Text or Presence: On Rereading the /Xam and the Interpretation of their Narratives

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Summary

The Bleek and Lloyd collection of /Xam materials has elicited a variety of responses from scholars in different disciplines. These include interpretation of the texts, history and biography. Most of this writing has not been subjected to close criticism. I will argue in this paper that Jacques Derrida's critique of the work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Claude Lévi-Strauss in *Of Grammatology* (1976) is applicable to some of the writing that has been produced in relation to the Bleek and Lloyd archive. Derrida's work also illuminates Bleek's ideological framework and the attitudes displayed towards the Bushmen during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Opsomming

'n Verskeidenheid response uit verskillende dissplines het gevolg op die Bleek en Lloyd-versameling van /Xam tekste. Dit sluit interpretasies van die tekste self in, die geskiedenis en biografiëe. Die meeste van hierdie werke is nog nie blootgestel aan noukeurige ondersoek nie. Ek voer in hierdie artikel aan dat Jacques Derrida se kritiek van die werke van Jean-Jacques Rousseau en Claude Lévi-Strauss in *Of Grammatology* (1976) ook van toepassing is op die literatuur voortspruitend uit die Bleek en Lloyd-versameling. Derrida se werk lig Bleek se ideologiese raamwerk en die houdings teenoor die Boesmans gedurende die negentiende en twintigste eeue uit.

The /Xam archive, collected from several /Xam informants in the 1870s by the German linguist, Wilhelm Bleek, and his sister-in-law, Lucy Lloyd, comprises one of the most extensive and important collections of oral literature in the world. It is not surprising, therefore, that it has attracted the attention of scholars from a variety of disciplines. The close interpretation of the actual texts, though, remains a task that surprisingly few of them have attempted. It is also true to say that, with some exceptions, the interpretation that has been conducted does not employ or engage with the theoretical insights that have resulted from the debates of the last forty years in the fields of cultural and literary studies. Nor, again with some exceptions, has

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the interpretation that has been produced been subjected to the type of critical scrutiny which takes these theoretical developments into account. A number of reasons might be advanced for why Marxist, feminist, post-structuralist or postcolonial theory has had relatively little impact on the interpretation of the /Xam narratives. The groundbreaking and deservedly influential analysis of the /Xam narratives by Roger Hewitt was produced in the seventies, although only published in the late eighties. It preceded, therefore, much of the theoretical activity to which I am referring. In addition, several of the readers of the /Xam stories have been anthropologists, historians, archaeologists and art historians rather than literary critics. Academics in these disciplines have not always been preoccupied with theoretical questions to the same degree as cultural and literary scholars. The general field of folklore and mythology, moreover, within which much of the interpretation of the /Xam texts could be located, remains largely rooted in the comparative, functionalist and structuralist paradigms of an earlier era, partly perhaps because the object of its study has often been seen as traditional and timeless. Another possible factor is that contemporary theorists have rarely shown much interest in analysing "traditional" oral texts themselves and have not, therefore, provided a lead as to how to apply their insights to texts of this sort (Csapo 2005: 291).

Despite the relative lack of impact of contemporary theory on the interpretation of the /Xam materials, the insights produced by this theory have potentially profound consequences for the ways in which the texts are read. Work such as that of Henry Louis Gates (1988) or Karin Barber (1991; 1999) has demonstrated the effectiveness of employing some of the theoretical insights of the last fifty years when reading both traditional oral texts and the more contemporary texts that are directly related to older oral traditions. These insights involve, chiefly, the textual nature of language, the ideological character of cultural production and the importance of locating texts within an internal discursive economy rather than, for example, analysing them in terms of ahistorical, cross-cultural plot structures or situating them within a universal genre of archetypal myths.

Although most of the interpreters of the /Xam texts have not systematically concerned themselves with the theoretical aspects of interpretation, they have generally applied themselves to understanding the texts in such a tenacious and intelligent fashion that they have often, it seems to me, encountered the limitations of the interpretative schools or theoretical frameworks within which they were working. This can be seen in various ways in their work. While Hewitt, for instance, uses Radin's writing on the trickster in order to discuss the /Xam figure, /Kaggen, and has also been influenced by Levi-Strauss's idea that myths are structured in terms of a nature/culture binary, he qualifies his use of their concepts in very significant ways. He distances himself from Radin's Jungian universalism by insisting that /Kaggen's "role *qua* trickster [be] elucidated within a very

specific ethnographic context" (pp. 19-20). His detailed examination of a story concerning the Dawn's Heart Star and the Lynx, leads him to conclude that the binaries in the narrative are mediated differently from the way Lévi-Strauss claims they are in myth (1986: 102).

Hewitt's struggle to fit his analytical tools to the materials is replicated in other work on the narratives. Andrew Bank (2006: 354) notes that Lucy Lloyd herself moved away from a preoccupation with mythology to concentrate on /Xam culture in general. Her change in focus could be interpreted in terms of a progressive departure from Bleek's theories of cultural evolution, a move that was prompted by her increasingly close acquaintance with /Xam discourse itself. Mathias Guenther (1999) questions the ability of structuralist and functionalist approaches to comprehend Bushman narrative at the same time as demonstrating how easily the materials can be accommodated within these explanatory frameworks. He goes on to argue that none of the paradigms that have been applied to reading Bushman narrative whether "theistic, sidereal, animistic, prosaic, shamanic, gender, symbolic ... encompasses the field in its entirety, despite the claims to the contrary" (1999: 232). Duncan Brown (1995, 1998), whose work is informed by recent literary theory, explicitly criticises the limitations of certain approaches to the narratives and suggests others. He emphasises the importance, for example, of reading the texts as distinctive "rhetorical acts" rather than "as evidence of social practices and belief systems" (1998: 36).

The work of many theorists could be used to illustrate the relevance to the interpretation of oral literature of contemporary theory. In this article, though, I focus chiefly on some of the writing of Jacques Derrida in *Of Grammatology*. There are a number of reasons for this choice. Derrida's work was a major influence on Henry Louis Gates's *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (1988), a seminal text, in my view, for the reading of oral literature and non-Western texts in general. Anne Douehi (1993), too, draws on *Of Grammatology* in order to deliver an incisive critique of the identification of figures from diverse cultures as tricksters (see Douehi 1993). The term "trickster" has been widely applied with little qualification to /Kaggen, the mantis figure who is the central protagonist in a great many /Xam stories of the First Times.[1] In

1. The /Xam materials are generally considered as belonging to one of two periods or orders. The first of these orders represents the early formative times, uderstood as mythical or fictive, while the other represents the present, or "real" order of existence. The earlier period is usually referred to as the First Times or the First Order and its inhabitants as the people of the Early Race, the First People, or the First Bushmen. The characterisation of /Kaggen as the /Xam trickster pervades the literature on the /Xam texts. See, for example, Hewitt 1986; Brown 1998: 55; Guenther 1999; Lewis-Williams 2000: 8; James 2001: 157; Bennun 2004: 91-94 and Bank 2006: 182-183; 240.

addition, Derrida's critique of Lévi-Strauss and the ethnological project in *Of Grammatology* is closely connected to the concerns of /Xam studies. Lévi-Strauss has directly influenced some of the major analyses of the /Xam narratives. This includes Hewitt (1986), Lewis-Williams (1996, 1998) and Guenther (1999).

The relative absence of recent theory from interpretation of the /Xam texts has not been replicated in other writing about the collection, particularly that which concerns representation of the Bushmen and the ideological basis of Bleek's Bushman project. Here Derrida's work sometimes features directly, as in the writing of Shane Moran (1995: 2001). Even where it is not mentioned explicitly, the work of Wilmsen (1996), Bregin (1998, 2000) Brown (1995, 1998) and others, on both the /Xam narratives and the Bushmen more generally, accords, in important respects, with Derrida's delineation in *Of Grammatology* of a complex in Western thought that is characterised by nostalgia for a lost origin. This paper's examination of some of the repercussions of his work for reading the /Xam narratives does not occur in a vacuum, therefore.

I will consider certain of the implications of Derrida's writing on the lost origin for investigating representations of the Bushmen. This is followed by a discussion of some of the consequences that his critique of the privileging of speech over writing might have for reading the /Xam materials. They are, after all, the products of an oral tradition that have been preserved in writing. I argue that some of the major writing on the narratives is based on the type of opposition between speech and writing that Derrida investigates in *Of Grammatology*. In conclusion I offer a few remarks about the possibilities that Derrida's own approach to reading texts offers for reading the narratives. The aims of this paper must necessarily remain modest. It seeks only to contribute to a greater degree of theoretical discussion about interpreting the materials. It cannot claim to offer new insights into Derrida's work. Since it uses *Of Grammatology* in a selective manner, only to suggest some of its implications for /Xam studies, it necessarily presents a partial and simplistic view of the sophisticated thought that is contained in Derrida's book. Nor, unfortunately, does the scope of the paper allow for the type of analysis of a /Xam narrative for which I argue in it. In my view an analysis needs to be as detailed as possible. An article which is devoted primarily to other matters, as this one is, cannot hope to provide a meaningful examination of a /Xam text.[2]

One of the major themes of *Of Grammatology* (1976) is the contention that a system of binaries recurs in European thought. One of the terms in such a binary is privileged. Its ability to signify relies largely on its opposition to the suppressed or negative pole of the binary. The favoured

2. I have tried to do this elsewhere (Wessels 2007). See Lewis-Williams (1998) for an article which is entirely devoted to the examination of a single narrative.

pole is located close to an origin and invested with presence. The primary opposition in Western thought is the one between speech and writing. A written sign supposedly symbolises a spoken sign which in turn symbolises a concept. Writing, therefore, is only the representation of a representation. While Western thought positions all signification as secondary, as only the outward sign of an inner signified, it tries to mask the derivative character of the sonic sign by erecting this opposition between speech and writing. Speech is then located, in terms of its opposition to writing, as proximate to the signified.

This phonocentric move, in which the voice is considered as contiguous with presence and being while writing is positioned as supplementary, paves the way for the gap between the order of the signifier and the pre-verbal realm of the signified to be similarly narrowed in regard to the privileged pole of a number of other sets of binaries. Such oppositional binaries include nature/culture, when nature is aligned with an authentic condition and placed against the artificial realm of culture. The wider complex in which signifiers and signifieds are considered as belonging to the orders of the sign and meaning respectively is called logocentrism since it is based on the view that graphic or sonic signs are the outward representation of the logos, a realm of conceptualisation that precedes or is interior to all signification. Signification, in this structure, results from the relationship between a sign and the concept it signifies rather than from the relations between signs themselves.

Before going on to discuss the presence of an opposition between speech and writing in some of the literature that has interpreted the /Xam materials, I should like to make some observations about the implications that the system of antithetical binaries has had for the way that the Bushmen in general has been represented in colonial and contemporary thought. The opposition between nature and culture has been central to this history. Broadly speaking, nature, like speech, is situated as close to an origin in which presence is directly accessible while culture, like writing, is seen as a necessary but unfortunate product of the lack that distance from the origin has produced. The Bushman is frequently considered, in terms of this complex, to be closer to the origin and to nature than is modern man, both literally, in the sense that he is supposed to belong to an earlier phase in the development of man, in which economic activity involved the natural activities of hunting and gathering, and figuratively, since he symbolises a more natural way of life, one that is closer to that which prevailed before the fall from presence.

This complex, however, like the false distinction between speech and writing, produces its own irresolvable contradictions. While “natural” man is situated as closer to the origin from which more advanced societies have fallen and, therefore, enjoys greater access to the full presence associated with an origin, no people, even ones that are to a large degree a projection

of the missing part of contemporary man, can ever be situated at the zero point of origin. This point will always prove elusive for there is always another "prehistoric, presocial, and also prelinguistic stratum" to be laid bare (Derrida 1976: 252). Natural man can never be natural enough. Rousseau can only point in the direction in which this point will be approached, in the warm, passionate South (p. 251) and in the time before time inhabited by the primitive who, although already partially wrenched from nature, is not yet in society (p. 253).

The /Xam, "illiterate" foragers and inhabitants, literally and metaphorically, of the South, come close to fulfilling the conditions for the "natural man" that Derrida finds in Rousseau and in the literature he has inspired. Since, however, the view of the Bushman as emblematic natural man is based on an untenable opposition between nature and culture, and is also the product of an ideological complex in which Bushmen exist chiefly as objects or symbols in someone else's story, it comes as no surprise to find that interactions with historically situated Bushmen contradict many of the expectations of the Western construct "Bushman". This dynamic, as Andrew Bank's (2006) work has shown, was already a feature of Wilhelm Bleek's interactions with the /Xam interlocutors. Bleek's ideas about the /Xam and their mythology changed markedly once he got to actually know them. As I have already suggested, several scholars have discovered the limitations of their interpretative frameworks when applying them to actual /Xam texts. Since, though, it has been impossible for Western critics to think entirely outside the structures of thought that have generated these frameworks, and even more so if the critiques of them that have appeared in the theoretical debates of the last half century are ignored, this contradiction can never be properly resolved in their work.

Derrida observes that the nostalgia for an origin and the association of the primitive with it occurs within a wider European narrative:

> Non-European peoples were not only studied … [as the] … index to a hidden good Nature, as native soil recovered, of a "zero degree" with reference to which one could outline the structure, the growth and above all the degradation of our society and our culture. As always, this archaeology is also a teleology and an eschatology; the dream of a full and immediate present closing history ….
>
> (Derrida 1976: 114-115)

This complex produces its own paradoxes. The simple condition of natural man must be returned to in order to reunite with presence. On the other hand nature has also to be left behind. The difference between nature and culture must be maintained in terms of the structure and yet collapsed if presence is to be reclaimed. "On several levels, nature is the ground, the inferior step: it must be crossed, exceeded, but also rejoined. We must return to it, but without annulling the difference" (p. 197). The difference must be main-

tained for it is the alienation from nature represented by societies and language which "permitted the actualisation of the potential faculties that slept inside man" (p. 257).

This marks the limits of the sympathy with the "non-European" that follow from the attraction his closeness to the origin exerts and the pathos-ridden knowledge that contact with civilisation must inevitably precipitate a fall away from presence. Modern man must not let himself be destroyed by becoming too close to natural man. His interest in this primal man is his interest in a part of himself that is no longer present. The primitive man can never be allowed to exist as a reciprocating, self-representing, contemporary individual. The difference between the savage and the civilised must be maintained, for it is precisely his distance from the origin that has resulted in the development of the modern man. Modern man might be further from presence than primitive man, but he is also closer to the endpoint of the teleological trajectory in which full presence will be reclaimed on the higher level that has been put in play through the fall from innocence. When the point of total alienation is approached, the "total reappropriation of presence" becomes possible (p. 295).

This structure goes some way towards explaining the paradoxical ways in which people such as the /Xam have been regarded and treated. They have been vilified and idealised at different points in history. Wilmsen (1996: 186) describes the conflicting but related impulses: to preserve "a mythic image of the childhood of mankind" and to expunge the "sub(human) remainder" of "the childhood of human nature". The Bushmen are animal-like, since they are low on the ladder of ascent to contemporary man but also godlike in that they are closer to the origin and the age of innocent purity. In the first case they clearly mark the divide between civilised and uncivilised man. As hunter-gatherers they are nearer to animals than to human cultivators and pastoralists. In the second case, they preserve and embody the attributes that modern man has lost: authenticity, simplicity, spiritual innocence and spontaneity.

This Janus-faced complex can justify persecution or inspire fascination, depending on the way that the unstable opposition between nature and culture is construed. Both impulses were in evidence in the Cape colony during the period in which the /Xam materials were assembled. The view that the Bushmen were virtually animals who should give way to more civilised people predominated, however, at a time when the struggle for land and resources was paramount and the Bushmen were still capable of offering stiff resistance to incursions into their areas. Nor was the genocidal impulse confined to colonial opinion in southern Africa. After Charles Dickens had seen an exhibition of Bushmen in London he wrote: "I have not the least belief in the Noble Savage ... I call a savage something highly desirable to be civilised off the face of the earth ..." (Dickens quoted by Maughan Brown 1983: 59). The lives of the /Xam informants, as the

materials make clear, were played out in this murderous milieu. Persecution and dispossession were everyday experiences.

These theories provided the intellectual context in which the Bleek and Lloyd collection was assembled (Bank 1999). Bleek's interest in the /Xam and their mythology was closely linked to his interest in human origins and the history of the unequal rates of evolution of different peoples. Understanding this history required a comparison of "the conditions of those peoples who have stopt [sic] short at the lowest phases of development" with those of the "most cultured nations" (Bleek 1969: 36-37, quoted by Bank 1999: 10). Bank argues that Bleek was "South Africa's first systematic theorist of racial difference ... a figure who marks the transition from the hardened racial stereotyping of the early mid-nineteenth century to the intellectual racism of the twentieth century" (p. 7). Bleek believed that language, culture and race could be correlated in an evolutionary scheme within which he positioned Bushman languages close to the "communication of primates" (p. 9). The study of Bushman mythology, in Bleek's view, was central to providing evidence for his evolutionary theories since he believed that mythology provided direct access to a people's mental structure. It is important to note, however, as I have already mentioned, that Bleek's engagement with the informants and their work quickly began to qualify his attitudes in important ways; a process that went further in the case of Lucy Lloyd (Bank 2006: 158). Bleek came to view the /Xam informants as part "of the most interesting nation in South Africa" after initially seeing them as close to monkeys (p. 165). He even began to refer to //Kabbo, the oldest and perhaps most important of his informants, as his teacher (p. 185).

The idealisation of the Bushman is more consistently a twentieth-century phenomenon in South Africa than a nineteenth-century one. Tony Voss (1987) has traced the passage in South African literature of the depiction of the Bushmen from vermin to original, quintessential human beings. This phenomenon characterises not only literature of course. Wilmsen (1989, 1995, 1996) emphasises its presence in anthropology and other forms of scholarship. He describes how, in the European imaginary, the Bushman has become the archetypal representative of an age of innocence from which Europeans were ejected (1996: 186). A great many people from southern Africa who pursued a range of economic strategies from agropastoralism to hunter-gathering have been lumped together as "Bushmen" in the course of the realisation of this ideological project" (p. 188). The very category "Bushman", Wilmsen (1996: 186) argues, is a construct, more a product of Western longing than a sociological category: "Nostalgia for an innocent past before we Europeans were cast out into the sorrows of self-awareness spawned the current form of 'Bushman' ...."

Derrida's work indicates that the idealisation of the primitive is as much a form of ethnocentrism as is racial discrimination. The ethnocentric basis of

racism is obvious. The ethnocentric nature of the romanticised version of the Bushman is less apparent since it constitutes itself as "anti-ethnocentrism, an ethnocentrism in the consciousness of a liberating progressivism" (Derrida 1986: 120). The core of this attitude depends, however, on the ethnocentric "desire for the Other to REMAIN 'other', not to become too much like us" (Žižek 2001: 69, emphasis in the original). In both the romantic and the racist versions, the Bushman is consistently positioned as other, as altogether different from modern man. He represents the part of modern people from which they are irrevocably separated. They can only pine for this innocent, natural part of themselves, never recover it. From the viewpoint of the racist, the Bushmen are irredeemable strangers, the savage other of civilised man.

"Bushman", then, in the South African context, is a term which refers as much to the "other" of "South African historiography" (Bregin 2000: 37) as to an actual category of historically situated people. For most of South Africa's colonial past this "other" was "subhuman". Much of the obsession with racial difference was driven, as we have seen, by Social Darwinism which "postulated a linear or teleological model of human development, from degenerate native child to adult white man" (p. 39). This scheme allowed for "a slide backwards through 'racial decline'". The Bushman for some represented the actualisation of this possibility. They were a "degraded species" while the Zulu occupied the ideological position of the noble savage. Later the Bushmen came to signify differently, in the writing of Laurens van der Post (1961), for example. They were now not only part of common humanity but quintessential human beings (Brown 1998: 63-64). They were closest to the origin, the pure embodiments of natural man. Bank (2002) has shown how this stereotype of the Bushman has sometimes been inadvertently strengthened by scholarly writing on the collection. The informants, for example, are commonly said to have lived in huts in Bleek's garden whereas they actually lived in the house. In this way "the world of the house, site of the colonial culture of Bleek and Lloyd" is separated conceptually from "the natural world, site of huts and traditional stories" (p. 71). "[A]ddressor and addressee are overdetermined as civilized Western man and natural savage" (Moran 1995: 31).

Most contemporary writing on the /Xam archive is critical of the legacy I have been describing. It attempts to find ways with which to engage the tangible realities of rock art and the verbal materials in the Bleek and Lloyd collection that do not reproduce ethnocentric or romanticised ways of viewing the Bushmen. Nevertheless, this writing, as Bank's observation about the huts in the garden demonstrates, still sometimes unwittingly contains some of its patterns. Brown (1998: 27) maintains that the influence of both the idealised and the racist way of thinking about the Bushmen can only be weakened if "the songs and stories of the /Xam" are allowed to "'talk back' back to modern understanding". Wilmsen argues, in a similar

vein, that the diverse group of people who are called Bushmen should be addressed as themselves and not "as missing parts of ourselves" (p. 189). I would argue also that addressing the materials in the Bleek and Lloyd archive in a way that incorporates the insights of contemporary theory can contribute to this project in a variety of ways. I shall discuss some of them towards the end of this article.

For now I would like to return to Derrida's critique of the opposition between speech and writing. In terms of the "metaphysics of phonetic writing", as we saw, the voice is positioned as close to the pretextual realm of being while writing, the preserve of the signifier, merely represents speech. It is alienated from presence, to which its signs can only gesture. The way that language works, however, argues Derrida, renders the quest for absolute origin or for fullness of being and presence within it impossible. No sign, verbal or written, is pure; it always carries the traces of all the other signs. This entails not only a spatial relationship of difference but also a temporal one of deferral. Meaning is never absolutely present, fixed or univocal, as it was understood to be in the theological "age of the sign" (Derrida 1976: 14); it is always, to some degree, postponed. This is as true of the spoken word as it is of the written one. Speech and writing, thus, both rely on an interplay of presence and absence, the respective qualities attributed to speech and writing, rather than on their opposition. This contention has major implications, in my view, for the way in which "traditional" oral narratives are read. They have generally been identified as folklore or myth and treated in a very different way from texts that have been produced in the written tradition. Derrida's work suggests, though, that the products of both voice and pen deal in signs and are equally, susceptible, therefore, to being approached as texts.

The insight that oral literature exhibits both the characteristics that are usually separately associated with writing or speech is contained in the title of Duncan Brown's study of South African oral literature, *Voicing the Text* (1998), which includes an important section on reading the /Xam materials. Brown (pp. 17-18) would like to see the development of interpretative "models that acknowledge simultaneously the textuality and historicity of oral texts, of combining a sociology with a poetics of literature …. [T]he crucial questions for criticism become: what does the text seek to accomplish in the spheres of social and political action, and how does it accomplish this (by what rhetorical features/formal strategies)". He argues elsewhere that the stark separation of orality and writing obscures the fact that a form of signification such as rock art "uses an 'alphabet' of symbols, signs, colours, shapes and images in making its meaning, and which demands intelligent 'reading'" (2006: 22). The activity of tracking "requires decoding, involving the analysis of signs in context, the creation of hypotheses, and so on: the same cognitive processes as reading printed texts".

Brown's position is unusual in the context of the analysis of the /Xam materials. Much of the writing on the /Xam narratives is implicitly predicated, in my view, on a radical distinction between orality/presence and writing/textuality. In the Western intellectual tradition, contends Derrida, the very notion of history is defined by the possibility of writing (p. 83). Since the Bushmen have no history, the consequence of their having no writing, it follows that their oral narratives are timeless myths or folklore rather than historically and culturally situated texts that provide a dialogical discursive space in which meanings are generated and contested: "a mythic time is reserved for them, while real time ticks on impartially for us all" (Wilmsen 1996: 186).

Much of the writing on the /Xam and other Bushmen, in my opinion, either directly privileges speech over writing or has been influenced by intellectual traditions that do. Dorothea Bleek writes that "[h]alf or more than half of each day was spent lounging about watching bird and beast, and talking – always talking" (p. 47, quoting Bleek & Stow 1930: xxxiiif, in Hewitt 1986: 47). Natural man, it is suggested, is largely free from the imperative to work. He enjoys a direct communion with nature. Hewitt similarly separates speech from writing when he notes that narrative formed "part of daily living to an extent unknown in literate societies where leisure time is limited" (Hewitt 1986: 47). Is this statement simple ethnographic observation or does it carry the ideological whiff of the nostalgia for a lost origin that is evident in the language that Bleek uses? Are people in literate societies always busier than those in speech-based ones? To which societies is Hewitt alluding? Is he suggesting that writing itself produces an alienation from direct experience or is he merely saying that people in more complex societies enjoy less leisure time? Hewitt's tone, unlike Bleek's, is neutral. His statement could be understood in different ways.

I would argue that this ambivalence colours much of Hewitt's writing on the materials. I argued at the beginning of this paper that a tension exists in Hewitt's work, the result of the inadequacy of the hermeneutic traditions he uses to do justice to the texts with which he grapples so closely. Much of this inadequacy I would attribute to the fact that these traditions rely in various ways on the privileging of speech over writing and the opposition between nature and culture that Derrida identifies as crucial components of logocentric thought. Earlier I gave the example of Hewitt's need to modify aspects of both Radin's and Lévi-Strauss's work. I shall provide a few more examples here. Hewitt's analysis contains structuralist and functionalist elements. The structuralist component of his reading of the materials most obviously displays the tension that I am proposing exists in his work. His formalistic dissection of the narratives downplays their historicity and textuality. He relies on the methods of Vladimir Propp to break the stories down into their component parts. In the course of this enterprise he dismisses the details of the stories as "the verbal surface" and pays little

attention to them (p. 235).[3] Elsewhere in his book, though, he discusses this "verbal surface" in considerable depth. Propp regards tales from around the world as variations on a single tale. The story escapes, in its essential aspects, both historical and social specificity. Hewitt's engagement with the singularity of /Xam ethnography, though, as well as his study of the way the different narrators manipulate the possibilities of /Xam narrative, leads him to include history, textuality and /Xam cultural and social particularities in his treatment of the materials to a far greater degree than Propp himself would have done.

Some of the tension between his methodology and the actuality of the Bleek and Lloyd texts is also present, in my view, in the complex way in which Hewitt is forced to employ the nature/culture binary in his discussion of the materials. While some of this complexity might be attributed to the wider anthropological tradition in which people like the Bushmen are posited as natural man even as their narratives are read as attempts to reinforce the claims of culture over nature, much of it results from Hewitt's unique attempt to grasp the /Xam texts. He reads the stories as the assertion of the sociocultural over nature and distinguishes a "basic opposition between elemental nature and /Xam culture" (Hewitt 1986: 88). "Many of the magico-religious ideas of the /Xam", he argues, relate to the "broader opposition, nature/culture ..." (p. 136). He sometimes equates nature with disorder and chaos and sometimes with an order that can be distinguished from the human order but which is integrally linked to it. He frequently qualifies the dichotomy between nature and culture by including "the order of the /Xam's daily interaction with amenable nature" along with the "order of social life itself" as part of culture (p. 134). The "orderliness of nature was essentially bound up with the orderliness of society" (p. 113). In this way part of nature is claimed for the human sphere and is separated from "malevolent wildness" (p. 101). Culture is linked to stability and order but is also susceptible to lapsing back into the natural, as in the many stories in which artefacts return to the raw materials from which they originated. In addition, nature, in Hewitt's work, appears to occupy different poles of different binaries in the discourses which relate to hunting observances and the stories of the First Times. In the narratives, nature is opposed to culture. In the hunting observances, it is positioned against the forces of unamenable nature that threaten to disrupt the natural order. /Kaggen occupies the pole associated with nature in the case of the narratives and the pole associated with unamenable nature in the case of the hunting observances.

Mathias Guenther, the most influential and important interpreter of the /Xam materials after Roger Hewitt, more obviously embraces the radical opposition between oral and written cultures than Hewitt does, a position

3. Cf. Alan Barnard's insistence on finding a deeper meaning in folklore (including the /Xam narratives) "than that which appears on the surface" (1992: 82).

that determines, to a significant degree, in my opinion, his reading of the materials.[4]

In a recent article Guenther (2006) emphasises the centrality of speech to Bushman culture: "In talking and telling stories, not only are the concerns and issues of the foraging lifeway and society dealt with, but also the ethos or ideology upon which they rest is reiterated and reconstituted" (p. 255). Storytelling is only one aspect, albeit an important one, of a speech-based society: "Talking is pervasive and is found in all of the San's institutional domains …. All of this talk greases the wheels of society in what is an inherently loose and labile collectivity." Is Guenther simply making the point that a great deal of the surplus time that attends a foraging economy is devoted to conversation, discussion and storytelling? He is, after all, a field anthropologist who has closely observed the interactions that he describes. When, however, these statements about Bushman speech and orality are placed in the context of his writing generally, they can be seen, I would argue, to contain strong echoes of the logocentric complex that Derrida delineates in *Of Grammatology*.

Although it is seldom directly stated in his work, the polar opposite of the oral, speech-based social and cultural practice that Guenther celebrates in much of his own writing is writing. Every now and then, this opposition is brought into the open, as when Guenther writes that "unlike the written style which is fixed, orality by its very nature, creates variation" (Guenther 1999: 85). In Guenther's view, orality is so different from written literature that it largely eludes interpretation by literate Western critics. The difference between speech and writing is primary and ontological. Writing, for example, focuses attention on the meanings of actual words while oral cultures concentrate on the "message".

Writing, in this framework, Derrida's work suggests, is more than a technique of inscribing words. It describes the process of the production of meaning through artifice. It always occurs at a remove. Speech, on the other hand, is the direct manifestation of consciousness and truth. The presence of speech, rather than the absence of writing, gives Bushman culture its distinctive authenticity. By bringing this opposition into play, Guenther signals his approach to reading the /Xam narratives, a strategy that relies heavily on oppositional binaries. These include speech and writing, orality

4. The value of Guenther's contribution to /Xam studies over many years can hardly be overestimated. He has shown, among other things, that the /Xam narratives can be fruitfully compared to others of their kind in the region (1989). He has argued, importantly, that the storytelling context is as central to the production of meaning as a story's content (1996). He has also contended at length that the analytical tools that have been applied to the /Xam materials cannot do justice to their multivocality (1999). The reading of Guenther's position regarding speech and writing that follows is in no way intended to belittle this contribution to /Xam studies.

and textuality, simple foraging societies and complex contemporary societies as well as egalitarianism and power. Bushman speech and orality are aligned with spontaneity, flexibility and an absence of power while writing belongs to rigid, complex social formations that are characterised by structure and power.

Guenther (2006: 15) locates Bushman narrative and figures such as the /Xam character, /Kaggen, firmly in the world before the fall: "This early pre-Genesis world of chaos and ambiguity, which God's divine creation has displaced from the Judeo-Christian cosmic purview, is the world of the trickster. He is its premier inhabitant, along with the early animals, humans, and animal-humans. It is also the world of Bushman mythology …." Guenther's choice of words, in the context of Derrida's discussion of the Western complex of the lost origin, is revealing. This complex, as we have seen, is a way of thought that is predicated on the idea of an alienation from presence. The narrative of Genesis is the prototypical narrative in the Western tradition of the fall into experience. Guenther explicitly inserts Bushman narratives into this wider, "universal" narrative, positioning them at a point even before the creation. The contours of this pre-creation world, he suggests, have been suppressed in the dominant Judeo-Christian account. The /Xam tales, it is generally accepted, chart a movement from the state of "chaos and ambiguity" of the First Times to a present state that is, in most respects, an improvement on the First Times. If we follow Guenther's logic, as well as his assertions about the Bushman foraging way of life generally, we would have to conclude that the present order of the Bushman, the post-mythological world of the hunter-gatherer, corresponds to the prelapsarian phase of creation in the Genesis narrative.

I cannot in the space of this paper provide an in-depth analysis of all Guenther's statements concerning speech, orality and power. What I would like to suggest, though, is that a similarity exists between many of them and the writing of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Claude Lévi-Strauss that Derrida investigates in *Of Grammatology*. In *Tristes Tropiques* (1961), Lévi-Strauss expresses the belief that his introduction of the idea of writing to the Nambikwara has corrupted the immediacy of their existence and the purity of their ways. Where before they knew only speech, that almost unmediated secretion of the soul, they have now been introduced to the artificial order of writing. Derrida claims that Lévi-Strauss's support of Rousseau's attack on writing leads to his inability to see that there is "no society without writing", whereas all "societies capable of producing, that is to say obliterating, their proper names, and of bringing classificatory difference into play, practice writing in general" (p. 109). Lévi-Strauss's failure to see this and his scorn of writing lead to an ethnocentrism in which the absence of writing is equated with innocence and non-violence and the primitive "other" is constituted as the "model of original and natural goodness ..." (p. 114). Rousseau himself applies this model especially to foraging people for he

considers that writing "is born with agriculture". "The furrow of agri-culture", as Derrida puts it, "opens nature to culture (cultivation)" (p. 287).

Rousseau links orality to community and writing to a lack of authentic relationships (p. 135). A particular view of hunter-gathering societies is presupposed, at once pure and peculiarly susceptible to outside corruption:

> Only a micro-society of non-violence and freedom, all the members of which can by rights remain within range of an immediate and transparent … address, fully self-present in its living speech, only such a community can suffer, as the surprise of an aggression coming from without, the insinuation of writing, the infiltration of its "ruse" and of its "perfidy". Only such a community can import from abroad "the exploitation of man by man".
>
> (Lévi-Strauss 1961: 119)

Such a society is prepolitical for politics presupposes that liberty has already been lost; politics is "always the supplement of a natural order somewhere deficient …" (p. 298). Writing and political enslavement, in this scheme, necessarily accompany each other. Writing is an instrument of power, commanding "by written laws, decrees and literature" (p. 302). Lévi-Strauss follows Rousseau, whom he hails as his antecedent and the founding father of anthropology (p. 105), in claiming that exploitation of man by man is peculiar to literate societies.

Guenther's (1999) position comes close to the views that Derrida ascribes to Rousseau and Lévi-Strauss. He asserts that Bushman societies are "free of hierarchy and power structures" (p. 5). He links this freedom to orality and the hunter-gathering way of life. His reading of Bushman narrative is tied to this phenomenon: Bushman "myth ... is able to remain within its proper, mythic time, where order is inchoate and power absent, rather than be called upon to spin out charter myths that legitimate temporal order and power" (p. 84). Speech in Guenther's work is consistently aligned with freedom, spontaneity and egalitarianism; writing belongs to structure, order and power.

So far, in this essay, I have referred to Derrida's work in order to discuss some of the writing that has been produced in relation to the /Xam. His work has equally important implications, in my view, for the reading of the /Xam texts themselves. It is not a simple matter of deriving a methodology from his work, though, and transferring it to the interpretation of the /Xam texts. Derrida himself argues that his strategy, deconstruction, is not properly a method. It does not comprise a set of rules and practices that can be repeated and used in different contexts. Deconstruction "does not settle for methodological procedures, it opens up a passageway, it marches ahead and marks a trail ..." (Derrida 1991: 337). It does not replace metaphysical philosophy with a new kind of philosophical framework in terms of which the unified themes in texts can be discovered and explicated. Whereas analysis traditionally seeks to attain a resolution, deconstruction continues

to disassemble the elements it exposes. It must be stressed that this is not the same as attempting to reduce a narrative to its basic constituent elements as Hewitt, for example, does when he breaks the narratives down into types and then the individual narratives down into units which, following Propp, he terms "functions". This sort of approach, in Derrida's view, is a regression "toward an indissoluble origin". The apparently basic elements that structuralism isolates are themselves "subject to deconstruction" (Derrida 1985: 2).

The type of reading a deconstructive approach generates is always provisional. Deconstruction, Derrida asserts, cannot operate outside the logocentric structure. It depends on the old structure's "strategic and economic resources of subversion" with the result that "the enterprise of deconstruction always in a certain way falls prey to its own work" (Derrida 1976: 24). Of necessity, a language is employed whose premises are not subscribed to. We are so tied to the categories of logocentrism that "nothing is conceivable for us without them" (p. 13). The authority of a reading is, therefore, fleeting: "we must learn to use and erase our language at the same time" (Spivak 1976: xviii).[5] This does not mean that anything goes. On the contrary, it means that reading should be rigorously self-reflexive, continually questioning the basis on which it is producing statements about texts.

Although Derrida's work does not embody replicable methodological procedures in the conventional sense, methodological consequences do arise from his work. I shall briefly discuss some of those which, in my view, are important for /Xam narrative studies. Deconstruction is a way of reading that does not establish a "natural" hierarchy of signifiers (p. 44) and one that is not founded on an idea of language as guaranteed by a transcendental signified. It follows that all the signifiers in a narrative should be given detailed attention. They are not merely aesthetic embellishment. A reading should, moreover, investigate the way that signifiers work within the /Xam texts themselves (p. 50). Where functionalist and structuralist readings of the /Xam narratives have suppressed the textual details in the interests of submitting the texts to overarching analytical paradigms, and tended to discuss them in comparative and general terms, Derrida's work invites the sort of reading which investigates their singularity.

A reading produced in a deconstructive spirit does not claim to be able to represent the "real" world of the texts. It disassociates itself from the essentialist notion that a "true" meaning exists beneath the surfaces of the stories that can be deciphered. It does not suppress the elements in the stories that do not fit a particular interpretative scheme or dismiss them as marginal. A reading that takes into account Derrida's critique of the

5. Gayatri Spivak (1976) translated *Of Grammatology* into English and contributed a long preface to it.

metaphysics of presence also foregrounds the fact that the reader is implicated in his reading. Derrida draws attention to the highly mediated nature of texts. This is especially true of our reception of the /Xam texts which is filtered by a complex series of events that includes transmission, translation and a history of interpretation situated within particular traditions of reading and of ethnology.

Derrida's contention that there is no linguistic sign before writing (Derrida 1976: 14) has important consequences, as I indicated earlier in this paper, for the way in which the oral aspect of the /Xam materials is considered. Even if we had access to the spoken performance of /Xam narrative rather than to the translated texts, we would still, according to Derrida's logic, have to read these performances as texts, in spite of the fact that the context of the performance would mobilise a range of meanings in the form of gestures and other non-verbal codes of performance that are excluded from written texts.[6] In Rousseau's thinking, the gesture is closer to presence, more natural even than voice (Derrida 1976: 233). Derrida maintains, by contrast, that gestures, too, should be interpreted primarily as text, part of the interaction of speech and writing from which signification emerges.

To summarise and conclude: Derrida's work suggests that the /Xam narratives could be read textually, in terms of their own discursive economy, rather than as a body of oral literature that is purportedly closer to the origin of things than are written texts. Meaning is generated from the multiplicity of signs within the texts, and their circulation within a discursive order, rather than from the proximity of privileged signs to the origin of things.

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6. Karin Barber (1991; 1999) argues persuasively that a reading of oral texts is required that takes into account their textuality and also emphasises their performative and dialogical qualities. She asserts, for instance, that "for an *oriki*-text to be apprehended as a text, it must be heard and seen in action" (Barber 1991: 7).

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