed by the people who controlled their fate was so great that no knowledge of the former seemed to have leaked through to the latter.³²

³⁰ Shakespeare, *Bruce Chatwin*, 2.

³¹ Alan James, *The First Bushman's Path*, (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2001), 22.

³² Pippa Skotnes, "Civilised Off the Face of the Earth": Museum Display and the Silencing of the /Xam', (*Poetics Today* 22:2, Summer 2001), 319, 309.

A landmark in South African museum practice, 'Miscast' included a room where a central grey brick structure – suggestive of church, fort, jail or tomb and adorned with twelve rifles and a metal flag – was surrounded by thirteen resin casts of San bodies, made by the museum in the early twentieth century yet stored out of sight in its vaults. The headless torsos and dismembered limbs were arranged in a formation which suggested, in the words of the curator, 'a symbolic Last Supper in which the Bushman body was the sacrifice' (313). [Fig. 39]

Perhaps unsurprisingly, on encountering an installation not unlike those of Damien Hirst, some visiting delegations who claimed descent from the San and Khoikhoi felt that postmodern curatorial practice had gone too far. However, this debate was soon upstaged and diluted by the appearance of a group in loincloths and skins who seemed to have stepped straight out of the original diorama. Inhabitants of a 'traditional' reserve stroke tourist attraction in the Cape fold mountains, these individuals were berated by a 'brown Afrikaner' pressure group in suits while the press looked on, as a sincere attempt to 'negotiate the presence of the Bushmen' risked becoming merely another of the incorrigibly transient narratives constructed by the media.

Nonetheless the book of the exhibition preserves its radical charge, with a 'parallel text' encroaching on the academic essays from the margins of each page: the casually vicious remarks of Charles Dickens filling up his *Household Words* column of 1858 – 'I call him a savage, and I call a savage something desirable to be civilised off the face of the earth'; the 1863 report of the magistrate Louis Anthing warning of 'a wholesale system of extermination' being conducted on the northern frontier,³³ anthropometric photographs, disembodied limbs, ripped pages, trophy heads with glassy eyes. Yet also rock art, facsimile pages of Bleek and Lloyd's scruffy notebooks, musical instruments, the drawings of rain bulls, ostriches and porcupine spoor done by Diä!kwain and /Han#kass'o: an arresting visual essay suggesting 'that images and representations serve less to illustrate texts, than to irritate the boundaries of the knowledge those texts are capable of encrypting'.³⁴

Despite the sometimes overwhelming sense of both verbal and all too actual violence against the Bushman body which the book conveys, Skotnes's notion of editor as curator is an intriguing and liberating one. As in the exhibition, where cabinets of jumbled detritus, an absence of information panels and the lack of any prescribed route meant that the viewer was required to adopt a personal, non-linear way through, there is in the book a sense of merely bringing objects into relation, allowing them to stand for themselves, of textual and

³³ Louis Anthing, Cape Parliamentary Papers: Report A39, (Cape Town: Government House, 1863), 5.

³⁴ Pippa Skotnes ed., Introduction, *Miscast: Negotiating the Presence of the Bushmen* (University of Cape Town Press, 1996), 23.

visual artefacts left intact and immanent to a remarkable degree given the limitations of a two dimensional page. Recasting the (textual) opposition between preservation and reproduction as one between (curatorial) storage and display, it is a publication which drives home the alternately sentimental and dreadful 'proximity of Dr Bleek's Bushmen', as his dismayed Mowbray neighbour and retired director of the Royal Observatory Sir Thomas Maclear put it in a diary entry of 7 April 1875, and bears witness to the need, almost the compulsion, to bring submerged elements of the South African imaginary to the surface.³⁵

The dedication of the book to the memory of Lucy Catherine Lloyd, and a prominent, haunting photograph of her in the exhibition [Fig. 40], caused further misgivings that a white academic was using the display for her personal, and inappropriate ends. Such a charge, in weighing the claims of feminist and racial exhumations, veers towards some of the most slippery ground in postcolonial historiography: which efforts of recuperation should take priority, who can adjudicate between them and what happens when they run in contrary motion? In any case, the figure of Lloyd – curiously, almost obsessively absenting herself from the crucial role she played – provides a fascinating sub-plot in the story of the archive, and one that emerges strikingly as one pages through *Specimens of Bushman Folklore*. After many difficult years of travel between England, Sweden, Wales and Germany, and in the face of almost total incomprehension and indifference from bookselling and scientific communities alike, this indisputable classic of world literature was finally brought into the public domain by Lloyd more than three decades after Bleek's death in 1875.

'With all its shortcomings...'

What Skotnes has called the 'perceptual abyss' (312) between the diorama and the archive is built into the work from the very beginning in the disjunction between Lloyd's short preface and the lengthy introduction by the pre-eminent, indeed inescapable, historian of nineteenth century South Africa, George McCall Theal, D.Lit LL.D etc. 'With all its shortcomings, after many and great difficulties, this volume of specimens of Bushman folklore is laid before the public...' – so begins the preface, a hesitant, self-effacing, anecdotal piece whose author never admits to having made the bulk of the transcriptions, but merely refers in passing to 'the other collector whose ear had been mainly accustomed to English sounds' (vii). Theal, who venerates the figure of Dr Bleek and yet, one senses, has barely skimmed the contents of the book he is introducing, overbearingly rehearses the historical predicament of a race

³⁵ Martin Hall, 'The Proximity of Dr Bleek's Bushman' in Skotnes ed. *Miscast*, 143-159.

'fated to perish' – 'These is no space in the world for palaeolithic man' – and in the economy of prejudice, uses the conventional infantilisation adopted toward the Khoisan to explain away the remarkable speed with which they learned Dutch and English: 'Savages though having the passions and the bodily strength of men, are children in mind and children in the facility with which they acquire other forms of speech than those of their parents' (xxxi).

In his accusation against Krog, Watson maintained that, in her decision to alter the original English translation of the /Xam as little as possible, Krog had appropriated the work of Lucy Lloyd; yet this was someone whose dedication was matched only by her reticence to claim any credit for it. As early as April 1871, Bleek wrote to Sir George Grey that his sister-in-law was 'already further advanced in the practical knowledge of this language than myself, and as she has a far quicker ear I shall have to trust to her observation in many ways. She is of course able to devote more time to this study than I can'.³⁶ While Bleek worked to catalogue the contents of the Grey Collection behind the Palladian façade of the South African library, Lloyd spent more and more time recording the words the informants – or as she preferred to call them 'givers of native literature' – and would even stay on in Mowbray when Wilhelm and Jemima left for summer holidays on the Indian seaboard at Kalk Bay. And yet in Bleek's first *Report* on his Bushman Work delivered to the Cape Parliament in 1873, as well as the *Specimens*, only a small *L* appears beside the page number of every passage she transcribed; at her insistence, there is no indication of what the initial stands for. On seeing the printers' proofs for the last of the *Reports* in 1889 (written by Lloyd in London after Bleek's death), she asked that the typesetters reduce the size of her name on the title page.³⁷

Aware of Lloyd's aptitude for the work, in codicil to his will, Bleek asked that his wife might deal with 'the practical matters connected with having Bushmen (men or women) on the place' so that his sister-in-law could continue with their 'joint Bushman studies'.³⁸ On the face of it, perhaps this recalls the baleful Mr Casaubon's request that his widow Dorothea remain enslaved to his unfinished, unfinishable 'Key to All Mythologies' in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*. No doubt a peculiarly Victorian sense of duty contributed to the creation of this archive, yet one senses a gradual departure from such a totalising, taxonomic urge: his increasing familiarity with the /Xam soon led Bleek to abandon the belief that it might have similarities with ancient Egyptian and so offer clues to an African ur-language spoken throughout the continent.

³⁶ Cited in Etaine Eberhard, 'Wilhelm Bleek and the Founding of Bushman Research' in Janette Deacon and Thomas A. Dowson eds., *Voices from the Past*. (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1996), 54.

³⁷ Neil Bennun, *The Broken String*, (London: Viking, 2004), 334.

³⁸ Cited in David Lewis-Williams ed., *Stories that Float from Afar*, (Cape Town: David Philip, 2000), 24.

His letters to the increasingly distant Grey show a growing sense of fascination with narrative in and of itself – ‘You would be exceedingly interested, if you could be with us, and see the gradual progress of our studies, and hear their wonderful stories’³⁹ – while the format the quarto notebooks conveys a desire to absorb every aspect of the circling, digressive performances. Right-hand pages were divided into two columns with the /Xam text entered in one and the other reserved for English translation, this done over period of days or even weeks, then checked with narrators. Further observations or clarifications offered by them during this process were entered on the left-hand pages of the notebooks, becoming in the printed text of *Specimens* a bewildering array of asterisks and footnotes which make the accounts confusing and sometimes contradictory, yet also greatly richer and more nuanced.

No doubt, the entire book could in one sense be regarded as an extended anatomisation of the observer’s paradox; as Chapman remarks, ‘it is difficult to decide whether the circularity of the tale betokens the style of the oral imagination or the patience of the tellers in accommodating themselves to the laborious process of Bleek and Lloyd’s longhand transcription...The emphasis, one way or another, is probably a fine one’.⁴⁰ Is the aberrant grammar (where present tense fragments are embedded in longer past tense narratives) an example of in-built dramatisation, evidence of the seamlessness of a pre-Cartesian cosmology, or merely a result of problems in transcription? Abstracted from the living context of oral performance, a fidelity to the process of story dictation must often have worked against its recitation: Lloyd describes in her preface how //Kabbo ‘watched patiently until a sentence had been written down, before proceeding with what he was telling’ (x).

Nonetheless, as many of those who have worked with the collection can testify, the contributions of the different narrators do emerge as entirely distinct, each with a set of narrative traits all of their own. //Kabbo’s accounts are digressive, considering things from multiple viewpoints, sidetracked by circumstantial detail, yet also curiously spare. Di!kwain’s contributions are more talkative yet also serious, sometimes didactic; those of /Han#kass’o have a peculiar structural integrity, reinforced by songs and chanted refrains. And just as Lloyd’s term for the /Xam men and women with whom she worked so closely is more personal and more particular than the later anthropological convention – ‘informant’ – so too the individual contributions are never collapsed into an anonymous collectivity, the convenient fiction of the ‘ethnographic present’, that merges time and person. As the rock art researcher David Lewis-Williams puts it, ‘A /Xam equivalent for ‘the Nuer herder’ or ‘the Trobriand Islander’ and the like, the anonymous sources of so much ethnographic information, is never allowed to take shape’ (40).

³⁹ Letter of 9 October 1871, cited in *Voices from the Past*, 55.

⁴⁰ Michael Chapman, *Southern African Literatures*, (London: Longman, 2006), 23.

The precarious moment of this encounter in both personal and historical terms is brought into focus when one considers the work of Bleek's daughter Dorothea, who also became a world-renowned expert on the Bushmen, yet one of a quite different cast. Her grammatical sketches, comparative vocabularies and journal articles evince a lifetime's devotion to scholarship; she brought to completion the *Bushman Dictionary* begun by her father, and its publication in 1956 marked a century since he first noted interest in the Bushmen. Yet in her foreword to the 1924 volume, *The Mantis and his Friends* – an unlikely children's book stitched together from the confusing and sometimes plotless exploits of the trickster deity //Kaggen – the notion of the Bushman as carefree, idle child has reasserted itself, while the perceptual abyss yawns again in her introduction to the 1930 volume, *Rock-Paintings in South Africa*. The two volumes are indicative of how, in the twentieth-century popular imagination, the 'Bushman' became associated with children's tales and rock art reproductions for the coffee table market, all too often riddled with casual generalisations and faulty research.

Considering whether the extraordinary scenes copied by G. W. Stow were painted 'for magic purposes or for decoration' D. F. Bleek ventures that 'Knowledge of the lazy, improvident Bushman character makes the first answer seem highly improbable'. The requisite seriousness of mind and artistic discipline 'would be absolutely out of keeping with the thoughtless, care-free cast of mind of the race. Whenever there is plenty and the sun shines they are happy; anxiety for the future never worries them'.⁴¹ Nonetheless, in the same piece, she writes of visiting in the Prieska and Kenhardt districts in 1910, the places where //Kabbo and his family had lived, trying in vain to collect oral material even as her 76 year-old aunt prepared the testimony of the 1870s for printing. 'The folklore was dead', she remembered in another context, 'Killed by a life of service among strangers and the breaking up of families'.⁴²

As an apt symbol of the lost opportunities and unsaid words that haunt all those that have been set down, on the cover of *Specimens of Bushman Folklore* is an etching taken from a photograph of an informant called //Xakenan, also known as 'Mikki Streep', an old woman bent over to show how a digging stick was used when weighted with a bored stone. One of a group of northern Cape San who were offered sanctuary by the Cape government in the suburb of Salt River, she was the last giver of native literature recorded by Lucy Lloyd, who stayed 'a little while...but, could not make herself happy at Mowbray. She longed to return to her own country, so that she might be buried with their forefathers'.⁴³ She and her

⁴¹ George William Stow and Dorothea F Bleek, *Rock Paintings in South Africa*. (London: Methuen, 1930), xxiv.

⁴² D. F. Bleek, 'Bushman folklore', *Africa* 2 (1929), 311.

⁴³ Bleek and Lloyd, *Bushman Folklore*, xi.

relatives disappeared overnight, having asked a policeman directions out of town and begun walking north.

The breaking string: the archive and the poets

People were those who
Broke for me the string
Therefore,
The place () became like this to me,
On account of it,
Because the string was that which broke for me.
Therefore,
The place does not feel to me,
As the place used to feel to me,
On account of it.
For,
The place feels as if it stood open before me,
() Because the string has broken for me.
Therefore,
The place does not feel pleasant to me,
On account of it.

Reproduced as it appears on page 237 of *Specimens of Bushman Folklore*, across from the notation of the /Xam words spoken to Lucy Lloyd by Diä!kwain in July 1875, 'The Broken String' is a language event that has reverberated in the poetic imagination even when the Bleek and Lloyd Collection was all but forgotten. A version of it appears in Jack Cope and Uys Krige's 1968 *Penguin Book of South African Verse*, and again in that edited by Stephen Gray in 1989, though classified as a San 'traditional' which does not indicate the painful, personal circumstances of its telling. Asterisks in Bleek and Lloyd explain how !Nuin-/kuïten, a *!giten* ('sorcerer' according to the original transcribers, now translated as shaman), had been on out-of-body journey in the form of a lion and had killed 'a Boer ox.' The farmer raised one of the local, mounted bands known as a commando, pursued and shot him in reprisal. Mortally wounded, he limped back to the camp and described with his last breath how these people had destroyed his connection to the water bull resident in the sky, urging Diä!kwain's father Xa:ä-tin to continue singing the old songs, making rain in the old way: 'Now that 'the string is broken', the former 'ringing sound in the sky' is no longer heard by the singer, as it had been in the magician's lifetime.'

How then should one approach such a fragment? Enlisting the aid of structural anthropology and rock art research developed from the 1970s onwards, one could note its blend of real and non-real components, or the conflation of ancient and modern as narrators' attempts to relate 'traditionary' material for Bleek and Lloyd became ineluctably entangled

with the violence of the colonial frontier. One could read it alongside the dense and powerful narratives of the Early Race contained elsewhere in the collection, the often told creation myth of shape-shifting humans who mapped the country for the /Xam, eventually resolving into their proper forms of animals, stars, wind and rain. Perhaps one could attempt to chart the horizontal and vertical axes of /Xam cosmology, from camp to hunting ground, and earth to the heavens, 'mediated by water which both wells up in waterholes and falls from the sky.'⁴⁴ Or describe it instead as 'a great and complex web of *signs* that wrote themselves across the landscape and into the lives and bodies of those capable of understanding them' as Neil Bennun puts it in an elegant biographical account of the collection which takes its name and inspiration from this very piece.⁴⁵ And although, as Peter Carey comments of latter day attempts to evoke the songlines and dreamings of the Aborigines, we always sense that 'we are getting The Dummies' Guide' – the land remains 'like the index to a bible which we cannot read'⁴⁶ – it seems certain that the intrusion of settlers into the northern Cape heartland of the /Xam-ka !ei – 'the dust of the /Xam' – constituted a profoundly spiritual violence. Throughout southern Africa, San peoples resisting the terror of commandos would fight on against suicidal odds rather than surrender the land which was literally all they had to lose.

As a writer fascinated by man's inroads on place, acutely alert to *The Presence of the Earth* (1995), in the title of a more recent collection, it is hardly surprising that Stephen Watson felt drawn to this archive. In his 'A Kromrivier Sequence', a winter sojourn in the Cederberg mountains where so much rock art has been found becomes an exercise in logging details of landform and light, water and silence, as we watch a river 'braid itself, again unbraided itself in channels / of soft water-cut sandstone'.⁴⁷ His 1997 volume *A Writer's Diary* contains a prose account of this ascetic vigil in which he remarks that, 'even if the archaeologists in their middens might argue otherwise', the remnants of a people like the Bushmen are negligible: the landscapes of the Cederberg are 'haunted only by their own geology. The sole signs of bloodshed are the faded stains of iron oxide in the boulders'.⁴⁸ In its attempt 'to get back into language that original, aboriginal haunting – in Lorca's words, not "forms but the marrow of forms"' (30), much of his *oeuvre* could be described as a simultaneous exercise in and mediation on the curious transaction of signs in the natural environment for linguistic counters, a poetics valuably estranged from the academic postmodernism of the 1980s and 90s which claimed an inevitable disconnection between the

⁴⁴ J. D. Lewis-Williams, 'A Visit to the Lion's House' in Deacon ed. *Voices from the Past*.

⁴⁵ Neil Bennun, *The Broken String*, 234.

⁴⁶ Peter Carey, *Thirty Days in Sydney*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2001), 31.

⁴⁷ Stephen Watson, *The Other City: Selected Poems 1977-1999*, (Cape Town: David Philip, 2000), 127.

⁴⁸ Stephen Watson, *A Writer's Diary*, (Cape Town: Quellerie, 1997), 84.

word and the earth. A poem like 'The Sleep of the Pines' seems to pick up the circling refrains of San orature even as it describes, perhaps naturalises, an alien botanical presence:

Karossed deep in green, in the dryness after frost
in a kaross of pine-needles that is frost to that green,
the pines, these long mornings, sleep gathered to a distance
where they stare in the cold, the stone plateaus near the snow (125)

The Return of the Moon then, is a collection of where the fragments of Bleek and Lloyd are to be carefully brought into a modern poetic idiom through an alchemical reaction with the 'framing device' of Watson's own voice, enabling him 'to cast into relief certain features which would almost certainly have been lost even in the best prose translation'.⁴⁹ While Markowitz limited himself to recorded Bushman vocabulary in compiling his volume, and while James was praised for the degree to which he allowed his versions of /Xam texts to resist his own voice, those of Watson seem to have emerged in a more personal manner from an already existing body of work, its ongoing critical preoccupations and pre-rehearsed cadences. In a carefully considered introduction, he remarks how what seemed the purely technical challenges in translating the /Xam stories – their 'verbal surface', the syntactical spirallings and 'word-salads' which outdo those of Gertrude Stein, the 'natural surrealism' of many of the extracts and the betrayals involved in 'rounding them off' – led to more acute appreciation of the conceptual vacuum in understanding the Bushmen and the stereotypes which rush to fill it: the sentimentalising 'little Bushman syndrome; a hankering to find 'the soul of the Bushmen' as an antidote to modern, technological societies; a tendency to wistfulness and melancholy that results of knowing their historical fate so that the elegiac mode 'comes to have the force of gravity whenever one sets to work' (17).

In Watson's version, 'The Song of the Broken String' becomes a series of overlapping variations in four stanzas, the last of which reads:

Because
of this string,
because of a people
breaking the string,
this earth, my place
is the place
of something –
a thing broken –
that does not
stop sounding,
breaking within me. (59-60)

⁴⁹ Watson, *The Return of the Moon*, 16.

Reminiscent of T. S. Eliot's 'Ash Wednesday' – 'Because I do not hope to turn again / Because I do not hope' – where through a ritualised, incantatory repetition, the borrowings shift from sterility to a verbal music which 'takes a world and derives the world from it...squeezing and squeezing the word until it yields a full juice of meaning', here the counters of meaning become unmoored from their original word order to emphasise the sense of an internal, psychic breakage.⁵⁰ Indeed, as evinced by his invocation of Eliot's transformative (as opposed to derivative) borrowings, as well as the references to Stein, Robert Lowell and the mention of Ezra Pound as 'the inventor of Chinese poetry for our time', Watson is clearly working within a the long shadow of high Modernism at its most uncompromising.

Yet for her part, Antjie Krog surely has comparable credentials. Her celebrated account of covering the Truth and Reconciliation as a journalist, *Country of My Skull* (1998), is concerned with the matter of land, trauma and testimony at the deepest of levels, while her next prose work in English, *A Change of Tongue* (2003) uses transformational grammar and translation – its inevitable losses and serendipitous gains – as a wider metaphor in exploring South Africa's political translation. If Watson could be described as a sedimentary poet, proceeding by the slow accumulation of carefully rendered details, her language tends more towards the igneous or metamorphic, twisted into shapes that are experimental, always personal and often vulnerable. From her very first, explosive entry into the world of Afrikaans poetry at age seventeen with 'My Mooi Land' ('My Beautiful Land'), her verse has balanced a compulsion to explore the Karoo surrounds of the family farm at Kroonstad with a painful awareness that a closeness of fit between land and language could be invoked for political (and patriarchal) ends as proof of the Afrikaner's 'natural' ownership. 'had I a language I could write for you were land my land' begins one of her most well-known poems, yet soon makes explicit how a divisive history inevitably expresses itself through an indifferent, recalcitrant landmass:

me you never wanted
 me you never wanted
 time and again you shook me off
 you rolled me out
 land, slowly I became nameless in my mouth⁵¹

Yet unlike the many English-language poets of empty space, Krog avoids the self-enclosure and solipsism which often attend such communings with the natural world. As her

⁵⁰ T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909-1962*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), 93. *For Lancelot Andrewes: Essays in Style and Order*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), 20.

⁵¹ 'land', (trans. Karen Press), Antjie Krog, *Down to My Last Skin: Poems*, (Johannesburg: Random House, 2000), 114.

translations of not only the /Xam records but also oratures from each of South Africa's indigenous, official (and *living*) languages suggest,⁵² her entire *oeuvre* is marked by an openness to linguistic otherness, and by the sense of Afrikaans as only one of many, interacting African languages. She mentions growing up with Eugene Marais' remarkable 1927 collection of *Dwaalstories* (Wandering Stories) and writes that her prime motivation for *the stars say 'tsau'* (published simultaneously as *die sterre sê 'tsau'*) was an attempt at bringing the poems back into Afrikaans. In the introduction, she even claims that the 'the Afrikaans sub-structure of the material' – supposedly present in word orders like 'Hold thou strongly fast for me the hartebeest skin' – 'made it easy for me to identify with the original voices' (10).

Since Bleek did mediate through a broken form of Dutch with his first narrator /Alkúnta during the learning process, the words of the notebooks are indeed a complex tissue of embedded linguistic residues. The young teacher remarks at one point that 'de bushman tal praat is baie swer die noi' ('speaking the Bushman language is very difficult for the young lady');⁵³ farmyard animals appear as 'beest' ('cow') and 'huhness' ('hoenders': 'chickens') and even in the evocation of 'the Bushmen's letters' in the printed volume of 1911, //Kabbo explains that //gu means 'de bloem tijd' ('the flowering time') of the northern Cape.⁵⁴ And if the clean lines of rock art appeal to a certain kind of literary modernist, [Figs. 41-2] then one could also invoke as a counter-aesthetic those bewildering cave paintings where animals, elongated figures, entoptic phenomena and therianthropes are all superimposed upon each other, creating a palimpsest which is deeply unsettling to a modern sensibility trained to locate and relate discrete forms, worked on or worked out in isolation. As displays in the Origins Centre, Johannesburg and the South African Museum, Cape Town reveal, the nature of southern African rock art is layered, accretive, tactile. Rubbed surfaces attest to the importance of touching the pigmented surface, while the most densely painted shelters were surely sites of long human habitation and shared power.

Briefly discussing her 'highly personal and probably arbitrary work method', Krog mentions how she employed 'the natural way in which the narratives "fell" into verse' (10), attuned to the jagged, *vers libre* created as English translation was strictly aligned with /Xam text, never able to evolve into grammatically coherent sentences, punctuated at random by commas which create drifting adverbial phrases. As such, 'the song of the broken string' which opens her collection remains virtually unchanged from its original incarnation,

⁵² Antjie Krog, *Met Woorde Soos Met Kerse: Inheemse Verse Uitgesoek en Vertaal deur Antjie Krog* (Indigenous Verses Compiled and Translated by Antjie Krog), Cape Town: Kwela, 2002. This volume includes translations of recorded oratures from not only isiZulu, isiXhosa, Setswana, Northern and Southern Sotho but also isiNdebele, siSwati, Tshivenda and Xitsonga.

⁵³ BC 151, L124, cited Bank, *Bushmen in a Victorian World*, 84.

⁵⁴ Bleek and Lloyd, *Specimens*, 337.

appearing alongside a sepia photograph and short biography of its narrator, the man sentenced for killing a farmer who had threatened his family, yet known in Mowbray as the Bleek's 'pet murderer' on account of his gentleness. [Figs. 43] With Krog's version of 'die gebreekte snaar', however, one witnesses another link in a remarkable chain of translation and re-translation: the words of the collection have now passed from the /Xam via broken Dutch into Victorian English and now into the Afrikaans of a digraphic South African author who writes and publishes simultaneously in two languages:

mense was dit
wat die snaar vir my gebreek het
daarom
het die plek vir my só geword
as gevolg daarvan
omdat hulle die snaar gebreek het
en ek die trillende geluid deur die lug nie meer kan hoor nie.
daarom
voel die plek nie meer vir my
soos die plek eens vir my gevoel het nie
as gevolg daarvan
want
die plek voel asof dit sommerso oopstaan
omdat die snaar gebreek is vir my
daarom
voel die plek vir my vreemd
as gevolg daarvan (13)

In this much shorter rendering of the famous lament, a formality of diction is retained ('as gevolg daarvan', 'on account of it') and a sense of difficulty in articulation perhaps augmented by the double negative of the language. Yet equally, the lack of capitalisation, the spoken emphases ('só geword') and freely coined compounds of Afrikaans ('sommerso oopstaan') evoke a rootedness and colloquialism which has much in common with Marais. His preface to the *Dwaalstories* leaves one in no doubt that the Bleek and Lloyd Collection is a major presence at a formative moment of Afrikaans lyric poetry; it also gives a sense of where the unwritten preservation of such narratives may have proceeded, and why, as Krog maintains, there is a sense of historical rightness in bringing excerpts of the archive back into Afrikaans.

***dwaal*: (v.): roam, rove, wander, stray, struggle, err, be in error**

Marais' stories appeared in magazine format in the early 1920s, but even before this a writer of the *Eerste Taal Beweging* (First Language Movement), Gideon Retief von Wielligh, had translated and anthologised excerpts in his *Boesman-Stories*. Published in four volumes between 1919 and 1921, the last of these makes explicit reference to Bleek and Lloyd and

translates into early Afrikaans passages entitled 'Boesmans in die Breekwater' and 'Uit die Breekwater huis-toe.' So too, his recollections of totally bilingual /Xam narrators in Namaqualand, Bushmanland and the Hantam between 1870 and 1883 bear out Marais' claim of how 'when the Bushman language was dying out, the narrators transferred the stories into their own *eienaardige* (idiosyncratic) Afrikaans' (i).⁵⁵

Yet unlike those of Von Williegh, Markowitz or Van der Post, the *Dwaalstories* are not simple relocations and retellings of the Bleek and Lloyd material (in geographical terms the collection stems largely from Marais' time in the Waterberg district north of Pretoria, and his acquaintance with an itinerant storyteller there named 'Ou Hendrik'). They are, however, everywhere permeated by its metaphors, and its deep narrative grammar. In footnotes we are told about 'dinksnaar' (the 'thinking strings' through which the narrators expressed a model of consciousness), 'Die Rëenbul' ('the rain bull' whose trailing legs mediated between earth and sky) and several other motifs from the Bleek and Lloyd Collection that have subsequently become part of the South African imaginary: 'As 'n mens begrawe word, kom daar 'n wind wat al sy spore doodwaai, sodat niks van hom agter kan bly nie' (29).

In one of the most celebrated pieces from the *Dwaalstories*, 'Die Lied van die Rëen', (a poem subsequently reprinted with minor alterations in his *Gedigte* of 1925), the metamorphic powers associated with animal skin bags in the recorded folklore (it is in these that the trickster god Kaggen changes shape) are harnessed to the metaphoric possibilities of language to generate a chain of images where – as with so many oral repertoires – the mystical and the mischievous are held in a fine balance:

Eers oor die bergtop loer sy skelm,
 En haar oë is skaam;
 En sy lag saggies.
 En van ver af wink sy met die een hand
 Haar armbande blink en haar krale skitter;
 Saggies roep sy.
 Sy vertel die winde van die dans
 ...
 En haar koperring blink in die wegraak van die son.
 Op haar voorkop is die vuurpluim van die berggier;
 Sy trap af van die hoogte;
 Sy sprei die vaal karos met altwee arms uit;
 Die asem van die wind raak weg.
 O, die dans van ons Ousus (19)

⁵⁵ Exploring the swiftness of the language death remarked on by Dorothea Bleek, the linguist Anthony Traill amasses evidence for a long history of bilingualism on this 'forgotten frontier' of the Cape Colony, remarking that 'it is intriguing to think that some of the stories were being told to Von Williegh at Katkop and Limoenkop only a few kilometres away from 'Grass' /Xam, at the very time that Bleek and Lloyd were recording them from #Kasin and Diä!kwain in Cape Town.' "'!Khwa-Ka Hhouiten Hhoutien, The Rush of the Storm": The Linguistic Death of /Xam' in Skotnes ed., *Claim to the Country*, 145.

Discussing ‘the pure poetry of his so-called Bushman (San) stories and songs – work in a vein unsurpassed by any subsequent Afrikaans writer’, Jack Cope remarks that it is difficult to convey the ‘feel’ of Marais’ stories to someone unfamiliar with Afrikaans.⁵⁶ So too his biographer considers the particular quality of this ‘aboriginal poetry’ and suggests how it must have resulted from an intimacy with black Africans and their way of life in a moment which reimagines and reverses the Mowbray garden myth: ‘To judge by his loving depiction of the aboriginal people he must have been intimately associated with them and “slept in a grass hut”, one leading critic is quoted as saying’.⁵⁷

Yet as Kannemeyer suggests in his history of Afrikaans literature, it is the flexible, transformative attitude to the tradition of the *Boesmanvertelling* rather than any quest for folkloric purity that gives the collection its unity, and makes it such an important influence on later writers: its graphic language and irrational elements are regarded as a foreshadowing of the experimentalism of Jan Rabie and Breyten Breytenbach in the 1950s and 60s, while the embedded poems represent the first examples of non-metric verse in Afrikaans literature, a closer approximation of the speaking voice which was in turn taken up by Breytenbach and Krige.⁵⁸ And surely the work of translation itself is evidence enough of empathy and intimacy, which makes it fitting that Cope and Krige’s rendering of this fragment (also included in their landmark 1968 anthology) evinces a valuable, all too rare instance of dialogue between English and Afrikaans poetic traditions, and a moment in which the poised balance of life-giving rain and grey, blanketing absence is masterfully maintained:

She spreads out the grey kaross with both her arms;
The breath of the wind is lost.
Oh, the dance of our sister!⁵⁹

One of Cope’s own poems included in the anthology, ‘Rock Painting’, seems to take its cue from such transformative borrowing, beginning with figures scratched or shaded on a rock surface and combining this African *ekphrasis* with his own considerable ‘Bushman work’ evidently undertaken in the creation of the volume. The language moves deftly between such visible, material traces and the recorded narratives (the legend of the origin of the Milky Way, for example, as wood ash thrown into the sky) in a chant-like rhythm which seeks to distil the immanence of these ‘shadow[s] on the stone’, and to imagine a lifeworld permeated by the numinous:

⁵⁶ Jack Cope, *The Adversary Within*, (Cape Town: David Philip, 1982), 14.

⁵⁷ Leon Rousseau, *The Dark Stream*, (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 1982) 267.

⁵⁸ J. C. Kannemeyer, *Geskiedenis van die Afrikaanse Literatuur*, vol. I, (Cape Town and Pretoria: Academica, 1978), 234.

⁵⁹ Jack Cope and Uys Krige eds, *The Penguin Book of South African Verse*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), 191-2.

The eland is standing just so
thorns in the fireplace piled
the word is an arrow without death
 song a sleeping child

Listen to the cough at the waterhole
mantis marks a shadow on the stone
the story is a hunter returning
 who does not come alone (83)

Like Peter Sacks' evocations of painted shelters in the Drakensberg,⁶⁰ or the 'parched, cryptic ones' of Douglas Livingstone's *A Littoral Zone* (1991),⁶¹ or Jeremy Cronin's inhabiting of cave sites in a 'Venture into the Interior' entirely unlike that of Van der Post –

mouth or
 cave-site of word
root, birdbone,
 shells of meaning
left in our mouths
by thousands of years of
 human occupation.⁶²

– it is a poem that can be read alongside the scholarly expositions of southern African rock art which themselves draw heavily on the Bleek and Lloyd Collection. In several of his books, the doyen of rock art studies David Lewis-Williams explains his debt to the archive not as a simple means of decoding of the paintings, but as a source of apprehending the deep metaphoric structures of rain-making, trance and shamanic potency which run through the narratives and across the rock surfaces of what might well be the longest continuous artistic tradition in human history.⁶³ In a characteristically intrepid discussion of the Linton Panel (which supplies the figures on the South African Coat of Arms), Lewis-Williams surmises that, just as one inevitably reaches for the figurative in describing otherworldly states of being ('It is *like* death', 'It is *like* being submerged underwater'), so the artists surrounded human figures with fish and eel-like creatures to convey out-of-body shamanistic experience.⁶⁴ Dotted lines weaving in and out of the rock face are taken to imply that the very substrate of the painting was conceived as a porous boundary between the

⁶⁰ Peter Sacks, *In These Mountains*, (London: Collier Macmillan, 1986).

⁶¹ Douglas Livingstone, *A Littoral Zone*, (Cape Town: Carrefour Press, 1991), 45.

⁶² Jeremy Cronin, *Inside*, [1983], (London: Jonathan Cape, 1987), 37.

⁶³ J. D. Lewis-Williams, *Believing and Seeing: Symbolic Meanings in Southern San Rock Paintings*, (London: Academic, 1981).

⁶⁴ J. D. Lewis-Williams, 'The World of Man and the World of Spirit: An Interpretation of the Linton Rock Paintings,' Margaret Shaw Lecture, (Cape Town: South African Museum, 1988).

literal and figurative, that the pigment itself could act as ‘a solvent that makes the crack in the rock face more permeable’.⁶⁵

As ever, one sees here the danger of all-encompassing theories being advanced in a domain where very little can contradict them. To reproduce and discuss rock art in scholarly forums is to abstract it from the specific sites which lend it so much of its power. So too it risks passing over the diversity and fragility of many panels, their slow irreversible fading, the effects of weathering and the way that the chemical alteration of their substrate can produce outlandish forms which might invite mythological explanations where none were warranted. [Figs. 44-5] Yet the combination of gradually layered palimpsest and heightened transparency that some of the great San paintings evoke does tempt one to reverse the normal direction of exegesis and evolve a reading of the literature based on this non-alphabetic but complex visual ‘script’. In recent years, rock art researchers have turned increasingly to the record of the ‘colonial Bushmen’, those panels of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries where horses, wagons, figures wearing sun hats and in one case even a European galleon intrude onto the rock surface. In several of these later paintings, the figure of the shaman appears to swell in size, a phenomenon which has been explained in terms of a shift from a largely communal, egalitarian social organisation to a context in which leaders and negotiators were required to deal with the encroaching claims of pastoralists and settlers.⁶⁶ It is even tempting to imagine that on these rock surfaces one can discern what Coetzee’s Magistrate describes in a famous passage as the shift from the ‘recurrent spinning time of the cycle of seasons’ to the ‘the jagged time of rise and fall, of beginning and end, of catastrophe’ (133).

Rock, art, writing

In his selection of previously unpublished extracts from the Bleek and Lloyd records, *Stories That Float from Afar* (2000), Lewis-Williams is at pains to stress just such irruptions of historical trauma contained within the archive, suggesting that it is prose which best brings out the difficulty and digression of the records, that poetry risks ‘a prettification of the texts’.⁶⁷ Certainly, as the popularity of Van der Post’s Kalahari fables and their many imitations attest, Khoisan peoples ‘have long laboured under the stereotype of being “essential poets”’, in the

⁶⁵ David Lewis-Williams, *The Mind in the Cave: Consciousness and the Origins of Art*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 2002).

⁶⁶ Thomas Dowson, ‘Painting as Politics: Exposing Historical Processes in Hunter-Gatherer Rock Art,’ in Megan Biesele et al. eds., *Hunters and Gatherers in the Modern World: Conflict, Resistance and Self-Determination*, (New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2000), 413-26.

⁶⁷ David Lewis-Williams, *Stories that Float from Afar*, (Cape Town: David Philip, 2000), 36-38.

words of Duncan Brown, 'somehow removed from the harsh (and prosaic) concerns of survival and history'.⁶⁸ Yet reading the plain, stripped-down accounts of this volume, one has a sense that the aesthetic of the collection – by no means some inherent, static quality but rather the result (like the rock art itself) of collaborative, accretive effort – has been somewhat stifled.

Moreover, reservations about 'prettification' surely imply a rather narrow conception of what poetry might be, and the range of effects at its disposal. In a poem by Patrick Cullinan – which Watson appraises as a move beyond the circumscribed subject matter and linguistic deadness which he sees as characterising much English-language poetry in South Africa – one is given a chilling intimation of extinction. An unnamed tribe flees north through a forbidding, non-specific landscape that has something in common with Coetzee's displaced evocations of the colonial frontier:

The women and the children sleep
In the warm heart of the camp.
It is not death I fear
But the thought that birth will stop.
I fear the end of my people.⁶⁹

Nonetheless, Alan James is surely right to suggest that in selecting excerpts to work on, poets have inevitably steered away from the many extended transcripts in the notebooks, those which resist reduction to verse because of their length, complexity and the virtual absence of the 'manipulable qualities appropriate to short poems' (21).

The exception to this, however, and one of the longer narrative pieces that has attracted literary and critical attention comparable to that afforded 'The Song of the Broken String', is the autobiographical account published in 1911 as '//Kabbo's Intended Return Home'. In this remarkable transcript, and the three shorter excerpts which precede it, the /Xam rainmaker describes his road into captivity and his longing to set out north again, to leave the 'women's work' and the genteel confinement of the Mowbray villa for the flat-topped hill of the Bitterpits in the northern Cape. To reproduce only a small portion of its sparse imagery, insistent cadences and sense of a mental journey often rehearsed:

Therefore, I must sit waiting for the Sundays on which I remain here, on which I continue to teach thee. I do not again await another moon, for this moon is the one about which I () told thee. Therefore, I desired that it should do thus, that it should return for me. For I have sat waiting for the boots, that I must put on to walk in; which are strong for the road. () For, the sun will go along, burning strongly. And then, the earth becomes hot, while I still am going along halfway. I must go together with the warm sun, while the ground is hot. For a little road

⁶⁸ Duncan Brown, *To Speak of This Land: Identity and Belonging in South Africa and Beyond*, (Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2006), 28.

⁶⁹ Patrick Cullinan, *Selected Poems: 1961-1964*, (Cape Town: Snailpress, 1994).

it is not. For, it is a great road; it is long. I should reach my place, when the trees are dry. For I shall walk, letting the flowers become dry while I follow the path.

Then, autumn will quickly be (upon) us there; () when I am sitting at my (own) place. For, I shall not go to other places; for, I must remain at my (own) place, the name of which I have told my Master; he knows it; he knows, (having) put it down. And thus () my name is plain (beside) it. (315-17).

For Von Wielligh, the first anthologist to reproduce and translate parts of the collection, 'Die geskiedenis van "Kabbo" (Jantjie) is so belangwekkend dat ons uit "Specimens of Bushman Folklore" ook die volgende verhaal van sy terugkeer huis-toe aanhaal. Let op die redeneervermoë' (135). For Chapman it represents 'some of the most powerful testimony in our literature' and a reminder of how such records must be approached 'not only as a route back to the beliefs of a mythic age, but as a document of loss and longing within the times of colonial history' (31). In his account of the relation between narrative and dwelling in southern African literature, Brown offers an extended reading of it as a text which, while showing a deep spiritual embeddedness within the natural world which one might see as a characteristic of the premodern, also demonstrates 'an extraordinary modernity' (15).

As //Kabbo describes the three names which 'float to my place', he includes his colonial title, while his claims of belonging based on genealogy and knowledge of the hunting ground run seamlessly into a sense of cultural transaction and material bargaining, an awareness of the powers of literacy and a frank admission of his own need for certain technologies: the boots which were promised to him, the gun 'which takes care of an old man... It (the gun) is strong against the wind. It satisfies a man with food in the very middle of the cold' (317). Discussing the unexpected poetry that results from this personal, opportunistic selection and recombination of the motifs of colonial conquest, Brown compares it to a passage from Chatwin where an aboriginal leader surprises the narrator by proving himself an adept map reader: 'like Kabbo with his various – and in his view equivalent – claims to his land... Alan is presented as being quite able to work across the so-called epistemological and cognitive divisions of tradition and modernity, the spiritual and the scientific, the spoken and the written: to measure off a songline on a map' (34).

In writing the foreword to Brown's book, Antjie Krog is clearly attuned to the mixing of ancient and modern in this 'rarest and most moving of stories', and the way that its narrator seems to be self-reflexively using the mechanism of the recording process to remind his hosts of their obligations: 'in a thoroughly postmodern way, Kabbo dictated to them that they should write down that he was wanting to return to the place of his family and his ancestors; the moment the moon turned, he would be going' (xiii-xiv). Again, when the passage is translated into Afrikaans, the stilted diction seems to resolve into something more freely spoken and colloquial – we read of 'vrouenswerk', 'rokende mense' and how 'ek sal eers 'n rukkie sit' (50) – in a situation where the *lingua franca* of the Cape colonial frontier seems to

unlock or reclaim elements submerged in the Victorian English of the original.

Here perhaps one can discern a sense of translation as an action which, following Walter Benjamin, not only extends the afterlife of the original but also reveals its instabilities and its suppressed longings, the limits of the language available to it: 'It is the task of the translator to release in his own language that pure language which is under the spell of another, to liberate the language imprisoned in a work in his recreation of that work.'⁷⁰ Discussing the process of translating her poems into English, Krog refers to the problems posed by 'the different forms of spoken Afrikaans – so laden with power relationships, memory and longing – which are impossible to reproduce in another language'.⁷¹ In a reverse procedure which releases just such linguistic echoes, when one reads a sentence like 'Daarom het ek al die sondae hier gesit en wag, my baas', it is impossible not to be put in mind of the twentieth-century and apartheid resonances simply not present in the English word 'master'.

Yet the limit of such a 'floating', postmodern reading attuned primarily to the play of signification across time is reached almost as soon as it is raised. As Bank reveals, while Bleek is indeed referred to as 'baas', 'mynheer' and even 'magistrate' at various points in the notebooks, both Watson and Krog make a textual error in imagining '//Kabbo's Intended Return Home' as addressed to him when it was in fact delivered to Lucy Lloyd. Both poets insert the word 'master' at the end of the opening line, the confusion arising from their having taken the extract from the published account in *Specimens*: 'It is associated there with "B." (Bleek), not because it features in a Bleek notebook (it doesn't) but because it is catalogued in...his official report of 1875. This was a sleight of hand used by Lloyd to enhance Bleek's status as a collector and somewhat diminish her own' (200). Lloyd, he points out, was addressed more familiarly as 'Miss Lucy' or 'nooi', and speculates that it was her own experience of isolation within the colonial society of Natal (following her estrangement from her father) which engendered the empathy and, to use Eliot's phrase, 'passive attending on the event' that elicited this more fluid, contemporary and personal testimony.

In Watson's version, 'Return of the Moon', this acute rendering of homesickness and longing is divided into numbered stanzas to become a powerfully orchestrated lament, ending the volume and serving as a kind of reprise for many of its images and themes. Yet for some tastes, this formal control threatened to efface just such context-bound idiosyncrasies: one reviewer remained unsure that his preferred form, with its visual neatness and largely four foot line, was necessarily the most appropriate means of presentation. For her it seemed 'to work against the pauses and tuneful variations of a story-

⁷⁰ Walter Benjamin, 'The Task of the Translator' [1923], *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, (London: Fontana, 1992), 80.

⁷¹ Krog, *Down to My Last Skin*, 4.

telling situation': the fragments seemed 'somewhat strangled in the Western garb of Watson's stiff forms, much as //Kabbo does in the picture on the cover'.⁷² It is worth recalling, however, that the only other images of //Kabbo are anthropometric ones: dehumanising photographs of his naked body seen front on and then positioned alongside a measuring stick, the tiled floor of the Breakwater Prison visible in the background. [Figs. 46-7] Both sets of images were commissioned by Wilhelm Bleek, one prior to his meeting with //Kabbo, the other reproduced in homage at the beginning of *Specimens of Bushman Folklore*.

In its stark historical honesty, perhaps the photographic image, now cropped to hide any measuring instruments, ultimately lends its subject as much power as the idealised lithograph; in any case they seem to emerge as appropriate emblems of the distinct approaches taken by the poets, as well as a stark reminder that there is no easily inhabited middle ground. For they have surely approached the Bleek and Lloyd archive through the lens of very different twentieth-century traditions: an essayist who railed against the 'mindlessness of politicisation' in the 1980s, Watson is clearly intent on purifying the dialect of the tribe; Krog, who tells in *A Change of Tongue* of a comic, myopic attempt to recite a praise poem for Mandela (and is at one point forced to take her malfunctioning hard drive to 'the workshop where they recover memory') is attuned to a decidedly non-Eliotic setting loose of emotion, messiness and compromise.⁷³ One approach offers a highly worked poetic object which aspires to the ahistorical condition of modern myth; the other a text which bears the strains of its dictation and transmission, and yet where, through constraints of the notebook page and the transcription process, that single /Xam syllable become awkward, anachronistic refrain – 'on account of it' – takes on a such a deep, unaccountable linguistic charge.

Today, the words of the Bleek and Lloyd Collection are being dispersed ever further by new volumes, reviews, digital preservation, internet message boards and all the bewildering circuits of literary reproduction and reception. One can only hope that this fulfils the wishes of //Kabbo, who 'much enjoyed the thought that the Bushman stories would become known by means of books' and in his testimony evoked so powerfully how *kukummi* – stories, news, gossip – borne by the natural conduits of wind and water and felt almost as a bodily presence by those attuned to them, provided the most vital links between the dispersed, dispossessed bands of the /Xam-ka !ei.⁷⁴ The truth of his historical experience and that of his extended family is surely all but irrecoverable in the multiply translated language through which we now approach it, but the embodied, almost somatic

⁷² Annie Gagiano, 'Just a Touch of the Cultural Trophy Hunter', *Die Suid-Afrikaan* (May 1992), 78.

⁷³ Antjie Krog, *A Change of Tongue*, (Johannesburg: Random House, 2003), 141.

⁷⁴ Bleek and Lloyd, *Bushman Folklore*, x.

understanding of the environment – ‘the Bushmen’s letters’ – that so many of the extracts speak of perhaps find a distant correlative in the unforeseen workings of its poetry on the readers of today, material that, once it has begun to act on the auditory imagination, cannot easily be forgotten. If many of the fragments in the collection undoubtedly do need sensitive editing, //Kabbo’s spare, allusive narratives can often stand without any further alteration, carrying with them the all stresses, compromise and loss which attend the whole project, and yet which make the faintly heard echo all the more moving. Describing how a person’s last physical trace was erased from the face of the earth, he explained that:

The wind does thus when we die, our (own) wind blows; for we, who are human beings, we possess wind; we make clouds when we die. Therefore, the wind does thus when () we die, the wind makes dust, because it intends to blow, taking away our footprints, with which we had walked about while we still had nothing the matter with us; and our footprints, which () the wind intends to blow away, would (otherwise still) lie plainly visible. For, the thing would seem as if we still lived. Therefore, the wind intends to blow, taking away our footprints. (398-99)

•

CODA

NOT YET, NOT THERE

Agter ons verdeelde huis
Agter die hart gesluit teen homself
Agter draadheininge, kampe, lokasies
Agter die stilte waar onbekende tale
val soos klokke by 'n begrafnis
Agter ons verskeurde land

sit die groen hotnotsgod van die veld
en ons hoor nog verdwaasd
klein blou Namakwaland-madeliefie
iets antwoord, iets glo, iets weet

Ingrid Jonker, *Rook en Oker* (1963).

But the horses didn't want it – they swerved apart; the earth didn't want it, sending up rocks through which riders must pass single file; the temples, the tank, the jail, the palace, the birds, the carrion, the Guest House that came into view as they issued from the gap and saw Mau beneath: they didn't want it, they said in their hundred voices, 'No, not yet', and the sky said, 'No, not there'.

E. M. Forster, *A Passage to India*, (1924).

At the outset of this work, I attempted to define its parameters and motivations via three meditations on place which struck me as particularly resonant: J. M. Coetzee's Jerusalem prize address which speaks of how a loudly attested love for the non-human might mask a lovelessness toward the human; Dan Jacobson's evocation of southern African landscapes as unused, unaccommodating and 'untouched by their own history'; Albert Camus' wish never to be unfaithful neither to beauty nor the humiliated. Beginning with literary treatments of the colonial archive at the Cape, and trying never to avert the gaze from the representational and all too actual violence of this record, it has gradually shifted from a postcolonial to an ecocritical register. In doing so it has wondered if (and hoped that) it might win a space to consider a literature of place in more intimate terms: to address those works open to the wonder and 'teeming strangeness' of the biosphere; the intrusions and unconformities of the Peninsula's geology; the 'endless forms' generated by organic evolution.

These readings of Cape literature, then, have attempted to move from the local matter of 'white writing' – the psychological and sociopolitical suppressions of texts by those who feel themselves to be 'no longer European, not yet African' – to the wider challenge of 'writing white': of rendering the non-human and the numinous in words, even while sensing that such raids on the inarticulate (or inanimate) might properly tend towards the simple litany, the incantatory, the non-verbal, the blank page.¹ At the same time, this approach has shared an impatience with the predictability of a certain strain of late twentieth-century cultural criticism. It has even suspected that the groundlessness and infinite deferral posited by 'high theory' has had the unfortunate result of working in tandem with the cultural logic of late capitalism, or at least the language of neo-liberal economics. For if the world beyond our built environment is *not* conceived of in its own right or paid sufficient imaginative attention – if this cannot even be countenanced by the most rarefied intellectual models – then vast tracts of it are all the more easily privatised and enclosed in the name of 'development.'

Ultimately though, the motivation here has not been narrowly political, nor an attempt to transmute the robust and self-evident claims of contemporary environmentalism into literary practice. In the 1954 essay 'Return to Tipasa' – set on an African coastline of similar light and latitude to the Cape Peninsula – Camus does after all push his thinking a step further: the injunction to be faithful to both beauty and the humiliated 'still resembles a moral code and we live for something that goes farther than morality. *Si nous pouvions le nommer,*

¹ In addition to *l'écriture blanche* which Roland Barthes explores via the prose of Camus – 'a style of absence which is almost an ideal absence of style' – I also have in mind here the aphorism that 'Happiness (or desire) writes white'. 'Writing and Silence' [1953], in *Writing Degree Zero & Elements of Semiology*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1984), 64.

*quel silence!*² In considering the encounter between natural history and the *literary* imagination, what I have hoped to trace is which strains of the imaginative writing produced in and of the Cape are equal to their social context and physical surrounds: to the region as both a 'concentration of world history' and 'remarkable promontory'.³

With the work of Brink and other post-apartheid fabulists, we began by considering what Derek Walcott has called the 'elemental privilege of naming the New World':⁴ a linguistic ambition and energy which informs both Camões' exploratory cantos and the twentieth-century classics of magical realism. The insistence on newness and naming in these various types of 'world literature' – of finding a language fitted to the 'unlettered nature' which it encounters – finds a compelling local inflection in N. P. van Wyk Louw's vision of Afrikaans on the Taalmonument in Paarl. Yet it is a passage which reveals how easily a language of natural expanse shades into a discourse of nationalistic exclusion; so too it suggests why Brink's visions of 'First Peoples' naming a paradisaal African landmass – in being unable or unwilling to address how thoroughly the notion of an Adamic congruence between word and world has been tainted in southern African historiography – read as somehow unconvincing when transplanted to the Cape Colony.

The Cape, writes Coetzee, was not part of the New World, but rather the 'farthest extremity of the Old': a judgement which may have more to do with his distinctly personal and guarded literary style than the objective testimony of the archive. Visions of the Cape as kind of Eden (alongside isolated islands like St Helena and Mauritius) certainly do exist in the long history of European travel writing; but it is a phrase which takes on a larger meaning when one considers southern Africa's immense history of hominid evolution, early symbolic behaviour and modern human occupation. Nonetheless, Coetzee's stringent refusal of any easy recourse to pre-colonial mythology, African Edens or African farms makes his depiction of the non-human world (edged as it is with a deep, unspoken sense of longing) a singularly powerful one.

As with Dan Sleigh's *Eilande* or Burchell's *St Helena Journal*, we take from the text visions of isolation and self-sufficiency, of temporary shelters and abandoned islands: what would seem to be an elusive third term beyond the polarities of 'prison' and 'garden'; and a novel enactment, perhaps, of the 'aesthetic of relinquishment' that Lawrence Buell evokes in

² Albert Camus, *L'Été* [Gallimard, 1954, 160] rep. in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O' Brien, (London: Penguin, 2000), 182.

³ Jacques Derrida, 'Le dernier mot du racisme' (Racism's Last Word), trans. Peggy Kamuf in Henry Louis Gates, Jr. ed., *Race, Writing and Difference*, (The University of Chicago Press, 1986), 337.

⁴ Derek Walcott, 'The Muse of History', *What the Twilight Says: Essays*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), 41.

The Environmental Imagination.⁵ 'The ungainsayable commitment that Coetzee makes us know is hard to sustain beyond the time of the text', writes Gillian Beer,⁶ yet the play of the rooted and the rootless in a work like *Life & Times of Michael K* – the double helix of a prose which means that experimental post-structuralism never loses touch with the material fact of grubbing in the earth – makes this solitary walker's journey a compelling work through which one might test the claims of a twenty-first century ecocriticism. For it is a practice which, as Dominic Head writes in his discussion of *Michael K*, is 'necessary yet not accurate or coherent'.⁷

Indeed, in a southern African context, the difficulties of disentangling ecological conservation from political conservatism are such that the later chapters here have, it seems, only begun to broach the question of what an uncompromised writing of nature might read as in this part of the world. For can one really agree with Jonathan Bate that in shifting critical attention from the voice of Caliban to that of Ariel, we need to imagine 'an island which Prospero has left, an ecosystem which man must be content to leave alone'?⁸ In the postcolony, it would seem, this utopian vision too easily becomes involved in a politics of displacement and enclosure; its risks dovetailing with those colonial travelogues and wilderness narratives which sought to disavow actual human populations (or, in the case of the San, elegised them as perpetually vanishing and doomed to extinction).

Following Richard Grove's call for an anthropology of environmental awareness to be written from the periphery of an expanding European system, one might use the case of the Cape Colony (and the 'textured postcoloniality' of contemporary South Africa) to reflect certain shortcomings back to the practice of ecocriticism within the Western academy. For a critical approach which seeks to draw wishful analogies between ecosystems and literature – between, say, vaguely conceived energy flows in the natural world, and those in the literary work – will always be hampered by a kind of utopianism and even sentimentality: a desire for pristine, steady-state habitats already rare at the time of Darwin's voyage of the *Beagle* and by now entirely untenable, both in actuality and in terms of modern ecological theory.

As the narrative trajectory of *Michael K* suggests, having left it in the hope of seeking 'forgotten corners and angles between the fences', contemporary environmental criticism surely needs to return to the city, but as a site where the conventional dichotomies of the pastoral no longer apply. Driving back to Cape Town along the N2, David Lurie watches while a child with a stick herds a stray cow off the road and into the shantytowns:

⁵ Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing and the Formation of American Culture*, (Cambridge MA, London: Harvard University Press, 1995), 143.

⁶ Gillian Beer, *Arguing with the Past*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), 2.

⁷ Dominic Head, 'The (Im)possibility of Ecocriticism', in *Writing the Environment: Ecocriticism and Literature*, ed. Richard Kerridge and Neil Sammells, (London: Zed Books, 1998), 38.

⁸ Jonathan Bate, 'Caliban and Ariel Write Back', in Catherine Alexander and Stanley Wells eds., *Shakespeare and Race*, (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 173, 176.

'Inexorably, he thinks, the country is coming to the city. Soon there will be cattle again on Rondebosch Common: soon history will have come full circle' (175). Within the last decade, the human race has become a primarily urban species, lending ever greater urgency to the question of how one might conceive of a postcolonial, urban ecology; one concerned not with 'empty unused landscapes' but rather cities of strained infrastructure and precipitous social gradients, yet also creative, adaptive strategies for survival.

Surprisingly, it is the high imperial figure of Rudyard Kipling who seems to anticipate such a vision this in these pages. For if he was on the one hand preoccupied with distant, imagined locales during his time in Cape Town, then the unsaid and uncanny dimensions of the growing colonial port – its porous edges, its claustrophobia coexisting with the vastness enabled by global imperial technologies – press in from the margins of his cryptic and abbreviated short fiction. In 'Mrs Bathurst' and the 'series of City Studies' suggested in his letter to Stephen Black of 1908, Kipling broaches a sense of the cityscape as comprised of micro-habitats and disparate narratives and which is in turn realised by Cape writers later in the century. It is a vision which also seems latent in other colonial texts when one considers not the avowedly poetic renderings of Table Mountain which clutter early Cape anthologies, but rather a prose record of actual ascents dating from the seventeenth century to the present.

With the aid of writers like David Malouf and Gary Snyder, one is led toward an idea of wilderness not as something which is remote and hived off from human life, but which 'exist[s] unexpectedly around and within it: in cities, backyards, roadsides, hedges, field boundaries or spinnies'.⁹ Writing out of a sense of the Scottish landscape (and in mind of a history of Highland Clearances not unlike the forced removals of the Group Areas Act), Robert Macfarlane advances a definition all the more powerful for being so tentative:

That margins should be a redoubt of wildness, I knew, was proof of the devastation of the land: the extent to which nature had been squeezed to the territory's edges, repressed almost to extinction. But it seemed like proof, as well, of the resilience of the wild – of its instinct for resurgence, its irrepressibility. And a recognition that wildness weaved with the human world, rather than existing only in cleaved-off areas, in National Parks and on distant peninsulas and peaks. (227)

The history of land clearances in Scotland (or Yosemite, or John Clare's Helpston, or the *terra nullius* of the Australian outback) serves as a reminder that the occluded social dimension which contemporary writings of nature must address is hardly unique to southern Africa: it is merely a question of historical proximity. Yet there is perhaps something singular in a city of such prisons, gradients and gardens; and the shift in perspective from a 'poetry of

⁹ Robert Macfarlane, *The Wild Places*, (London: Granta, 2007), 226.

empty space' to much smaller scales of existence finds an unusually literal realisation within the varied literature of incarceration which has emerged from Cape Town.

Written across a small geographic area, this sub-tradition reveals prison communities at their most utopian and their most nightmarish: the image of Mandela's carefully tended garden must, following Brutus's and Breytenbach's early accounts of prison gang mythology, have a counterweight in Kafka's *Strafkolonie*, its horrific, malfunctioning machine engraving a forgotten law onto an offender's body. Subsequent accounts of Ninevehites, *wetslaners* and 'The Number' by Van Onselen and Steinberg have further revealed an infernal cycle of common law prisoners inflicting on one another the violence unleashed on them by apartheid's custodians: insights that cannot be forgotten given the larger failure of the prison as an institution which remains crowded and inherently brutalised. Nonetheless, writers as different as Bosman, Breytenbach and Cronin, each fascinated by the rich argot of prison life, are linked by a notion of language as generative, evolving and hybrid: evidence of the human organism's unflagging ability to adapt and make some sense of even the worst environments. 'Die woord is 'n engte,' writes Breytenbach, 'The word is narrow; a slip of land between two dark oceans; a tongue. The word is also a confinement. Yet it is the only way that I know, the only space.'¹⁰

In such moments South African prison writing enacts an unexpected, lyrical renewal of poetic language; even its darker variants, I would argue, secure a place for literature which (in being underwritten by a sense of enforced community) is able to admit the improvisational, the colloquial, the mouthy, the musical – elements of South African verbal culture which are largely passed over by the unrelenting seriousness of a writer like Coetzee. And in a sense, there is no more cogent rebuttal to the charge that attention to natural history inevitably obscures social relations than Cronin's celebrated 1983 collection *Inside*. For if Coetzee's essay on the *plaasroman* talks of entrapment within great space, Cronin's poems generate great space from solitary confinement:

Perhaps my original prison poem was a prayer, the simple litany of place names that has its times within most of our lives. Thrust into the loneliness of solitary confinement, bounded by four uncooperative walls, I began to recite over and over that laconic list of place names, repeating the standard SABC weather forecast. '...Port Shepstone to the Tugela Mouth...the Tugela Mouth to Kosi Bay.' I left out, or filled in, weather details as the mood came. How reassuring it was to be able to gather a sense of space with the bare resources of tongue, bone gum, breath, word. Each one was a shrine. Cooped up I was able to make geography in the small theatre of my mouth.¹¹

Joining the other rewritings of the colonial travelogue already encountered, his ironic 'Venture into the Interior' becomes (like the poems of Ingrid Jonker, or Ingrid De Kok) a

¹⁰ Breyten Breytenbach, *True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), 337.

¹¹ Jeremy Cronin, 'Geography of the Mouth', *Inside*, [1983], (London: Jonathan Cape, 1987), 51.

means of bringing wilderness, or rather wildness, into the practice of ordinary life, into the city, and into the body itself. In the passage above it becomes too a litany of place more hard-won, compelling and convincing than the lavish naming of the land by South African magical realists. Here the list serves a mnemonic rather than mimetic function; the language is no longer trying to compete unsuccessfully with the plurality of the physical world, but distilling instead it into ever fewer, more concentrated linguistic tokens.

Yet equally, Cronin's later collections, in adopting explicitly *environmental* themes, reveal the paradox that a poetics which directly addresses the facts of ecological degradation invariably demotes itself to kind of writing which becomes little more than earnest, journalistic prose: 'To live close to every tree you had ever planted / Our century has been the great destructor of that.'¹² Following this, one might only be able to gather a sense of literary place here today as a range of intensely private sites: a corpus whose very diversity is testament to its powers of imaginative dwelling, and which is amenable less to general claims than a mere survey of lines more cryptic and felicitous than before:

We turn off the tar and the stars follow
Through ninety degrees of a radar pass.
The sky is scraped with phosphur, and we're here

And history, our own ground zero,
Where the lights are killed in a green theatre,
Aloud with rumour, like a lover's ear.¹³

One of the most delicate and musical collections of recent years, P. R. Anderson's *Litany Bird* (2000), begins with a 'Just So Story', recasting Kipling's 'great spaces washed with sun' entirely to form a love poem, and winning back an intimacy so often leached out of literature from this part of the world:

Across a darkening park,
An upper window view,
How level sunlight showed,
O Best Beloved, you,
Where green receiving stowed
The day against the dark. (7)

Reading for more recent versions of the mountain estate where two Nobel laureates penned their very different versions of the Cape, one finds Arthur Attwell envisioning the reservoirs built on the back Table the 1890s (the place where Kipling had located his Cape Crusoe) as 'silver ghost lakes...in the mountain's teeth...Five stone dams dreamed up in the mad eye of empire' where he is alternatively attracted and repulsed by the lives of the endangered crabs

¹² Jeremy Cronin, 'Moorage', *Inside and Out* [1997], (Cape Town: David Philip, 1999), 99.

¹³ P. R. Anderson, *Litany Bird* (Cape Town: Snailpress, 2000), 19.

and frogs surviving only in isolated kloofs, a writer taking his cue from the Seamus Heaney who showed that death of the naturalist is the birth of the poet.¹⁴ In 'Deer at Rhodes Memorial', Fiona Zerbst watches while 'Into trees / these wordless creatures go, filaments / in darkness as they walk, effortless...on the small horizon of our talk'; creatures which the poem tries to grant, if only momentarily, an entire otherness to human constructs.¹⁵

Ranging further along the mountain chain, Geoffrey Haresnape, recalls how 'From a tree-capped hill I once looked out / on mountains salaaming to the sea' in a line which unconsciously registers the sacred dimension of the slopes for the Cape's Islamic community – its open-air *kramats* and secret shrines – yet places this in dialogue with other religions that must also ultimately draw their metaphors from the physical world: the enclosed 'tree tabernacle' of childhood, the 'carved cones' of the pine forests, 'saints who slept / in hierarchies / where branches tapped'.¹⁶ Perhaps an indication of the degree to which the poetry of empty space might have receded is signalled by how deftly it is ironised in another 'Venture into the Interior' by Basil du Toit, a poem which begins with the speaker preparing:

...a townless U
our subcontinental coastline
with its geography wiped off,
its ethnography hammered back
to stone, and its pain suspended,
its climate undecided.¹⁷

We then watch it being slowly, playfully populated; on the one hand via the standard texts of natural history – plant compendia, classifications of trees, lists of every grass type, 'ornithological manuals / to give my routes birdsong, purring / of wings in the adjacencies' – and nature writing:

The annals of mountaineering clubs,
full transcripts of their proceedings:
then I can put their watermark
of real dangers in my travels...
Post them, and I will use almanacs
to overlay last year's weather
onto my expedition plans: from high above my paper trails
apposite thunderstorms will flash.

¹⁴ Arthur Attwell, *Killing Time*, (Cape Town: Snailpress, 2005), 45.

¹⁵ Fiona Zerbst, *The Small Zone*, (Cape Town: Snailpress, 1995), rep. Ingrid de Kok and Gus Ferguson eds., *City in Words: an Anthology of Cape Town Poems*, (Cape Town: David Philip, 2001), 11.

¹⁶ Geoffrey Haresnape. *The Living and the Dead: Selected and New Poems, 1976-2005*, (Cape Town: Snailpress, 2005), 32.

¹⁷ Basil du Toit, *Older Women*, (Cape Town: Snailpress, 1996), 22.

This reassembly does not stop there, however, asking too for 'revisionist histories / Marxist analyses, photo- / rich profiles of the ANC' in its efforts to recreate the subcontinent 'from clouds / to the mineral base below'; and finally, revealing the intimacy that this expansiveness is grounded on: 'send also what you cannot / the utter presence of my love' (24).

Yet if such love poems must, as Anderson remarks, be searched for in the small presses and magazines, then the writing which emerges out of the /Xam records has been far more prominent in the last decades. Even a brief entry into the Bleek and Lloyd Collection – its personages, physical traces, the long, complex history of its publication – serves as a further reminder that each encounter between 'prison' and 'garden' should be treated as singular and entirely distinctive. In the various personal and literary trajectories that envelop the collection, one can discern an opposition where the self-aggrandising figure of Van der Post, always reorienting its narratives to place himself in a central role, can be set against the elusive, self-effacing and often unreadable presence of Lucy Lloyd.

So too, the debate surrounding the archive in recent decades – its rediscovery by academics and subsequent instatement as a cornerstone of post-apartheid cultural identity – finds a counterpoint in lone innovators like Marais and Cope who have drawn imaginative sustenance from it in less obvious ways. And of course, such literary afterlives constitute only one medium through which the Bleek and Lloyd Collection has been extended and celebrated; indeed, it is an archive which requires one to move beyond a single medium, a single vocabulary or specialisation. Bank, Bennun, Martin and several others who have worked with the archive have spoken of the need to leave their desks and visit the homes of the informants in the northern Cape, reimagining the lone quest of colonial romance in terms of pilgrimage and silent vigil. In a recent publication inspired by the 'givers of native literature', *My Heart Stands in the Hill* (2005), the archaeologist Janette Deacon collaborates with a filmmaker to project their photographic portraits onto the land where they once lived. One sees images of /A!kúnta, Diä!kwain, /Han#kass'o and //Kabbo superimposed on aloes, kokerbooms, tortoiseshells and the cracked mud of the Bitterpits in an environment where, as the authors remark, the uneven surfaces transform the Victorian ethnography into distended, layered images not unlike the hallucinatory visions of rock art. [Fig 48]

And while the nineteenth-century discourses surrounding Bleek and Haeckel undoubtedly show the dangers of Darwinian theory being crudely mapped onto culture, such afterlives tempt one toward a suitably nuanced vision of cultural selection. For a meditation grounded merely in how and why certain cultural forms survive through translation and reinvention surely frees the (eco)critic from many constraints: the need to be prescriptive, to be an arbiter of taste, or to advance any absolute definition of what 'the literary' may mean.

The only criterion is what remains; and it remains not because of a simplistic, ideologically motivated process of canonisation, but in a flux of language comprised of as many variables, checks and balances as those present in the ‘tangled banks’ – the ‘total relations’ of any given ecosystem – which Darwin worked so hard to bring into the language of *The Origin*. In this reading, the makers of such an archive become, to borrow from Edward Said, figures ‘whose work has enabled other, alternative work and readings based on developments of which they could not have been aware.’¹⁸

I see them contrapuntally, that is, as figures whose writing travels beyond temporal, cultural and ideological boundaries in unforeseen ways to emerge as part of a new ensemble *along with* later history and subsequent art...in all sorts of unforeseen proleptic ways. (24)

Following an attempt to reclaim the radically egalitarian impulse of evolutionary theory, is intriguing to note that it is the late Darwinian interpreter Stephen Jay Gould who writes the introduction to Skotnes’s *Sound from the Thinking Strings* (1991), a limited edition of etchings and poems drawn from the /Xam records now regarded as one of the treasures of the African Studies Library at the University of Cape Town. Here he suggests how Honoré de Balzac explored in all his greatest works variations on a biological theme that he had absorbed from his friend, the anatomist Etienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire: ‘There is, Balzac argued, only one essential human nature, with our infinite variety arising from the enormous range of environments in which we dwell.’¹⁹ Gould goes on to express the modern consensus of evolutionary biology and genetics which posits a human race based on fundamental sameness rather than difference; but a sameness which reveals (or disguises) itself precisely through our powers of cultural adaptability:

Our essence is hidden from view, and manifest primarily in the diversity of overt expressions among our cultures and nations. The greater this range of diversity, the more we can learn about our essential nature and its remarkable flexibility. When we cut off parts of this diversity, by whatever means (from the ultimate brutality of genocide to the relatively benign spread of international fast food chains) we lose – as an anatomist like Geoffroy might have said – an organ of our totality.

I am an evolutionary biologist by training. I work with branching systems of genealogical descent. I know, from the core of my professional being, that when a stem of life’s tree is extirpated and ripped off, that precious parcel of diversity can never arise again.

Unfolding between these two poles of multifariousness and extinction – of intense linguistic felicity and total language death – the transcribed words of this archive embody the most profound analogues of everything that has been signified here by the words ‘garden’ and ‘prison’.

¹⁸ Edward Said, *Freud and the Non-European*, (London, New York: Verso, 2003), 24.

¹⁹ Pippa Skotnes, *Sound from the Thinking Strings*, (Cape Town: Axeage Private Press, 1991).

For if Darwin in *The Origin* strains to give an optimistic inflection to the ‘endless forms’ produced by organic evolution, its corollary is extinction on an almost unimaginable scale. Contemporary evolutionary biology suggests that some 99.9 % of all life that has ever existed on earth has disappeared; the metaphorical tree with which Darwin sought to displace that of a biblical Genesis – ‘the great Tree of Life, which fills with its dead and broken branches the crust of the earth, and covers the surface with its ever branching and beautiful ramifications’²⁰ – we must imagine as almost entirely buried. And with the biosphere now in the midst of the sixth great wave of extinction, but the first that is anthropogenic, a background hum of information concerning habitat loss, pollution and endangered species makes the elegy not simply the province of representing aboriginal cultures like that of the San. ‘In modern nature poetry – perhaps in modern poetry itself,’ writes Nick Laird, ‘the elegiac tone has come to be the dominant mode, the pervasive mood. Any poem that takes nature as its locus must also be conscious, even in refusing, of being a hymn to its sickness.’²¹

The preceding pages, though, have cautioned us about the nature of elegy: its self-enclosure, stasis and tendency toward a monologue which does little more than ‘serve [its] own therapeutic purposes’²². To end on this note, perhaps, would be to partake of an interregnum no longer national but global: ‘a condition of passive waiting’ which (as the recent Copenhagen conference only confirms) resides in ‘the impasse between environmental consciousness and the inability of a culture to change’.²³ Instead, in closing one could turn again to Coetzee’s novel, in particular the passage where Michael K runs away from the literate intelligence who would explain him, ‘ploughing as if through water through the thick grey sand...plung[ing] far ahead into the deepest wattle thickets, running far more strongly now than one would expect from someone who did not eat’ (228-9). As in many other works of the South African transition – Gordimer’s *The Conservationist* and *July’s People*; the opening of Ndebele’s *Fools*; the end of Albie Sachs’ *Jail Diary* – here the solitary walker begins to run, unstoppably and uncontrollably; the defiant anti-apartheid hero of Cronin’s ‘Walking on Air’ becomes the nameless man in *Crossroads*, ‘Running Towards Us’: ‘running sore...in desperation, one shoe on, one shoe off. Into our midst. Running’.²⁴

It seems an apt image with which to close, one which reinstates the human presence in the landscape even as it suggests events – now taken to signify a natural history always entangled with social history – unfolding always ahead of our ability to apprehend or properly

²⁰ Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species* [1859], (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), 172.

²¹ Nick Laird, ‘Author, Author’, column in *Guardian Review*, (27 December 2008).

²² Stephen Watson, *Selected Essays: 1980-1990*, (Cape Town: Carrefour Press, 1990), 62.

²³ Richard Kerridge, ‘Small Rooms and the Ecosystem: Environmentalism and DeLillo’s *White Noise*’, in *Writing the Environment*, ed. Kerridge and Sammells, 194.

²⁴ Cronin, *Inside and Out*, 95.

represent them. So turning finally to the initial question of whether it is possible to move beyond a suspect, damaged relation between land and language here; whether one can, as in Jonker's poem, return to a natural world *after* a knowledge of the fences, camps and locations of 'our divided home' and find it 'answering something, believing something, knowing something', I would have to draw on a work from a very different place, but which also ends with a headlong rush, a sudden widening of the angle of vision, a breaking of the narrative frame to concede the limits of the literary imagination: no, not yet; no, not there.

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IMAGES

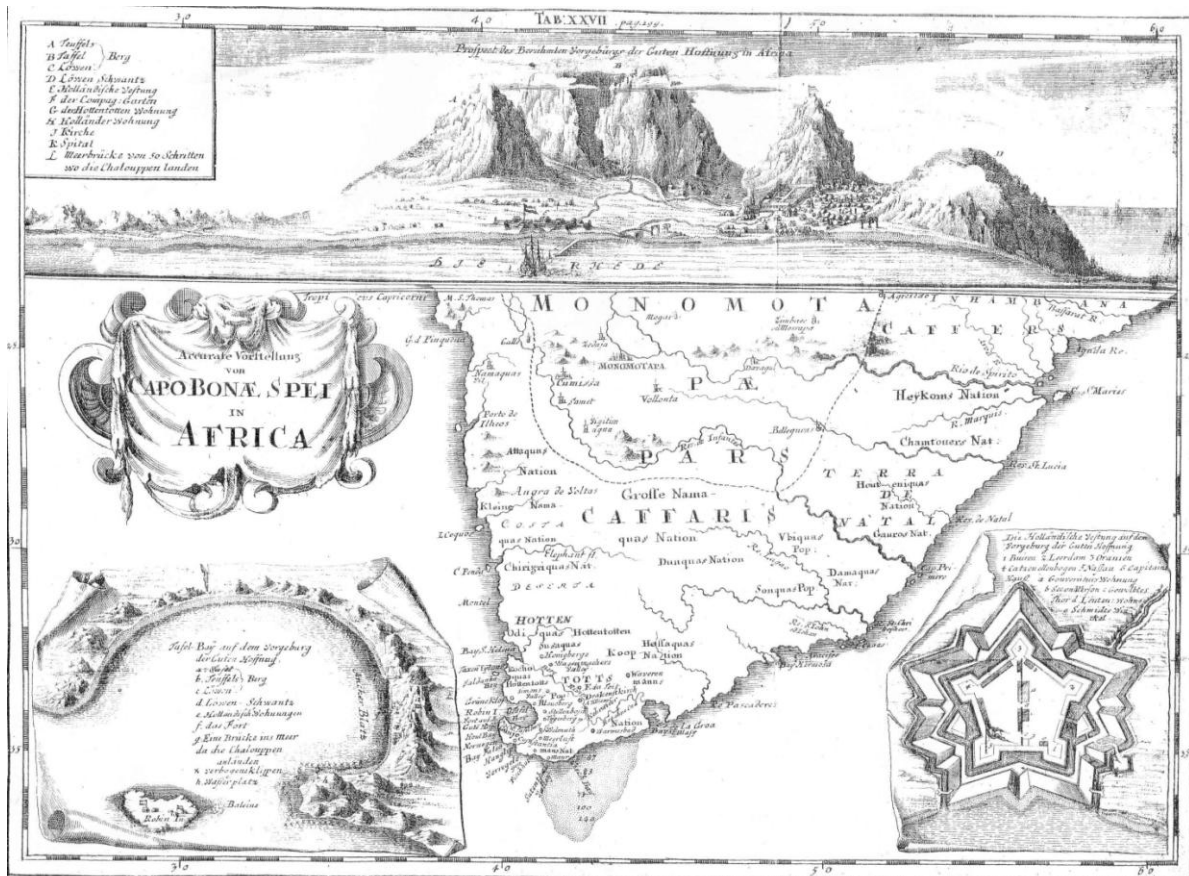


Fig. 1 Frontispiece, Peter Kolb, *Caput Bonae Speii hodiernum...* (Nuremberg, 1719) (above)

The Present State of the Cape of Good-Hope: or, a particular account of the several nations of the Hottentots: their religion, government, laws, customs, ceremonies, and opinions; their art of war, professions, language, genius, &c. Together with a short account of the Dutch settlement at the Cape, (London, 1731).

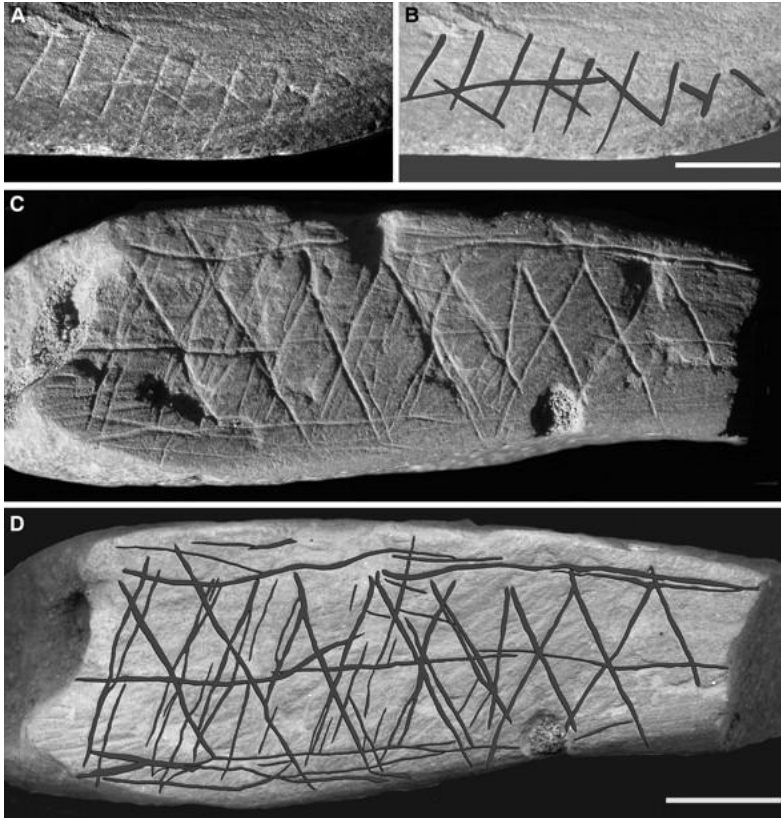


Fig. 2 Geometric engravings on Blombos Ochre, 70,000 years B.P.

Christopher Henshilwood et al., 'Emergence of Modern Human Behaviour: Middle Stone Age Engravings from South Africa'. *Science*, (15 February 2002), 1278-80.



Fig. 3 'Postal stone' inscribed by Wollebrand Geleynsz the Younger in 1635. In 1648 he called at the Cape again, and conveyed the shipwrecked survivors of the *Nieuw Haerlem* home on his return fleet'.

Dan Sleight, *Jan Compagnie: the World of the Dutch East India Company*, (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 1980), 53.

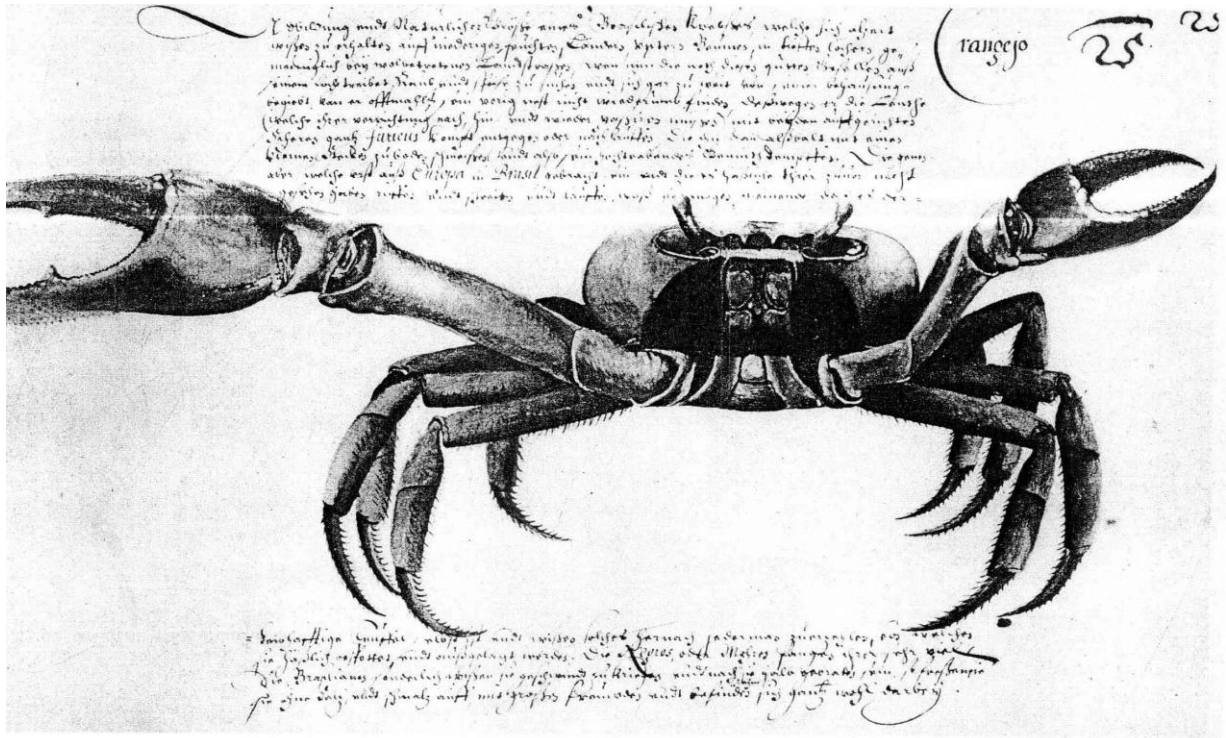
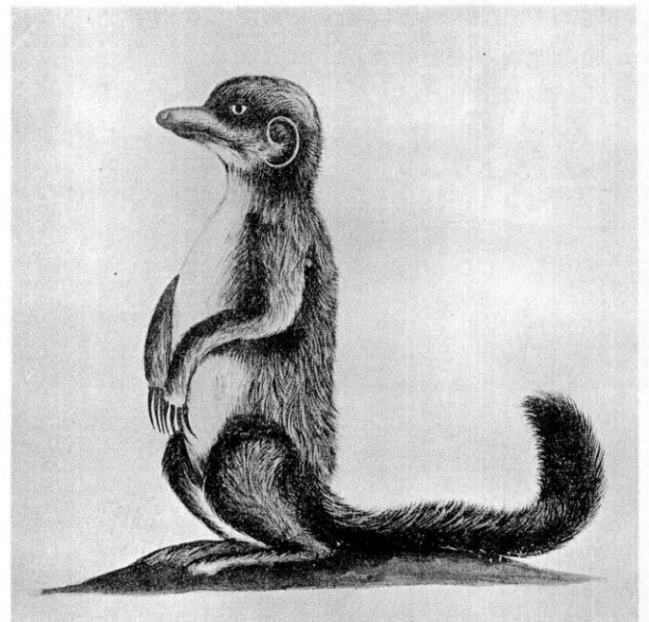
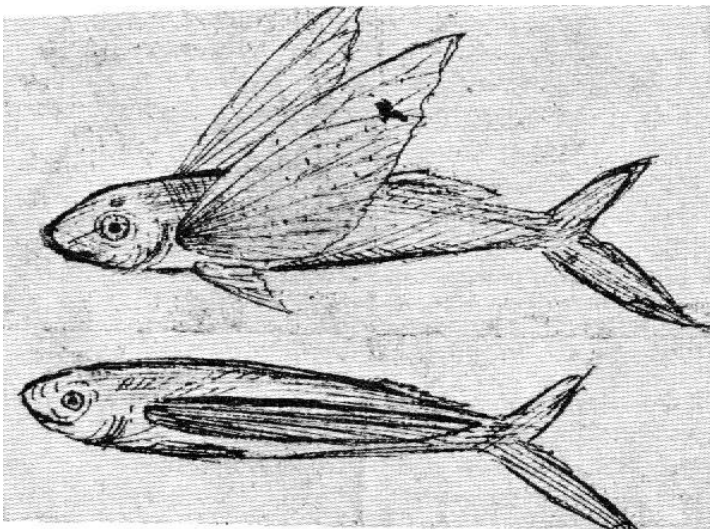


Fig. 4 'Crangejo: Sketch and natural size of a Brazilian crab'. [Original larger than this reproduction] 'If the old chap needs to look for prey and food, and is thus driven out of his hole, and if he gets too far away from home, it happens that he cannot find the way back'.

Zacharias Wagenaer, 'Animal Book', (early seventeenth century; now preserved in his native town of Dresden). Rep. and trans. O. H. Spohr, *Zacharias Wagner: Second Commander of the Cape*, (1967).



Figs. 5-6 Sketches of flying fish by Peter Mundy (left) and meerkat by Hendrik Claudius (right).

Rep. in R. Raven-Hart, *Before van Riebeeck* (Cape Town: Struik, 1967) and Simon van der Stel, *Journal of his Expedition to Namaqualand, 1685-6*, ed. from manuscript in library of Trinity College, Dublin by G. Waterhouse, (London: Longmans, 1932).

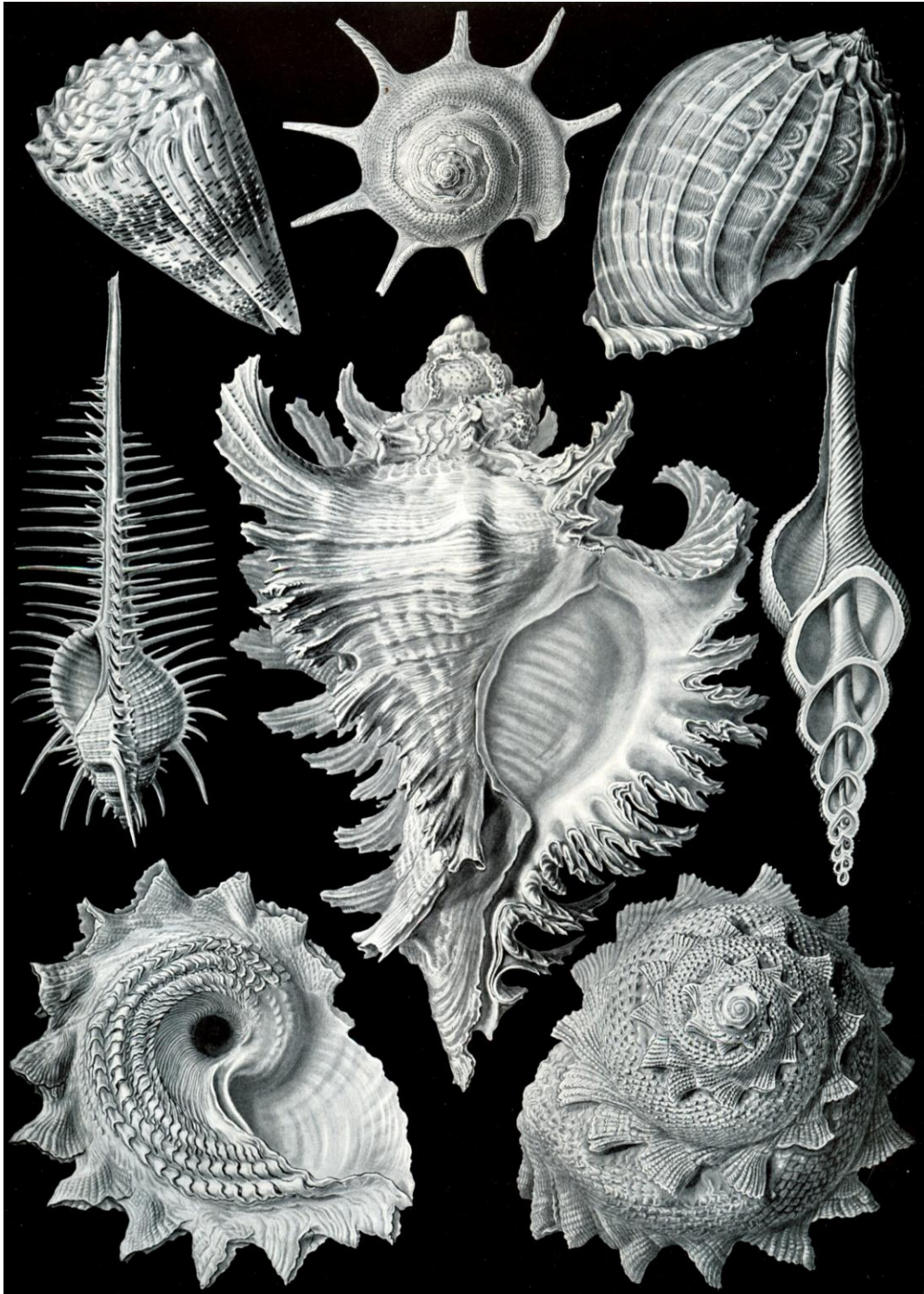


Fig.7 Ernst Haeckel, *Kunstformen der Natur*, (1904). Wilhelm Bleek and his family collected marine organisms on the Indian Ocean seaboard of Cape Town to send to his cousin.

'The concept that corresponds to a shell is so clear, so hard, and so sure that a poet, unable simply to draw it, and reduced rather to speaking of it, is at first at a loss for images. He is arrested in his flight towards dream values by the geometrical reality of the forms.'

Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* [1958], trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994).

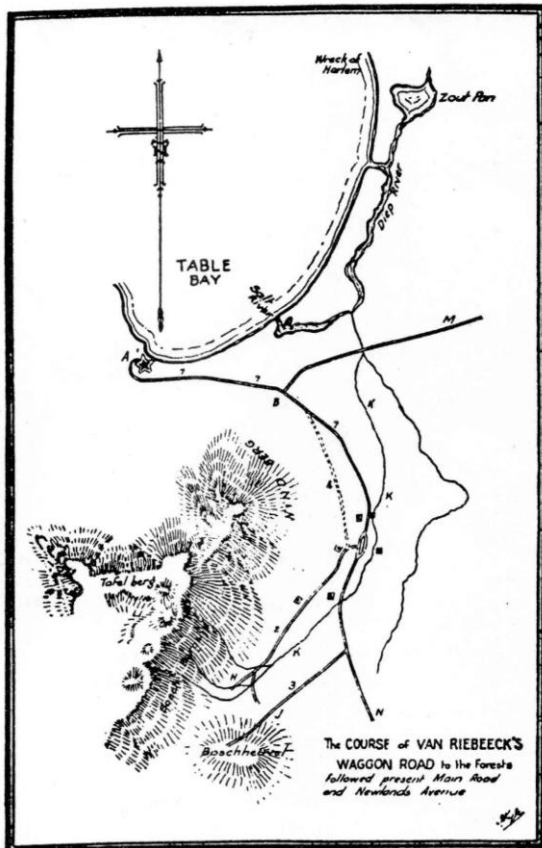


Fig. 8 E. E. Mossop, *Old Cape Highways*. (Cape Town: Maskew Miller, 1927).

- | | | |
|--|---------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Main Road. | A. The Castle. | F. The Brewery. |
| 2. Newlands Avenue. | B. Roodebloem. | H. Kirstenbosch. |
| 3. Protea Road. | C. Rustenburg. | J. Bishopscourt. |
| 4. Traces of old road from Welgelegen to Grootte Schuur. | D. Grootte Schuur. | K. Liebeck River. |
| | E. Klein Schuur. | M. Road to Stellenbosch. |
| | O. The Old Rondebosch Farm Eklenberg. | N. Road to Simons Bay. |

Fig. 9 Woodstock, Main Road, Cape Town, 2004.

'Its shops are respectable, its lanes notorious. It is clean and dirty, modern and old-fashioned, plastic and enamel, with just a touch of crinoline and sedan chair. It contains bank mangers and clerks, whores and pimps. Mosques and churches, Englishmen, Afrikaners, Coloureds, Moslems, Africans, Jews, Gentiles, Germans, Greeks, Italians'.

Richard Rive ed., *Quartet: New Voices from South Africa*, (London: Heinemann, 1963), 19



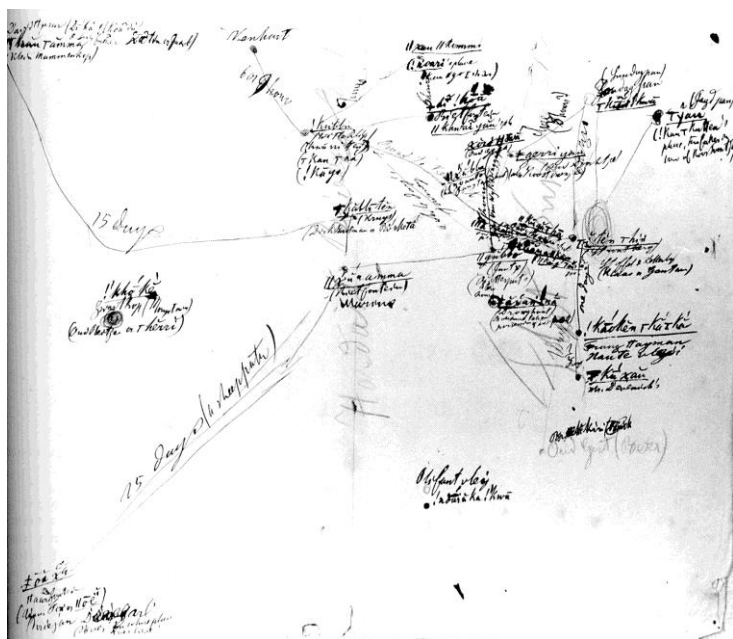


Fig. 12 Map of the /Xam-ka !ei – ‘the dust of the /Xam’ – drawn by Bleek with information from //Kabbo in 1870, corresponding to the area between Kenhardt, Brandvlei and Vanwyksvlei in the northern Cape UCT BC 151

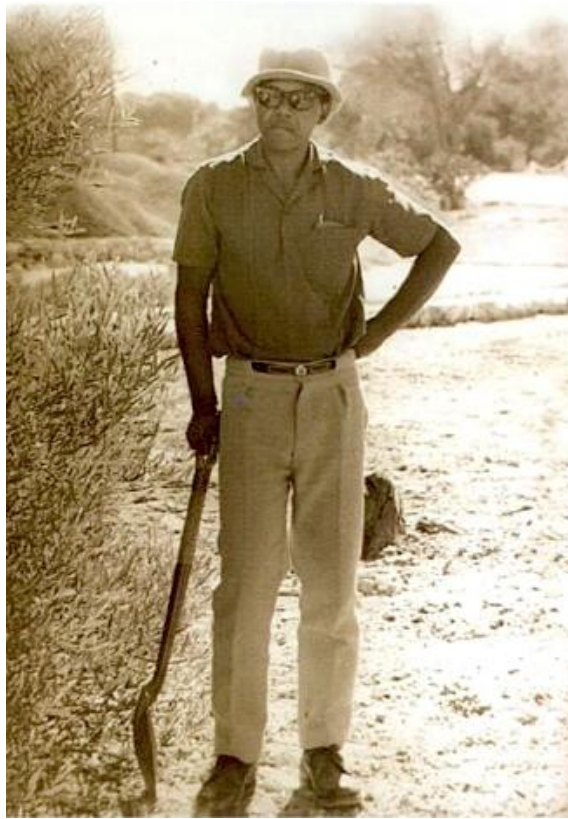
Fig. 13 '//Kabbo's Intended Return Home', Bleek and Lloyd, *Specimens of Bushman Folklore*, (London: George Allen, 1911), 315-17.

children for me. The rain must first fall, and then, I should be looking around, while I looked around, seeking for (a pair of) ostriches which are wont to seek the water along the "Har Rivier", () that (2919) they may, going along, drink the water. I must, going round in front, descend into the "Har Rivier". I must (in a stooping position) steal up to them in the inside of the river bed. I must lie (on the front of my body) in the river bed; that I might shoot, lying in the river bed. For, the western ostriches do, seeking water, come back; that they may, going along, () drink the new water. (2920)

Therefore, I must sit waiting for the Sundays on which I remain here, on which I continue to teach thee. I do not again await another moon, for this moon is the one about which I () told thee. There- (2921) fore, I desired that it should do thus, that it should return for me. For I have sat waiting for the boots, that I must put on to walk in; which are strong for the road. () For, the sun will go along, burning (2922) strongly. And then, the earth becomes hot, while I still am going along halfway. I must go together with the warm sun, while the ground is hot. For, a little road it is not. For, it is a great road; () (2923) it is long. I should reach my place, when the trees are dry. For, I shall walk, letting the flowers become dry while I still follow the path.

Then, autumn will quickly be (upon) us there; * () when I am sitting at my (own) place. For, I (2924) shall not go to other places; for, I must remain at my (own) place, the name of which I have told my Master; he knows it; he knows, (having) put it

* When he is sitting at his own place. (2923')



Figs. 14-15 'n Gevangene werksaam in die tuin
Staged photographs of Nelson Mandela and other political prisoners on Robben Island for a visit by journalists in 1977.

A Prisoner in the Garden: Opening Nelson Mandela's Prison Archive, (Johannesburg: Penguin, 2005).





Fig. 16 Salmanslaagte, Sevilla Trail, Cederberg, Western Cape.



Fig. 17 Thembinkosi Goniwe, Untitled, *Returning the Gaze Series* Billboard at the foot of Woolsack Drive, 2000.

Subsequently used in “Scratches on the Face”: Antiquity and Contemporaneity in South African Works of Art from Iziko Museums of Cape Town’, Iziko South African National Gallery, 15 November 2008 to 31 July 2009.



Fig. 18 Details from tracings of rock art panels in south-western Cape showing images of colonial material culture: rifles, mounted hunting, hats, masted ship, wagons.

Royden Yates et al., 'Colonial Era Paintings in the Rock Art of the South-Western Cape', *South African Archaeological Society Goodwin Series 7*, (1993), 59-70.



'I sing my land...'

Fig. 19. Cyril Coetzee, *T'kama-Adamastor* [detail].
Oil on canvas, 1999, 8,64 x 3,26 m.
William Cullen Library, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.



Fig 20 The Kompanjies River, crossed by the N2 near Swellendam.

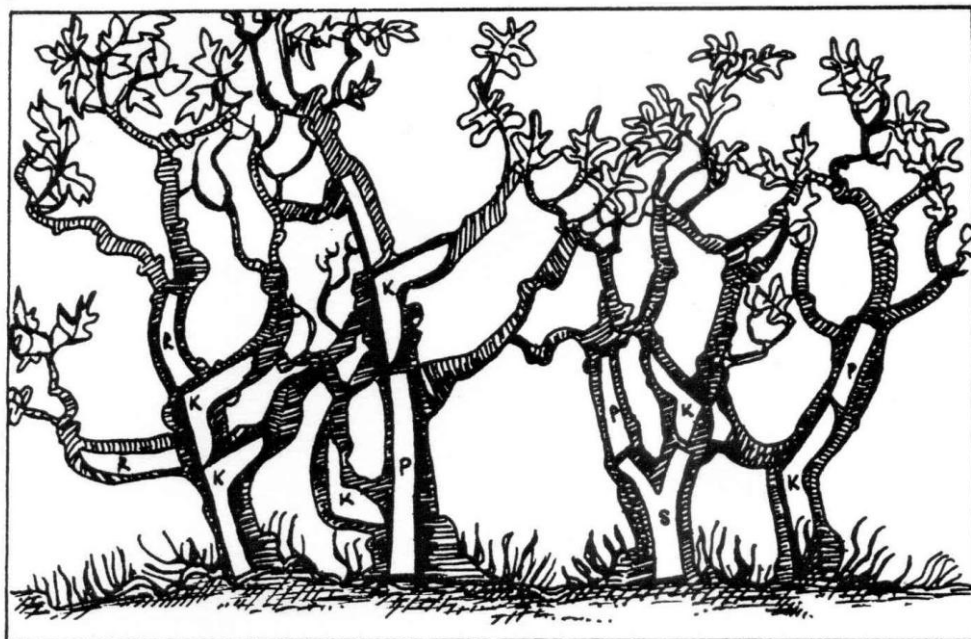


Fig. 21 A naval architect's instructions to a timber merchant, requesting a selection of wood suitable for ship building.

Dan Sleight, *Jan Compagnie: the World of the Dutch East India Company*, 53.



'By rock and heath and pine...'

Fig. 22 The Upper Campus of the University of Cape Town, the Jameson Hall aligned with the vertical axis of Devil's Peak. Rhodes seated on white plinth in the centre of steps.

'The disposition and general lay-out is excellent. It is simple and has the great architectural quality of being apparently obvious' wrote Sir Edwin Lutyens in a report of March 1919. 'It is a gradient common to a Surrey hillside and should present no practical difficulties which design and foresight cannot overcome...' (Herbert Baker papers, University of Cape Town archives).



Fig. 23 'How the Elephant got its Trunk', Kipling's own illustration in the *Just So Stories*. 'Underneath the truly picture are shadows of African animals walking into an African ark' (64). This drawing is a rebus found throughout the illustrations: 'Ark A' is a phonetic representation of the creator's initials, R. K.

'The content of the dream is given as it were in the form of hieroglyphs whose signs are to be translated one by one into the language of the dream-thoughts. We would obviously be misled if we were to read these signs according to their pictorial value and not according to their referentiality as signs. Suppose I have a picture-puzzle, a rebus, before me: a house with a boat on its roof, then a single letter of the alphabet...'

(Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 211).



Fig.24 From Max Beerbohm's *Lives of the Poets*.
Kipling composing 'The Absent-Minded Beggar'.

'You know, I couldn't stop', Beerbohm recalled in his eighties, 'As his publication increased, so did my derogation. He didn't stop; I couldn't stop. I meant to. I wanted to. But I couldn't'. (S. N. Behrmann, *Conversations with Max*, (1960) cited in Harry Ricketts, *The Unforgiving Minute*, 408.)

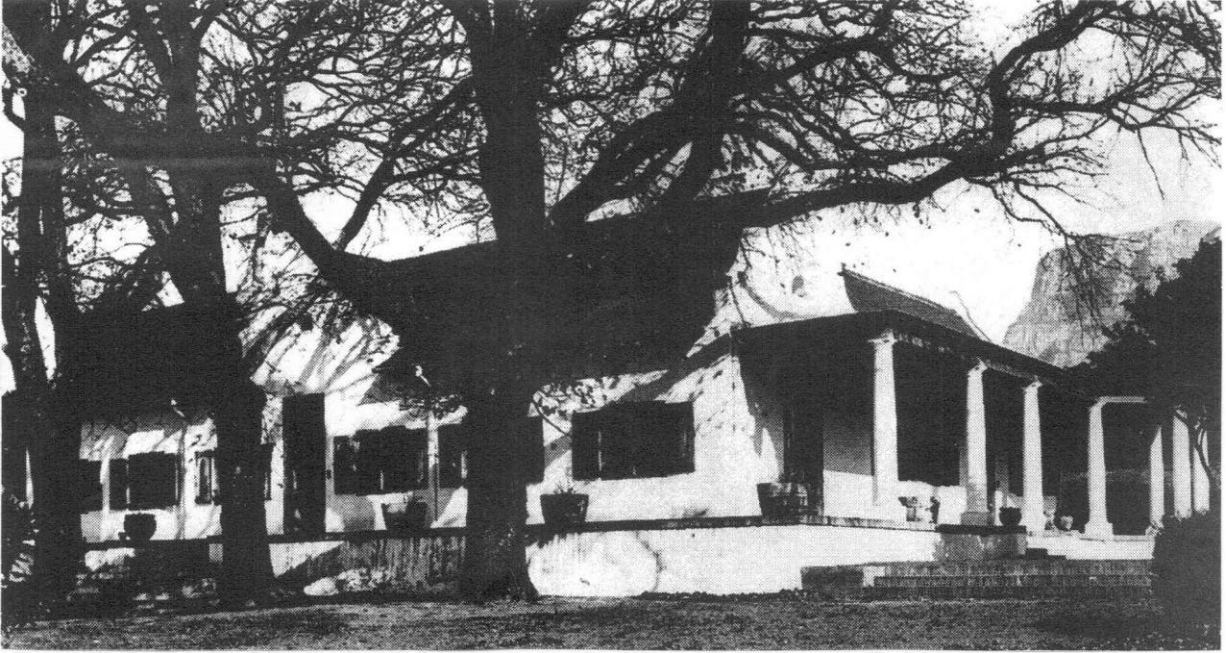
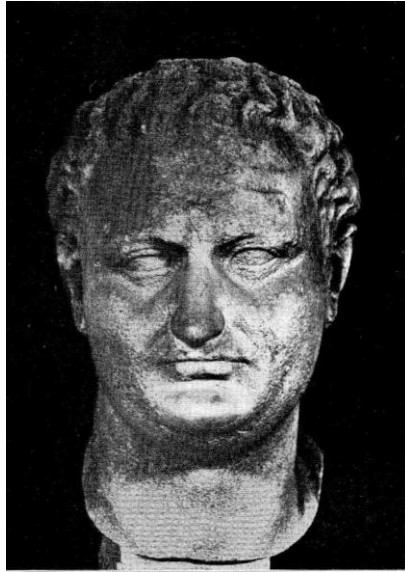


Fig. 25 The Woolsack, with the Eastern Buttress in the background. Much of Kipling's life and work can be explored in terms of the houses he inhabited, from the assured country seat of Bateman's steeped in Sussex history to 'The House of Desolation' in Southsea, the foster home where Kipling arrived from India at the age of five and a half. 'I should like to burn it down and plough the place with salt', Kipling remarked to his sister near the end of his life. (*Chambers Magazine*, 1937, cited in Craig Raine, 'The Divided Kipling', *In Defence of T. S. Eliot*, 210.)



Fig/26-7 The Emperor Titus (above) and the routinely defaced bust of Rhodes at heart of the Memorial (below). From Herbert Baker, *Cecil Rhodes by his Architect* (1934).



As Geoffrey Haresnape remarks in a preface to Plomer's biography of Rhodes, there was a personal dimension to the poet's *animus*. In his autobiography, Plomer records how his father Charles had been sent out to South Africa in the 1880s with a letter of introduction to the Colossus, then 'in the full flush of his megalomaniac triumph', and provides a definitive pen-portrait of the man: 'The shy bright-eyed boy took the chair that was offered, and the heavy purposeful mask, with the slightly hypnotic eyes and cloven chin, leaned towards him'. The interview came to nothing, but years later, Charles Plomer would volunteer to take part in the ill-starred Jameson Raid.

William Plomer, *Double Lives*, (1943) cited in Haresnape ed. *Cecil Rhodes*, xi.

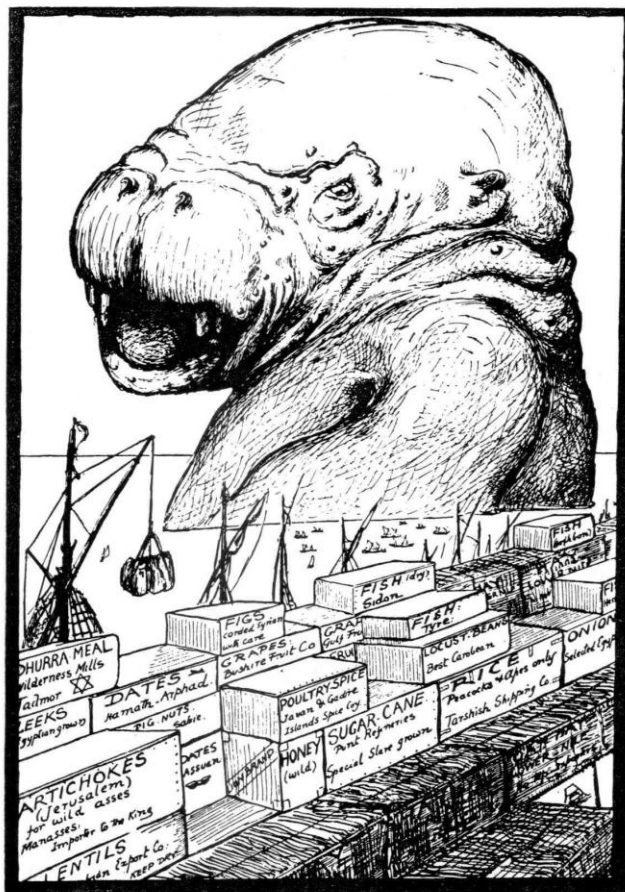
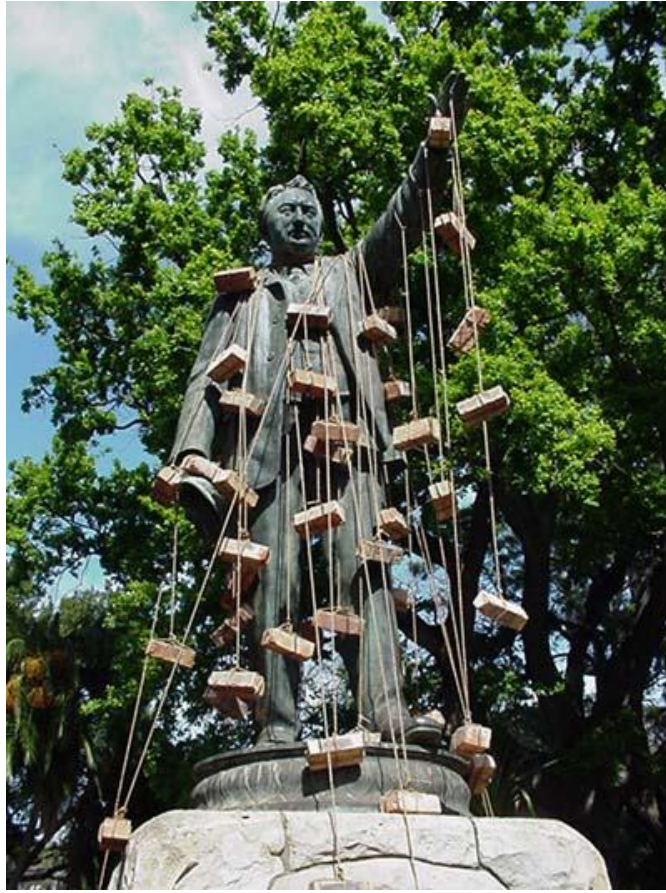


Fig. 28 From the *Just So Stories*. The juxtaposition of orderly technology in a colonial port and the frightening 'Animal that came out of the deep' is perhaps symbolic of the unexpected, irrational dimensions that lurk beneath the knowing surface of Kipling's writing. The 'Ark A' rebus can just be detected between crates at bottom right.



Figs. 29-30 Heritage Day 1999. 'PTO: Public Monuments Reconsidered.'
'Your hinterland is there!' (above). 'From Rape to Curio' (below).



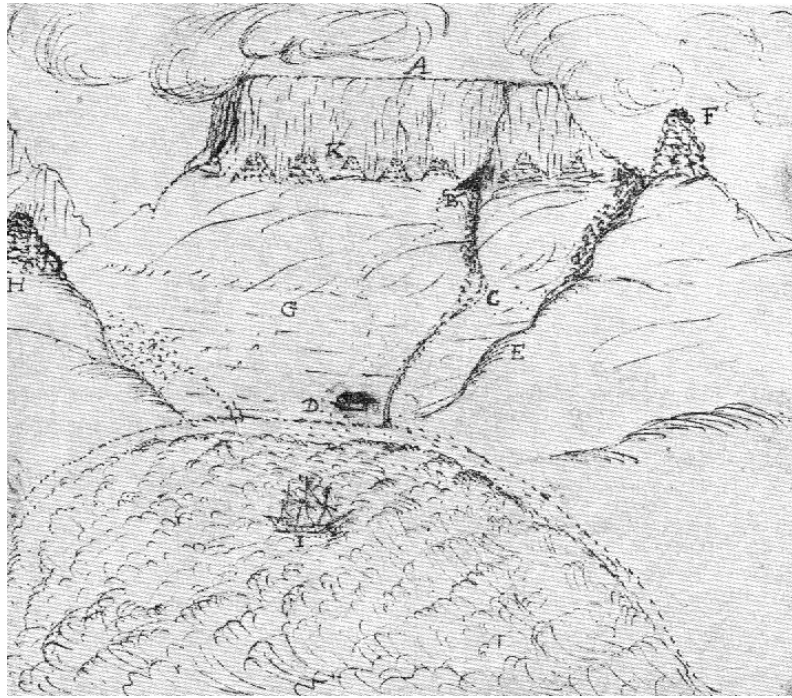


Fig. 31 Peter Mundy: Table Mountain and Table Bay (1634), R. Raven-Hart, *Before van Riebeeck*.

'A. The Topp of the great hill called the Table. B. The going upp thereto between a monstrous Clefte or opening. C. A prettie brooke which cometh from the said opening and runneth by the Tent. D. The Tent where the sicke men ly ashoare. E. James his Mounte. F The Sugar loafe. G. The Valley or plaine under the Hill. H. Charles his Mounte, being certaine Rocks on the Topp of a Hill resembling a Castle afar off. I. The place where our ship rode called Table bay and by some Saldania Bay. K. The Buttresses or supporters under the Table being of the Nature of Charles his Mounte, seemeing artificiall.'



Fig. 32 William Hodges, *A view of the Cape of Good Hope, taken on the Spot, from on board the Resolution, Capt. Cook*, Oil on canvas, 1772. National Maritime Museum, London.



Figs. 33-4 John Playfair, 'Account of the Structure of the Table Mountain, and other Parts of the Peninsula of the Cape. Drawn up by Professor Playfair, from Observations made by Captain Basil Hall' [Read May 1813]. *Transactions of the Royal Society of Edinburgh*, Vol. VII, (1815), 269-278.

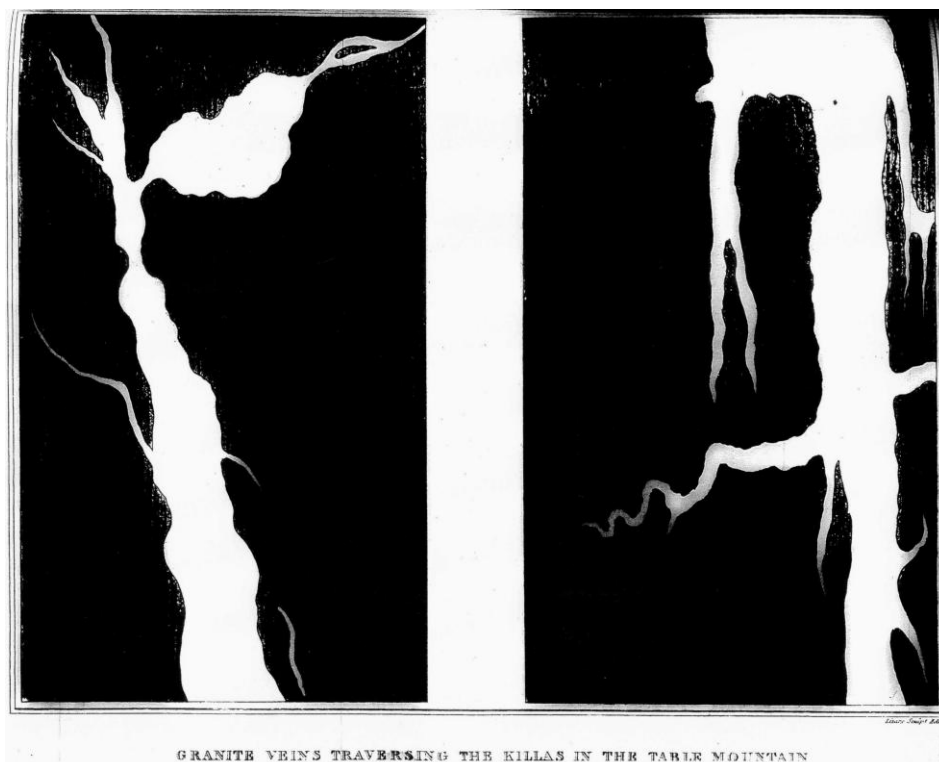




Fig.36

'Suburban Garden and Table Mountain, Bloubergstrand, Cape Town, Cape, 9 January 1986.'
David Goldblatt, photograph, rep. Vergunst ed., *Hoerikwaggo: Images of Table Mountain*, (Cape Town: South African National Gallery, 2000).

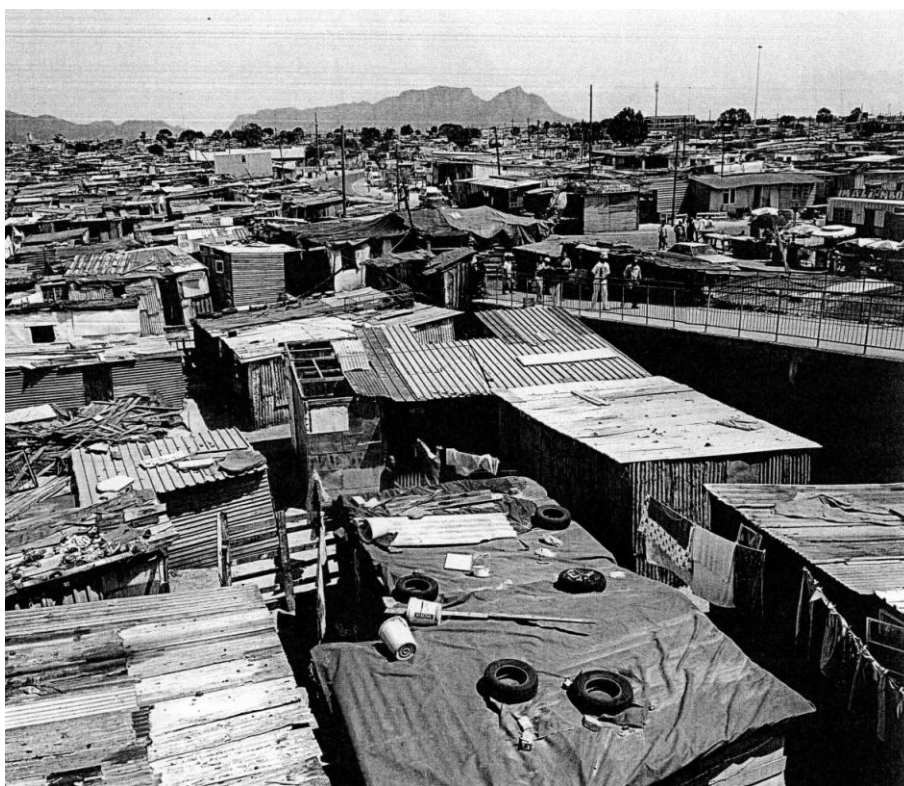


Fig. 37 'Nolungile Station, Khayelitsha.' David Lurie, *Images of Table Mountain*, (Cape Town: Bell-Roberts, 2006).

PUBLICATIONS AND MANUSCRIPTS.				CLICKS.			
Nos.	TITLES.	Date.	Catal.	Dent.	Lat.	Gutt.	Pal.
1	Sir Thomas Herbert, Bart.,...	1638	28.	i s t			
2	G. Fr. Wrede, Compendium....	1664	*30.				
3	God. Guil. Leibnitii, Collect...	1717	35.	t? k?			
4	M. P. Kolbe's Travels	1719	33.	∩ (or) ~			
5	Andrew Sparrmann, M.D.,.....	1782	23.	t'			
6	C. P. Thunberg, M.D.,.....	1789	24.	a	A	á	
7	F. Le Vaillant, Travels.....	1790	25.	Λ	V		Δ
8	John Barrow, F. R. S.,.....	1801	26.	—		∪	
9	Dr. van der Kemp, Catech....	1805	*21.	By 6 differ. Numer.			
10	H. Lichtenstein, M.D.,.....	1808	18. 19.	t' ¹	t' ²		t' ³
11	Kafir and Zulu Books, since...	1824	43.216.	c	x	q	(qe)
12	Will. J. Burchell, Travels.....	1824	20.	∩	c	cc	
13	Joh. Leon. Ebner, Travels	1829	*	—			
14	J. H. Schmelen, Manu., before	1830	10.	—	∩		∩
15	H. C. Knudsen, Spell.-book....	1842	5. 6.	.	∩	∩∩	:
16	H. C. Knudsen, Luke's Gospel	1846	15.7.4.	.	∩	c	:
17	C. F. Wuras, Catech., before...	1848	21.	.	∩	c	
18	C. F. Wuras, Grammar.....	1850	16.	f	y	q	v
19	H. P. S. Schreuder, Zulu Gr...	1850	178.	∩	∩	∩	
20	R. Lepsius, Manuscript.....	1853		1c	1x	1q	1v
21	Rich. Lepsius, Stand. Alphab...	1854				!	
22	F. H. Vollmer, Spelling-book..	1854	8. 12.	v	q	f	x
23	Rhenish Mission Conference...	1856				≠	≠
24	Henry Tindall, Grammar, &c.	1856	2. 3.	c	x	q	v
25	Wm. H. I. Bleek, Rese., &c....	1857	215.36.	c	x	q	∩
26	C. F. Wuras, Manuscript.....	1857	16.21.d	Λ	Π	∩	
27	Manuscript Notes.....		6.	ts	kl	gkt	kt
28	J. W. Gibbs, Remarks, &c....	1852	174.	□	□	≡	

Fig. 38 W. H. I. Bleek, Table of Clicks, *The Library of his Excellency Sir George Grey* (1858).

Between 1857 and 1859, Bleek worked to catalogue Sir George Grey's extensive library of 'traditional literature' in Cape Town, and in the process drew up a table of twenty eight different orthographies which had been used to notate the oldest southern African languages. As well as being a summary of the linguistic information contained within early accounts of the Cape, it provides the spectacle of a colonial taxonomy trying to apprehend and codify the sheer foreignness of the Khoe, Ju and !Ui-Taa language families, all of them characterised by a complex array of clicks, gutturals and shifting intonations.



Fig. 39 '...a symbolic Last Supper in which the Bushman body was the sacrifice'.

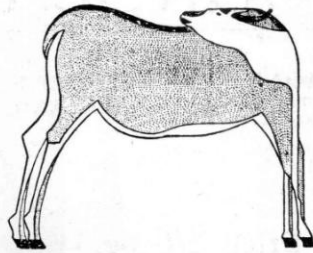
Miscast, South African National Gallery, 1996.

Fig. 40 '...the other collector whose ear had been mainly accustomed to English sounds'.

Lucy Catherine Lloyd in the 1870s
(South African Library).



VOORSLAG



'We had derived a good deal of amusement from the enterprise and perhaps, like twentieth-century Bushmen, had left a few vivid paintings on the walls of that dark cave, the mind of the white South African. Certainly nothing remotely like *Voorslag* had confronted its readers before, nothing so European, so cultivated, so forceful, ironical, and direct'.

William Plomer, *The South African Autobiography* [1975], (Cape Town: David Philip, 1984),172.

THE ALBATROSS	- - - - -	Roy Campbell
BEAUTY IN NATURE	- - -	Gen. J. C. Smuts
CÉZANNE	- - - - -	Edward Roworth
PORTRAITS IN THE NUDE	-	William Plomer

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Figs 41-2

. Rock art and literary modernism: Cover of *Voorslag* (above) (after copies by J. H. Pierneef). Roger Fry, 'The Art of the Bushmen' [1910], (below) rep. in *Vision and Design*, (London: Chatto and Windus, 1957).

VISION AND DESIGN



FIG. 1.



FIG. 2.



FIG. 3.



FIG. 4.



FIG. 5.

'...what strikes one most is the fact that extremely complicated poses are rendered with the same ease as the more frequent profile view...most curious of all are the cases... of animals trotting, in which the gesture is seen by us to be true only because our slow and imperfect vision has been helped out by the instantaneous photograph. Fifty years ago we should have rejected such a rendering as absurd; we now know it to be a correct statement of one movement in the action of trotting.' (89-91)

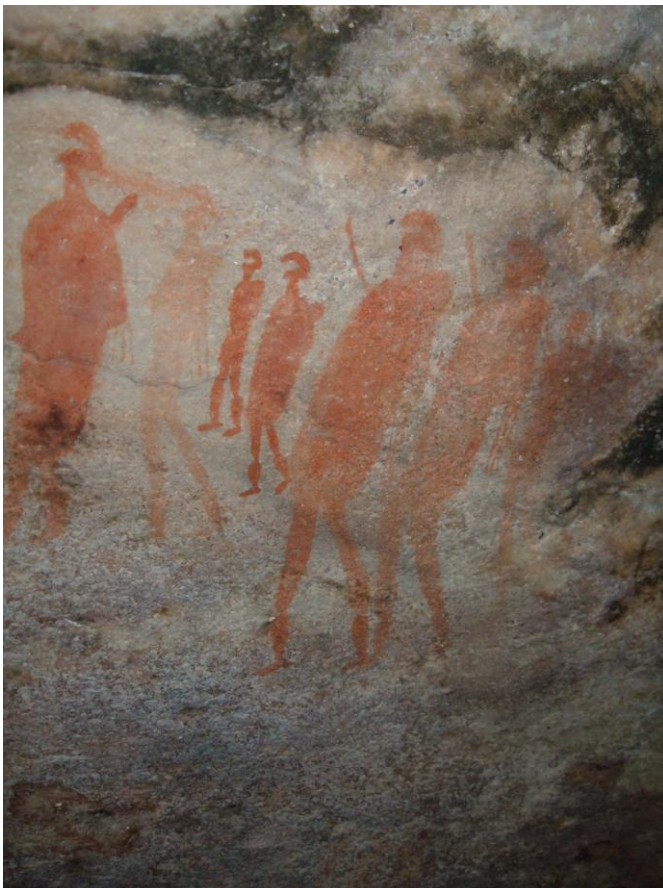


Fig. 43 Diä!kwain in a photograph by W. Hermann, Cape Town, 1873-6, reproduced in *Specimens of Bushman Folklore* (1911) SAM neg. no 671.

Dorothea Bleek remembered him in 1909: 'There stands before me an old photo of a Bushman. It is David, or Daud, as the Dutch called him. He is looking down with a happy smile at his best hat, which he holds gingerly, in order to display a brass ring on one finger. His best tie and suit have come out very well too. He holds his flute in his right hand' ('Notes on the Bushmen', 40).



Figs. 44-5 The hook-headed figures present on many rock art panels, one needs to be informed, were not painted that way, but created when lichen attacked and erased the lighter pigments used for shading the face. It is a process evoked in one of the oddest conjoinings of Bushman art and South African modernity, the dream sequence in William Plomer's *Ula Masondo* (1926) when the protagonist, trapped by a rockfall in a Johannesburg mine, hallucinates that he is 'searching in the Mountain of the Bushmen for a cow that was lost':



'When these colours fade
And lichens hang in their places,
When these forms lose their graces,
When the lines are not lines...'

Selected Stories,
(Cape Town: David Philip, 1984), 74.

Sevilla Trail, Cederberg.

Fig. 46 Anthropometric photograph of //Kabbo, taken in the 1870s while he was still a prisoner at the Breakwater. UCT Special Collections, D2.7.2.

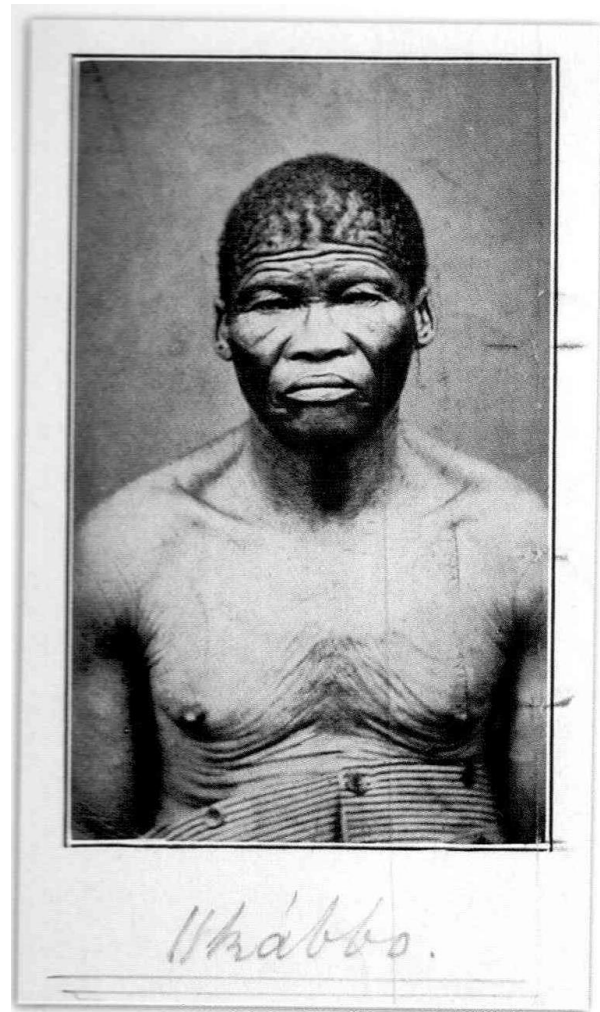


Fig. 47 //Kabbo in chromolithograph by Andre and Sleigh after a coloured portrait by William Schroeder, used as frontispiece to *Specimens of Bushman Folklore*, (1911).

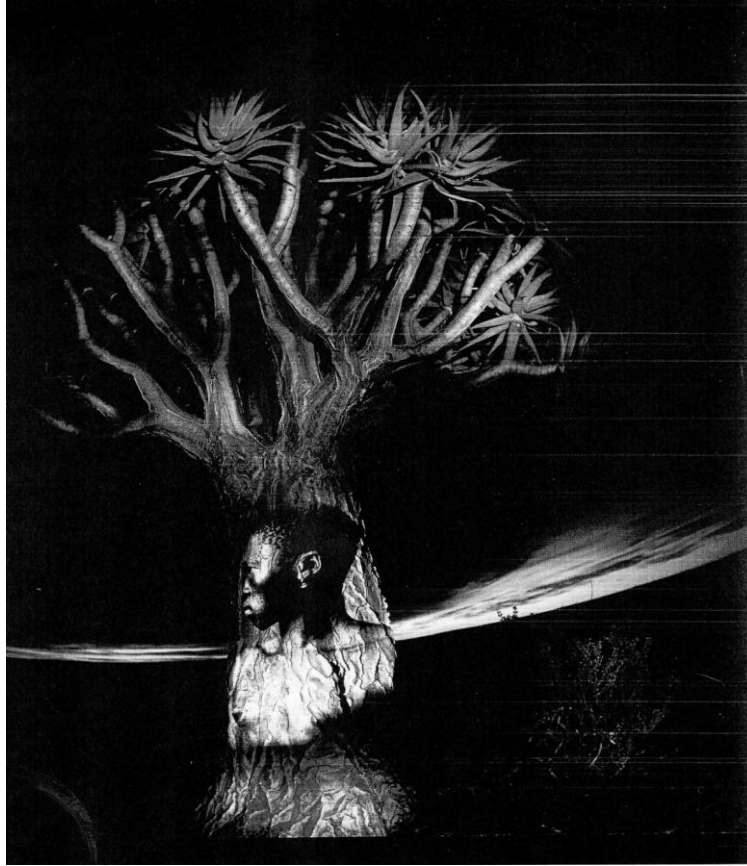


Fig. 48 Janette Deacon and Craig Foster, *My Heart Stands in the Hill*, (Cape Town: Struik, 2005).

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The financial support of the Arts and Humanities Research Council is gratefully acknowledged, and in particular its provision of overseas travel allowances which enabled me to spend significant periods of time at the Cape over the last four years.

My supervisors David Attwell and Derek Attridge have been generous, engaged and enthusiastic throughout. I especially appreciate their recognition that this work was written in mind of a more general readership than is normally the case with doctoral dissertations. If the preceding chapters are still lacking in theoretical underpinning, the fault is mine entirely. In addition, the opportunity to work with them on a forthcoming *Cambridge History of South African Literature* has been enormously beneficial for my own project. I am grateful too for British Academy funding on this account.

I would also like to acknowledge the long-term contribution of Sean Hunter Christie, my co-author during initial work on a cultural biography of Cape Town's Main Road. The decision to transform what was originally exercise in human geography into a literary history occurred to me just outside Simonstown on a day when we had walked the entire route from the Castle and were quite possibly suffering from heatstroke. Nonetheless, Main Road's many detours and diversions eventually gave rise to this project, and the *wagen pad* become clogged transport artery still runs through the chapters, if only as a buried metaphor. His interest in African roads has in turn extended throughout the continent via work on miners, smugglers and truckers.

I am especially grateful to the English Department at the University of Cape Town for making a wide range of resources available to me. In particular I would like to thank Tanya Barben of Rare Books (for her pointers on the Woolsack and the library of Wilhelm Bleek); the staff of the African Studies Library (not least for their dossier on the Himalayan tahrs); the Manuscripts Department (for allowing me to work with the original Bleek and Lloyd notebooks even after digital versions had become available); Sue Buchanan (for material on Darwin at the Cape), Carrol Clarkson (for granting me visiting researcher status at short notice) and Stephen Watson (for much help over the years, and in particular for facilitating the publication of parts of this work in the anthology *A City Imagined* and in *Neue Rundschau*).

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Finally I would like to thank Fiona Bucknill for unstinting support over many years, and so too my father.

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