

# //Kabbo's Challenge: Transculturation and the Question of a South African Ecocriticism

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## Summary

The presence of the "Bushman" in southern African literature and media is pervasive; it is arguably an ineradicable part of our regional identity. Literature derived from San or Bushman testimony provides both an opportunity and a problem for an ecologically orientated critic. This article focuses on Alan James's versions of the testimony of //Kabbo, in the Bleek-Lloyd archive, to explore the question of whether any articulations of the "Bushman" world view might provide a localised basis for a regionally-specific "ecocriticism". It suggests that both tradition and modernity will be inescapable elements of such an ecocriticism, best encompassed in a dynamic version of Ortiz's notion of transculturation.

## Opsomming

Die "Boesman" is alomteenwoordig in die Suider-Afrikaanse literatuur en media; stellig is dit onuitwisbaar deel van ons streeksidentiteit. Literatuur afgelei van San- of Boesmangetuïenis bied sowel 'n geleentheid as 'n probleem aan die kritikus met 'n ekologiese oriëntasie. Hierdie artikel fokus op Alan James se weergawes van die getuïenis van //Kabbo in die Bleek-Lloyd-argief. Die oogmerk is om ondersoek in te stel na die vraag of enige verwoording van die "Boesman"-wêreldbeskouing 'n gelokaliseerde basis vir 'n streekspesifieke "ekokritiek" kan verskaf. Daar word aan die hand gedoen dat sowel tradisie as moderniteit noodwendig elemente van sodanige ekokritiek sal uitmaak, wat ten beste vervat word in 'n dinamiese weergawe van Ortiz se opvatting van transkulturasie.

The following letter recently appeared in the *Mail & Guardian*:

It appears that the hallowed Bleek records, housed at the University of Cape Town (UCT), could be an elaborate hoax perpetrated by the German linguist, Wilhelm Bleek, aided and abetted by his sister-in-law, Lucy Lloyd, and his daughter, Dorothea.

This bombshell was dropped at a conference on marginalised languages by Bleek's great-grandson, Hans-Dieter Kepler, during a secret seminar on the Watson-Krog affair at UCT.

"My grandfather had a very odd, almost postmodern, sense of humour," he said. "Lucy and he did spend time with the San prisoners as a front to their constructing a fictional language to intrigue and fool future generations of academics."

News of this has occasionally been leaked. In Imogen Hartley's book, *Borges, Bleek and Barthes*, she suggested that the joke had inspired Borges's masterful allegory of imagination and reality, *Tlon, Uqbar and Orbis Tertius*.

Supporting this thesis is Lucy Lloyd's letter to her sister, Emily, in which she referred to the San as having a wonderfully liberating scatological wit and as also being delightfully sly pranksters. None of this is evident in the UCT records.

An interesting fact is that the only person who speaks the language is Alvin J. Klingman, a professor of linguistics at the University of Arkansas, who is currently rendering Ted Hughes's *Birthday Letters* into /Xam.<sup>1</sup>

The only sly prankster here, of course, is the letter-writer, Cape Town's comic poet Gus Ferguson. Ferguson nevertheless characteristically puts his finger on some important issues. His letter does recognise that the Bleek-Lloyd archive – some 12 000 pages of testimony taken down from said San ex-prisoners in the 1870s, and our primary source on San or Bushman<sup>2</sup> lore – has developed a substantial genealogy of scholarly commentary and creative “versions” of bits of it (see e.g. Hollmann [n.d.]; Skotnes 1996; Deacon & Dowson 1996; Lewis-Williams 2000; Bennun 2004; Bank 2006). Stephen Watson's accusing Antjie Krog of plagiarising *his* versions is only the (eminently satirisable) tip of that genealogy. Ferguson's delicious squibs about Borges and Barthes are a backhanded recognition that Bushman lore generally has had an immense effect on South African literature and culture. Finally, there's just a tinge of sadness to the joke about translating Hughes into /Xam: that language *is* effectively extinct, no one can now speak it, and Bleek's dictionary was never completed. It might as well be a hoax, for all its efficacy in the modern world.

Ferguson's prank effectively asks this: Why shouldn't we laugh? Why take the Bushman presence in our history and literature so seriously? One could propose many answers: most would centre on the great autochthonous longevity of the Bushmen; their ubiquitous and extraordinary rock art; the self-evident richness of their oral lore; the urge to expiate their all-but-total genocide; and the fact that there are surviving groups of self-styled Bushmen or Khoisan who take their own identity very seriously. They are an inescapable part of our history (not to mention our advertising) which needs to be recognised.<sup>3</sup> The figure of the Bushman is almost ubiquitous in our literatures, too – in short, is an undeniable part of South African identity.

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1. Revealed: Bleek Hoax. *Mail & Guardian* 31 March–7 April 2006, p. 24. Thanks to Marike Beyers for alerting me to this. Thanks also to Tim Huisamen and Dennis Walder for stimulating discussion.
  2. We all know these are contested terms; I use them here in the sense of an imposed overarching imaginary, not holding any ultimate categorical value.
  3. President Thabo Mbeki recently reiterated the national need to “pay homage

At least from the time of Laurens van der Post, the racist travelogues and grim records of hunting Bushmen down like “vermin” has given way to an often glutinous romanticisation of the Bushman’s “oneness with Nature”, with frequent citation of the Bleek-Lloyd material as authority. Yet – all the ethnographic studies notwithstanding – there exists no comprehensive survey of the Bushman trope in our literature, let alone of the role therein of the imagined Bushman conception of the natural world.<sup>4</sup> The neglect is surprising, since in Bushman lore “nature” is inescapable, as the numerous anthropological studies confirm. In the popular media, moreover, it is stated with numbing regularity that the Bushmen are the original ecologists; all but obliterated by our destructive modernity, *they* somehow hold the key to sustainable living. To take just one recent example: archaeologist John Parkington is reported as saying that the world view captured in San rock art “could teach modern man a valuable lesson or two about living in harmony with nature”, about being “inside the ecosystem”, and about “behaving sustainably and responsibly in the world”, precisely in opposition to colonial stereotyping, and with an eye on the current crisis of global warming.<sup>5</sup> That this ecological concern seems entirely confined to white writing is cause for considerable cultural interest, if not anxiety.<sup>6</sup>

The truth or otherwise of this perception is less important to me here than thinking about *how the perception operates in the literature*. At the very

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to the Khoi and the San, who set an example for all of us to fight for our freedom ...” (“Khoi and San History Needs to be Brushed Up”, *The Herald*, 25 September 2006, p. 2). Doyen naturalist Ian Player has spoken out similarly (“Wilderness Icon in Appeal for San Monument”, *The Herald*, 23 October 2006, p. 7).

4. While the ethnographic and folkloric literature on the Bushmen is vast (see Willett, Monaneng, Saugestad & Hermans 1999), study of literary, especially fictional, representations remains patchy. Van der Post has attracted most attention (see especially Wilmsen 1995), but apart from scattered allusions to some individual authors, such as Thomas Pringle and Bessie Head, to early literature (Bregin 2000, Glenn 1996), and to some poetry (Gagiano 1999), no extended studies exist, to my knowledge. Helize van Vuuren is paying greater attention to the image of Bushmen in Afrikaans literature (van Vuuren 2003; see also Renders 2001). None of these studies are even tangentially “ecocritical”, however.
5. Anton Ferreira, “SA Rock Art Has Valuable Lesson for Modern Man”, *The Herald*, 27 November 2006, p. 11.
6. Even more oddly, it seems to play no part at all in the thinking of Bushman and Khoisan self-expressions of identity today: at least, in the record of the 1998 conference on Khoisan identities, the natural world is mentioned only once – by Philip Tobias (Bank 1998).

least, there appears here to be an enviably rich vein of material for a South African ecocritic in search of not only locally-unique subject matter (easy enough) but also of alternative “ways of eco-thinking”. The literature raises interesting problems, however – none more sharply, perhaps, than the poetry recently derived by several poets (namely Stephen Watson, Alan James, and Antjie Krog) from the Bleek-Lloyd transcripts. Through some of this work – primarily James’s – I want to reflect on these questions: What might it mean to be an ecologically orientated literary critic in South Africa? Could the world views of the region’s most-quoted autochthonous culture provide the basis for a genuinely *local* ecocriticism, as opposed to one primarily stimulated by, even modelled on, the now bountiful American (and British, Canadian and Australian) examples? Is such a local – national or regional – ecocriticism either possible or desirable?

## 2

The fissured face of //Kabbo, one of Bleek and Lloyd’s main informants, stares out of a now famous photograph. Is he puzzled? Resigned? I find his expression as difficult to penetrate as a rock painting. If I am to say anything, I must read into it, interpret it, lay something upon it of my own predispositions. Is this ethical? Another layer of imperial appropriation? Or merely problematic but necessary? Could my examination be excused by curious respect, or is it inevitably an objectification?

Motivation is central – but motivations can be mixed. Less well known than the head-and-shoulders portrait of //Kabbo is a full-frontal nude shot of him, disturbingly reminiscent of all those other prurient and demeaning colonial-era photos of “natives”, of the revolting attention paid to Saartjie Baartman’s nether parts. Even under the attention of the Bleeks, who effectively rescued //Kabbo and his people, their language, their stories and their views, from complete oblivion, he suffered the indignity of standing naked next to a measuring stick. Virtually any attempt to re-present //Kabbo and his culture is likely to run into objections of exploitation.<sup>7</sup>

Let me dare to read //Kabbo’s expression as challenging. *Who are you to interpret my world?* is the question scored in that worn and thoughtful face. The interpreter’s point of departure is crucial. To make my own position perfectly clear, then: As an accidentally deracinated white Zimbabwean living in a rented home in an adopted country, my outsider status is fairly extreme. National identity means almost nothing to me, ancestral identity something, racial identity perforce somewhat more. My linguistic identity is powerful, being all but monolingual; my cultural milieu and mental

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7. Hence, for instance, Annie Gagliano’s review of Watson’s *Return of the Moon* is titled “Just a Touch of the Cultural Trophy-Hunter” (1992).

equipment is solidly English-language, secular, bookish. A product wholly of southern African modernity, I find particular affinity with a world view which incorporates hybridities and a certain relativism. I identify more with biomes than with borders, but even then only narrowly: the familiar mountain forests of my childhood, increasingly the thickets and kloofs of the Eastern Cape – a scope as narrow in its way as //Kabbo’s identification with Bitterpits, south of Kenhardt. Nevertheless, since I now live in South Africa and am entirely committed to staying here, I’ll call myself for now a “South African critic”.

I am uncomfortable, however, with the term “ecocriticism” to the extent that it implies a cohesive school of thought. There is, so far as I can see, little such cohesion. In the South African context, this may be a good thing; it may allow for a flexibility in methodology which could accommodate dramatic cultural differences while eluding the charge of being just another imperialistic or neocolonial imposition. There is little point ignoring the fact that “ecocriticism” is an import ineluctably tied to the literary, if not indeed to the academy, and therefore implicitly to the politics and ideologies of industrial capital – even as it often asserts itself as a vehicle of challenge to those very hegemonies. Perforce, those hegemonies have structured even the eco-friendly subversions of them; the subversiveness is almost inevitably couched in terminologies and logics already complicit in capitalistic Western mindsets. This ambiguity is, of course, the central dilemma of modernity. Hence, when a discipline, if ecocriticism can be termed that, comes to grapple with the artistic productions of autochthonous cultures, suspicions of further appropriation – the sorts of suspicions attendant upon even the most self-aware varieties of anthropology – are likely to surface. What, in short, does the ecocritic (or, as I prefer, the ecologically orientated critic) *do* when the content of the material under inspection asks questions of the very cultural foundations of her own practice?

I approach Bushman cultural productions, then – as I guess do most outside observers – largely with a baffled fascination. What can I truly know of “Bushman mindsets”? What can I firmly learn of, or from, “their” attitude towards the natural world about how best to manage and sustain our common and dwindling environmental inheritance? Do they even possess a concept of “nature-out-there”? If their conceptual framework of “being inside the ecosystem” is in some way culturally unreachable, am I as a literary critic disqualified or disabled? Since their difference is precisely what endows the Bushmen with importance, what common coefficients of understanding can develop, which might ground an efficacious relationship with our modern ecosystems?

This is an *empirical* dimension of //Kabbo’s challenge – to know what *he* thought. It is only an example of challenges attendant upon the interpretation of the artistic productions of any culture other than one’s own: Virginia Woolf, for example, recorded an analogous suspicion of her

reading of Greek writers and “the romantic feelings they induced”; her own sense of understanding the Greek might be an illusion; was she too, “reading into Greek poetry not what they have but what we lack?” (Briggs 2006: 121). One might ask the same of a Zulu informant, a Venda – or an immigrant Dutchman. Exactly because South Africa is replete with such radically different cultures, with so terrible a history of violence between them, we *must* inquire into one another’s cultures, whatever the limitations. The alternative is unthinkable. And because South Africa is so publicly embarked on a trajectory of “truth and reconciliation”, of nascent nationhood, of “rainbow” democratic unity, the question of a “South African ecocriticism” is perhaps not a trivial one.

Here, however, it is the *literary* dimension of //Kabbo’s challenge on which I will focus: the question of whether the “Bushman”, as the most deeply present, widespread, most ancient trope of belonging, can yet provide a “force-field” of eco-thinking to inform a regionally specific mode of criticism and praxis.

### 3

It was Laurens van der Post’s book, *The Lost World of the Kalahari*, published over 40 years ago, that first alerted many of us to an extraordinary civilisation that had survived in its pristine state at the heart of Africa for thousands of years. The secret of the San people was and still remains their complete immersion in the natural and spiritual rhythms of existence. This understanding of Mother Nature – something we in the developed world have almost entirely lost, as we are only now, to our cost, beginning to realise – lies at the very heart of the Bushman way of life. As Sir Laurens explained, the Bushman hunter “knew the animal and vegetable life, the rocks and stones of Africa as they have never been known since ...”. The Bushman is the essence of Africa. (Gall 2002: xvi)

That is HRH the Prince of Wales in his Foreword to Sandy Gall’s history, *The Bushmen of Southern Africa*, which is tellingly subtitled “Slaughter of the Innocent”. Though Prince Charles does warn that it is “easy to overromanticise” the Bushmen, his essentialising of both people and “Africa”, the inappropriateness of the term “Mother Nature”, the Eurocentric hint of the journey to what van der Post elsewhere called “the heart of Africa, in the heart of the Centre” (Wilmsen 1995: 206), causes palpitations nowadays. Van der Post traded on such romanticisation, exaggerating a relatively slender acquaintance with a few Bushmen to make some sweeping generalisations:

In our era of vast numbers and unreal collective abstractions, the story of this first individual and his imagination is more important than ever, if only

because it establishes that at the very beginning of things man was an individual, a hunter before a herdsman, the single Adam made in the image of the first spirit before the making of the many .... He lived, then, this first individual, in a state of extraordinary intimacy with nature ... there was about his life none of this cold, inhuman feeling that the existence of numbers inflicts upon the heart of the individual in our days .... Armed only with his native wit and his bow and arrow, wherever he went he belonged, feeling kinship with everyone and everything he met on the way, from birth to death.

(van der Post quoted by Jones 2001: 237)

Such a stark dichotomising of “our” (the Western) world from that implicitly warm, humane, intimate world of “the Bushman” has been thoroughly critiqued by recent scholarship. It has long been cogently argued that the category “Bushman” (or San, or Khoisan) is untenable, a colonialist appellation actually encompassing hundreds of groups, speaking mutually unintelligible languages, in radically divergent biomes, and in variable states of upheaval, stasis, or assimilation with neighbouring peoples (see e.g. Schrire). Congruently, the “West” is hardly homogeneous, either; there have always been strains in Western thought, which are radically opposed to the “cold, inhuman” facets of technological “progress”. Van der Post himself could not have spoken thus – could not have alluded to the paradisiac thread in Western mythology, for instance – had this not been so.

This is an indication that, romanticisation notwithstanding, there may still be something to be salvaged here. Ideals are not to be so lightly dismissed for being “virtual” or mythic; on the contrary, delusions often structure general thought and action just as effectively as “reality”. (A very clear distinction will have to be made here, though, between representations that intend to portray the “real” Bushmen, and the literary dynamics of the tropes.) Part of the attraction of the Bushman for the discontents of Western civilisation has been precisely the former’s perceived adherence to a deeply mythic mode of being and expression that has been almost obliterated in industrialised cultures. That this mythic mode is believed to be profoundly integral to a “Nature” which is disappearing as fast as the Bushmen are, only makes it more poignant and challenging. That Bushman society was in fact a long way from being idyllic, as Melvin Konner (who spent time with the !Kung) notes, does not mean it has nothing to say to techno-modern “us”. Nor is this attraction to be dislodged by the realistic awareness that, as Konner also points out, even if their lifestyle *is* one “of proven viability” – “courageous, egalitarian, good-humoured, philosophical” – there “is no going back” to it: “We are committed to and dependent on technology” (Konner 2002: 8).

There are, in sum, a number of obstacles to recuperating from any version of “Bushman” life a viable, regional ecological ethic. Firstly, there is no agreement even on who the “Bushmen” *are* – or were. Secondly, therefore, there exists no single version of “Bushman life”, either in reality or amongst

interpretations of it. There is no ur-text; there is little agreement on what Bushman rock art means or through what lenses it might best be viewed. Thirdly, there is no chronologically stable point to which to return; whatever "Bushman life" might have been, it was constantly in flux: there is decent evidence for a variety of accommodations being made to neighbouring peoples, their genes, and their invasive technologies for at least the last millennium (see Denbow 1984). Fourth, everything we know of the Bushmen is mediated through writing, scripts in the hands of strangers, translations. In some ways, this has worked to the advantage of the Bushman – as //Kabbo himself hoped it would when he told Lucy Lloyd he was glad his stories were being written down, because he knew even then that only thus would they survive (Bank 2006: 157). In other ways, the intense anthropological attention, and the seepage of the Bushman figure into so many corners of the national literary life, seems in practical terms not to have helped them one whit: the abuse of such communities as remain continues unabated.<sup>8</sup>

All this places the South African critic who wishes to evaluate the ecological content or tenor of "Bushman-related literature" in a particularly interesting, if not fraught position. How "activist" on behalf of living Bushmen should the ecological critic be? Is there not a danger that in merely examining the literatures deriving (say) from the Bleek-Lloyd archive, the criticism will help reinforce the stereotypes, or recede even further to the status of a tertiary, detached, and rarified epiphenomenon?<sup>9</sup> At the same time is it not the case that, whatever the attractions of interdisciplinarity, so often touted as a strength of ecocriticism, the critic's role is not to be a historian or an anthropologist, not to uncover the truth either of the past or of some putative social reality, but to examine just how *literature* works in the public consciousness? The realm of myth, metaphor, and imagination is precisely the literary critic's field.

Confining one's adherence to that field is more easily proposed than implemented. At least, several things have to be recognised. First, while the presence of the idyllic, eco-friendly myth persists in the literature, for quite comprehensible reasons, it is not the reflection of an attainable reality, either past or future. Second, the field is inevitably politicised: there is no way in which this material can be explored without running into current debates about ethnic and national identities, land ownership, or actual ecological activities. A criticism which fails to historicise the "Bushman issue", or to

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8. As I write, the newspapers report the renewed flaunting of all agreements to preserve !Kung rights to live in traditional ways; see John Grobler, "The San Are Losing Ground", *Mail & Guardian*, November 24-30, 2006, p. 27.

9. A good example of a dispute in this line is Sven Ouzman's outraged response to Helize van Vuuren's short endeavour to recuperate an Afrikaans-Bushman cultural link (van Vuuren 1995, Ouzman 1996).



take cognisance of the contribution of the anthropological understandings that inflect all other literary productions, will miss something vital. Third, the foundations of the examination are themselves in flux: there is no secure borderline between “traditional” and “modern”, between “oral” and “written”, or between “wilderness” and “civilisation”. As the imprisoned //Kabbo himself knew as he travelled on the train to Cape Town, he had already been overtaken by modernity, was himself in certain senses a modern.

An initial conclusion might well be that a regional ecological praxis, either critical or pragmatic, derived in any way from Bushman ecology, is impossible, even unethical.<sup>10</sup> Yet the ecologically orientated critic is faced with the long and continuing effort at “recuperation” of the Bushman by literary means. Not “reparation”: as Stephen Watson has said, no poems “could even begin to right a historical wrong as total, irredeemable, as that inflicted upon the /Xam” (Watson 1991: 20). Evidently poets like Watson, James, and Krog continue to view a search for a certain commonality with //Kabbo, for at least “some echo” (p. 20) of that world, as ultimately liberating. Why?

#### 4

Stephen Watson’s *Return of the Moon* (1991), Alan James’s *The First Bushman’s Path* (2001), and Antjie Krog’s *The Stars Say T’sau!* (2004) all take a similar stance towards their selection of items from the Bleek-Lloyd archive, many of which they share. None attempt to “translate” the original /Xam; rather they transmute the already-translated portions of tales and testimonies into “poetry”, in the service of making some fairly abstruse material “accessible” to the modern reader. Each imposes a distinctive personal style; each to varying degrees supports the poetry with “ethnographic” notation and explanation, creating oddly hybrid texts. All three offer various justifications for the enterprise, attempting to elevate what might uncharitably be seen as another round of neocolonial appropriation into “*regstelling*” (Krog, pers. comm. 15 August 2006). Whether or not one finally approves, they are clearly keenly attuned to the dangers of subjectivity, of the potential narcissism of restyling their “versions” or “representations”.

Of the three, James is the most eloquent in his considerations of the problems. James claims he was not thinking about the ecological dimen-

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10. One who might well disagree with this is Louis Liebermann, who argues that tracking, exemplified by that practised by the Bushman, is the origin of science. See for example <http://www.cybertracker.co.za/ArtOfTracking.html> (accessed 6 December 2006).

sions of the material, nor about the question of identity, though these clearly emerge as issues in the poetry itself (and indeed in James's own poetry). He is clearly troubled by the violence meted out to the Bushmen, and sees his own work as helping make them "an inescapable part" of a South African identity of "conscience ... an identity as the morally culpable, and as the heirs, and as the trustees" (pers. comm. 16 August 2006). That trustee-ship must incorporate the natural world. Working with the texts, James continues, did not efface the vast difference between himself and the /Xam; it did not produce "a greater feeling of belonging to South Africa ... or a greater sense of national identity or attachment".

I saw my work instead as dwelling, through speaking even of the minor everyday details of /Xam life, on our greater human identity, on some of the basics that humans share: that we have beliefs that inform and move us; that we sing and tell stories and laugh and cry; that we love and lose and win; that we are individuals and families and communities; that we live in a wondrous world of forces and processes that we share with other living creatures and plant life; that we live and we die. In that sense we have a common identity and belong together and belong to the land and the world. The /Xam were also people. And "everyone hurts": suffering is universal. In a sense, their suffering is also our suffering, our destiny: there is a fundamental commonality in regard to living and loving and eating and singing and dying and time passing and things changing unalterably and civilizations decaying. In that, we identify with the /Xam, consciously or unconsciously.

(James: pers. comm. 16 August 2006)

In making this identification, can a reading of these versions of //Kabbo's testimonies either evidence an "original human ecology", or lead to a greater ecological awareness? One can, perhaps, hardly avoid it. But James also says:

If one does not have an ecological self before working with the /Xam texts, either one's heart will be sufficiently hard and "ungreen" to resist the "green" pull of the texts, or it will be pliable enough to be converted to an ecological persuasion by that pull. If one already has a green heart, one's heart will respond enthusiastically to the greenness of many of the texts.

My heart was already green when I started my work, and I did thus easily and happily enter into the texts that spoke of rain and drought and plants and animals and seasons and the sun and moon and the making, and using, of everyday items from the resources at hand ....

(James: pers. comm. 16 August 2006)

James does confess to "a modicum of wistfulness or wishfulness", part of which is a perception that the

/Xam engagement with the natural world seemed to me to be almost a mythic ideal past with desirable values that challenge many of the values that we hold

today: respect for the natural order; regard for animals as subjective sentient living things, fellow creatures of the land, not just as food and as objects to be exploited; living lightly off the land, with few possessions; a deep practical knowledge of the environment and the resources of the land.

(James: pers. comm. 16 August 2006)

Clearly, the /Xam mode of “belonging to the land and of being within the natural order” (ibid) strikes a deep chord in James. What is striking is the all-but-unconscious blending of the modern and the mythic. This is explicitly tied in with his own move to Australia, after which event, he says, he “felt an obligation to make some positive gesture, literary or otherwise, as a mark of respect and gratitude to the people/country/personal connections I was abandoning” (ibid). As he hovers on the edge of a sentimentality born of deracination, James participates in a syndrome which philosopher Charles Taylor, for one, sees as endemic to modernity more generally. This involves “the search for moral sources *outside* the subject through languages which resonate *within* him or her, the grasping of an order which is inseparably indexed to a personal vision” (1989: 510). The buttressing of the poetic versions with anthropological information in *The First Bushman’s Path* seems to be an attempt to provide objective justifications for a potentially solipsistic poetic manoeuvre. The poems themselves are caught in the slippage between the evocation of another, more ethically “clean” culture and inevitably personalised adherences to the “foreign” poetic aesthetic; between the evocation of an Other communality, and the individualistic pleasure of poems read in the privacy of print; they participate, indeed now constitute, the “polyglot, syncretic nature” (Torgovnick 1990: 37) of modernity.

I think we can see the Watson-James-Krog enterprise as attempting to offer work of “subjective expressive integrity” (Taylor 1989: 510) which does nevertheless desire to evoke somehow an older “larger [Bushman] order” which lies beyond mere rationality. But it is possible that, as Taylor goes on to suggest, the enterprise “falls between the holes in the grid”, or is fatally split between the modes of presentation, because the “Bushman” order has effectively vanished. It can no longer be

the exploration of an “objective” order in the classical sense of a publicly accessible reality. The order is only accessible through personal, hence “subjective”, resonance. This is why ... the danger of a regression to subjectivism always exists in this enterprise. It can easily slide into a celebration of *our* creative powers, or the sources can be appropriated, interpreted as within us, and represented as the basis for “liberation”.

(Taylor 1989: 510; my italics)

James cannot avoid the “slide” entirely, despite being intensely aware of the dangers of “selfish” and “narcissistic” departure from the originals (Brown 2002: 154). Is “personal resonance” then ultimately vapid? Taylor thinks

not: “at its best, in full integrity, the enterprise is an attempt to surmount subjectivism” – one kind of modern ailment – but it is necessarily “a continuing task, which cannot be put behind us for once and for all” (p. 510).

There are, I suggest, several kinds of “resonance” at work in James’s versions, not all, perhaps, quite in harmony. One is a certain resonance with //Kabbo (and other informants) himself; though it is impossible to “hear” //Kabbo’s voice emerging in anything like a historically authentic way, neither is he absent: his originals do impose constraints upon what James can perform. To that extent, //Kabbo is present, even offering a kind of resistance to appropriation and effacement, no mere “ventriloquist’s dummy” (Torgovnick 1990: 19). A second, opposing, resonance is with the stylistics of James’s own poetry, hence to the modernist poetics of his time. And a third, important for our purpose here, is an ecological resonance – a sense that //Kabbo has something of vital importance to say about our relations with the natural world, something perhaps in which we already subliminally believe. We will have to confine ourselves to a single example here.

Perhaps nowhere do we sense the “essence” of “the Bushman” view of human-natural relations than in those stories dealing with a primordial time when animals were people, and spoke the same languages. Hence, in connecting with animals in a manner which reinvokes that relatedness, //Kabbo can (as the title of James’s poem has it) “sing the animals”. It begins:

the little snake  
the little snake  
the little snake  
the little snake  
the little snake

the very little snake  
the little coloured snake  
the small coloured snake  
the small snake

(James 2001: 57)

This is in the service of evoking performative incantation which was “possibly a way of celebrating the economic and cultural value of the many animals which inhabited, or had once inhabited, /Xam country .... It was seemingly a pleasurable vocal exercise” (p. 175). That it may be, but on the page, it’s rather thin stuff (the ethnographic notes are ironically much richer). Further on in the poem, James gets more inventive with form and language, incorporating euphonious /Xam words:

whai  
whai  
!kwai

!gwai  
//khwi  
//khwi  
!kwa

springbok  
springbok  
gemsbok  
hyena  
quagga  
quagga  
hartebeest

the hartebeest the klein hartebeest the groot hartebeest the  
groot ram hartebeest and the black wildebeest and the blue  
wildebeest and the white chameleon and the black chameleon  
and the black-and-white winged bird and the red-legged bird

...

the striped polecat and the bushy-tailed meerkat

(//Kabbo sang ... so he sang)

As James's extensive notes to this piece make clear, he was trying to "reproduce a modest version of a long celebration of animals requested by //Kabbo", recognising that such a performance cannot be adequately captured in writing. This statement, the poem's title, and the insertion of the "//Kabbo sang" narrative cues, are a touch disingenuous: as James explains, "[c]onsiderable intervention was necessary" (p. 175). He did not include all of //Kabbo's sixty-eight animal names, and he incorporated parts of a recitation by other informants, /A!kunta and Adam Kleinhardt; so //Kabbo's individual presence is subsumed within something broader, at least superficially "ecological". Furthermore, James juggles languages and naming styles – sometimes modern, sometimes archaic, sometimes briefly descriptive – so that historical specificity is also smudged. Yet the multilingual reality of South Africa is fully present here, in one breath as it were.

James has also (in contrast to the other poets, for whom the elimination of "excessive" repetitiousness is an aesthetic watchword) in this case *added* "a measure or repetition and variation ... that might have constituted aesthetic ingredients of the incantation" (p. 175), in an attempt at some reconstitution of the oral. It is not so much a matter of whether or not James is right here, as of noting that here we have a "voice" which is to a considerable degree an imaginative invention, a collage of voices and of forms in a new "hybridity" (Brown 2002: 160), drawing not just on the Bleek/Lloyd transcriptions, but on ethnographic evidence from elsewhere. It is, in short, a well-justified but inevitably problematic kind of "co-creation".

"//Kabbo sings the animals" nevertheless serves as a good introduction to this unavoidable dimension of /Xam belonging. It *appears* (how far one can

speculate on the strength of the evidence is problematic) that for //Kabbo to “sing the animals”, as a “bodying-forth” of the animals, a deeper sense of community than merely utilitarian is necessary: there remains every sign that //Kabbo regarded both himself and that which he “sang into being” as a periodically unified “function” of their reversible interconnections. This is a holistic sensorium, so to speak, often evoked, and not just by poets: Julia Martin summarises one archaeologist’s formulation:

Anne Solomon looked at the relative absence of landscape representation in San rock art, suggesting that it illustrates a fundamentally different understanding of people and environment from that of dominant Western world views. Instead of a “landscape” from which human agency is distinct, in this case place is experienced as a centre without a boundary: the path to a site is also part of it; the site of the rock art is constituted out of the place; there are no places without paths, no paths without places.

(Martin 1999: 53)

And it is clearly that sense of a very different ecological interconnectivity, in part, to which James has responded – but evidently something in James’s own, non-Bushman background and “green” make-up has made “resonance” possible. The possible philosophical roots of that deserve exploring, opening up broader applications to a reciprocating regional ecological criticism.

## 5

To briefly recap. The prospect that some kind of ecological wholeness is embodied in the “Bushman” remains irresistible, despite all the ontological and epistemological obstacles. The fact that the image of the Bushman, however mediated, pervades our literature, provides at least some promise that “his” ecological world view might regain some regional impact. The Bushman-derived poetry of James, as well as of Watson, Krog and others, seems partly to aim for such a “liberatory” redirection of our communal cultural trajectory. Call it the ghost of Sir Laurens. Van der Post, of course, famously linked himself with Carl Jung, whose own visit to Africa bred much that, as Marianna Torgovnick persuades us in her seminal book *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellects, Modern Minds*, should now be disparaged. We certainly have to disabuse our ecological literary criticism of any straining after *historical* cultural purity, whilst recognising that a tropological *imaginary* purity is likely to persist – indeed, it may be fundamental to our very humanity. We must also recognise that whatever we might once have termed “traditional”, “wild”, “natural” or, in an earlier generation, “primitive”, is irreversibly interdependent on, interpenetrative with, modernity. Texts like James’s are inevitably hybrid, or – to take a leaf from David

Atwell's recent study of modernity's impress on various South African poetics – *transcultural*.

Atwell quotes Fernando Ortiz, founder of that term: “Each [member of an immigrant culture is] torn from his native moorings, faced with the problem of disadjustment and readjustment, of deculturation and acculturation – in a word, of transculturation” (Ortiz quoted by Atwell 2005: 19).

South Africa has, as Atwell notes, stronger claims to autochthonous presences – especially the Bushman – than Ortiz's Cuba. Nevertheless, our *literatures* have all similarly “been through innumerable processes of adaptation and indigenisation”, in varying degrees of “reciprocal exchange” (p. 20). “//Kabbo sings the animals” shows not only James's “exogenous” poetics appropriating /Xam thought, but /Xam mediations indigenising James. In this way, a highly specific modernity, modified to the uniquely local, is being “co-created”. This resembles ecocritic Joni Adamson's analogous case for Native American literatures: “[W]e must develop more multiculturally inclusive concepts of nature, justice, and place that are rooted not only in deep, reciprocal relationships to the natural world, but in our diverse cultural histories ...” (Adamson 2001: xix).

Adamson's term “multicultural”, redolent still of discrete original “cultures”, seems less satisfying than “transcultural”: //Kabbo was already displaced, becoming polylingual, undergoing transculturation. In meeting the Bleeks he found an opportunity, albeit asymmetric, to reciprocate, to partly “indigenize” his listeners' sensibilities. In doing so, he could convey something also of his own reciprocity with the natural world and his place. As I mentioned before, this might – increasingly – resonate with contra-dualist, anti-mechanistic threads in Western thought. I can quote only one here, an apposite passage from phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty:

When the silent vision falls into speech, and when the speech in turn, opening up a field of the nameable and the sayable, inscribes itself in that field, in its place, according to its truth – in short, when it metamorphoses the structures of the visible world and makes itself a gaze of the mind, *intuitus mentis* – this is always in virtue of the same fundamental phenomenon of reversibility which sustains both the mute perception and the speech and which manifests itself by an almost carnal existence of the idea, as well as by a sublimation of the flesh.

(Merleau-Ponty 1968: 154-155)

A “/Xam” poem like James's, I would suggest, is such a carnal manifestation of phenomenological “reversibility”, a dialectic of differences and harmonies constructed according to its own truths.

Whilst a reinvigorated ecological sensibility can arguably be forged out of such syncretism, its very dynamism and contingency must remain a factor. If a “South African ecocriticism” is to be developed, it will look more like a nest of unique and living snakes than a crystalline or geodesic structure.

Given the inexorable pressures of globalisation, it will not be *purely* local. In some ways, the prospect is similar to that facing so-called “African philosophy”. Is there some unique mode of unitary thinking which constitutes *African* philosophy; or do we rather have philosophers practising in Africa, recognising philosophy as an imported discipline which can nevertheless be turned to local use? The argument I have followed here, I think, accords with Kwame Gyekye’s opinion that there is no *sankofa* – no return, no possibility of purist cultural revival (1997: 233). Gyekye proposes a syncretic account in which “tradition” and “modernity” are not opposed; rather, the modern *is* tradition selectively assimilated, recharged, “bequeathed to it by previous generations and all or much of which on normative grounds it takes pride in, boasts of, and builds on” (p. 217). On this model, there seems no comprehensive reason why “Bushman” traditions cannot be absorbed fruitfully, recharged to address contemporary issues, by an appropriately respectful European. We always choose what is normative, and of course different people will choose different things; only time can tell what might become an overarching or national norm, and whether a locally rooted influence might hold out against, or fruitfully integrate with, less appropriate imported ones. One can hardly do otherwise than agree with Sanya Osha that decolonisation “finds it almost impossible to create its own image [solely] by the employment of autochthonous strategies” (2005: 69); this will apply equally to local developments in our embryonic ecological criticism. An ecologically aware practice which “foregrounds regional priorities while at the same time acknowledging their non-universal, non-absolute status” (Martin 1999: 37) seems sensible.

I have no idea what a future “South African ecocriticism” might look like; as David Attwell has pointed out, we cannot agree even on “what a national-cultural literary history should look like” (2005: 8; emphasis removed). Someone with a more centripetal biography than mine might take a less sanguinely syncretistic view than I have offered here. At least, the dynamic of our history, which has “disallow[ed] everyone from remaining unchanged, and therefore kept histories, traditions and identities radically in flux” (p. 17), can hardly be expected to abruptly freeze. All I am sure of is that we are still at the beginning. //Kabbo can have the last word, as mediated by Antjie Krog:

I live in a place which is not my place  
but my people hear my name coming ...  
I wait for the moon to turn around  
so that I can examine the water pits  
I will work and restore the old shelters ...

(Krog 2004: 51)



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