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'This queer hieland glen': Multilingualism and Translocal Identification in Thomas Pringle's African Farm Poems

Lars Atkin

When poet, anti-slavery activist, and settler Thomas Pringle (1789–1834) first arrived in South Africa as head of the Scottish party of settlers in June 1820, he was led to the location of his party's settlement in Baviaan's River, Eastern Cape by a Dutch-African magistrate who, on gesturing towards the valley said: 'And now, mayneer [...] *daar leg uwe veld* — their [*sic*] lies your country.' Following the magistrate's gesture towards a six-mile-long tract, an unnamed 'Scottish agriculturalist' from Pringle's party comments that the land they are to settle resembles a 'queer hieland glen'. This moment of *translocal* identification, in which the Scotland that the party have left behind overlays the Africa they are emigrating into, is signalled by linguistic code-switching from English into Scots. Looking at his prose accounts of early settlement in dialogue with his two African farm poems, 'The Albany Emigrant' (1825) and 'The Emigrant's Cabin' (1834), this article explores the ways in which linguistic code-switching enables Pringle to evoke a translocal settler belonging in multiple registers. While the use of Scots alongside standard English enables him to articulate a colonial identity that is both distinctly Scottish and compatible with a broader trans-imperial Britishness, Pringle's use of Cape Dutch has the opposite effect. As the language spoken by both Dutch settlers and the colony's slave and Indigenous populations, the presence of Cape Dutch loan words in Pringle's poems of settlement gestures towards a continuing Indigenous presence on unceded, settler-occupied land, a presence that Pringle's articulations of settler-colonial world-building persistently seeks to occlude. The final section of the article examines Glasgow-based South African writer Zoë Wicomb's critical re-visioning of Pringle's legacy in her novel *Still Life* (2020) as a means of thinking through some of the legacies these myths of settler belonging continue to have in contemporary South Africa, where rival claims to sovereignty mean that the relationship between land and identity remains a fiercely contested terrain.

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Note on terminology

It is the contention of this article that etymology has political as well as semantic significance, especially in settler-colonial contexts. With this in mind, close attention has been paid to using the language that communities use to self-describe when discussing South Africa's settler and Indigenous communities. Readers should also be aware, however, that the racist appellations 'Hottentot', 'Bushman', 'Bastard Hottentot', and 'Boor' are found in some of the colonial sources cited. In the accompanying analysis, I use the words *Khoekhoe(n)*, *San*, and *Griqua* to describe those descended from the Western and Eastern Cape's Khoekhoe and San Indigenous communities and the word *Boer* to describe Dutch-descended settlers. The amaXhosa and amaTembu are Nguni African communities who lived in the Eastern Cape at the time of British settlement and continue to inhabit this area. Cape Dutch, also referred to in this article, is the nineteenth-century progenitor of Afrikaans.

'This queer hieland glen'

When Thomas Pringle (1789–1834) first arrived in South Africa as head of the Scottish party of settlers in June 1820 (*Fig. 1*), he was led to the location of his party's settlement by a Boer magistrate who, on gesturing towards the valley said, 'And now, mynheer [...] *daar leg uwe veld* — their [*sic*] lies your country.' Following the magistrate's gesture towards a six-mile-long tract, an unnamed 'Scottish agriculturalist' from Pringle's

Fig. 1: Thomas Baines, *The Landing of the British Settlers of 1820 at Algoa Bay* (1853). Albany Museum, Grahamstown. Wikimedia Commons.

party comments that the land they are to settle resembles a 'queer hieland glen'.[1] This moment of *translocal* identification, in which the Scotland that the party has left behind overlays the Africa they are emigrating into, is signalled by linguistic code-switching from English into Scots.

Looking at his prose accounts of early settlement in dialogue with his two African farm poems, 'The Albany Emigrant' (1825) and 'The Emigrant's Cabin' (1834), this article explores the ways in which linguistic code-switching enables Pringle to evoke a translocal settler belonging in multiple registers. While the use of Scots alongside standard English enables him to articulate a settler-colonial identity that is both distinctly Scottish and compatible with a broader trans-imperial Britishness, Pringle's use of Cape Dutch has the opposite effect. As the language spoken by both Dutch settlers and the colony's slave and Indigenous populations, the presence of Cape Dutch loan words in Pringle's poems of settlement gestures towards a continuing Indigenous presence on unceded, settler-occupied land, a presence that Pringle's articulations of settler-colonial world-building persistently seek to occlude. The final section of the article examines Glasgow-based South African writer Zoë Wicomb's critical re-visioning of Pringle's legacy in her novel *Still Life* (2020). Wicomb's polyphonic novel revives the Indigenous voices marginalized in Pringle's settler-colonial world-building. In so doing she resurfaces occluded Indigenous histories that trouble the boundaries of national belonging in present-day South Africa.

Pringle's Scottish party's right to take possession of the place they called 'Teviotdale' on Baviaan's River is predicated on what Goenpul scholar of the Quandamooka nation Aileen Moreton-Robinson has theorized as the 'possessive logics' that underpin white belonging in the settler-colonial context. As Moreton-Robinson has argued in the Australian context, colonial legal codes that 'legitimized the appropriation of Indigenous lands' and 'limited naturalized citizenship to white immigrants' created racialized discourses of national belonging that continue to be operationalized in the present.[2] Moreton-Robinson's work brings an Indigenous-feminist perspective to Australian anthropologist Patrick Wolfe's argument that settler colonialism is 'a structure not an event', a 'complex social formation' based upon the creation of a 'new colonial society on an expropriated land base' which has continuity through time.[3]

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[1] Thomas Pringle, 'A Party of Emigrants Travelling to Africa', *Penny Magazine*, 26 January 1833, pp. 28–29 (p. 29).

[2] Aileen Moreton-Robinson, *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty* (University of Minnesota Press, 2015), p. 30.

[3] Patrick Wolfe, 'Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native', *Journal of Genocidal Research*, 8.4 (2006), pp. 387–409 (pp. 388, 390), doi: 10.1080/14623520601056240.

The right of the Scottish party to lay claim to unceded land was underpinned by a Scottish Enlightenment discourse of political economy that provided a rationale for Indigenous dispossession. As David Johnson has argued, the 'four stage teleology of human development' developed by Adam Smith in his *Lectures on Jurisprudence* (1762–63) provided a legal and economic framework for settler colonialism in South Africa. As settler farms granted by the colonial government displaced Indigenous communities, Indigenous populations were disciplined into labour relations with white settlers that were framed in colonial discourse as opportunities for them to make 'the progressive developmental journey from "Savages to Scotsmen"'.[4] In the first instance, as Canadian historian Elizabeth Elbourne has argued, the 'frontier logic' of settler agrarianism required a significant amount of Indigenous labour to manage large-scale pastoral farming. To this end, the British colonial administration in South Africa enacted 'a variety of mechanisms' to coerce dispossessed Indigenous peoples into working on settler farms, including vagrancy laws and apprenticeship legislation, which kept Indigenous labourers tied to particular locations.[5]

In Pringle's later writing on the establishment of the settlement that came to be known as 'Glen Lynden', he fuses the Scottish Enlightenment discourse of improvement with a sense of divine mission infused by his evangelical religious beliefs. When recounting his party's first Sabbath at their Baviaan's River location he threads through his description numerous allusions to the Old Testament to justify their presence on unceded San territory as part of a divine mission to 'become the honoured founders of a prosperous settlement, destined to extend the benefits of civilization and the blessed light of the Gospel through this dark and desolate nook of benighted Africa'.[6] Yet for all that Pringle's prose and poems of settlement work to present the Scottish party as the benign face of settler colonialism, there is substantial evidence in his letters that they encountered fierce resistance from local San and amaXhosa communities.[7] It is my contention that this fraught frontier context works in dialogue with Pringle's Scottish identity to articulate a translocal settler belonging that is clearly expressed in his two cotter poems: 'The Albany Emigrant' and 'The Emigrant's Cabin'.

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[4] David Johnson, *Imagining the Cape Colony: History, Literature, and the South African Nation* (Edinburgh University Press, 2012), p. 85.

[5] Elizabeth Elbourne, 'Rights, Interpersonal Violence and Settler Colonialism in Early Nineteenth-Century South Africa: Thomas Pringle and Scottish Colonialism at the Cape, 1820–1834', *Journal of Indian Ocean World Studies*, 5.2 (2021), pp. 185–214 (pp. 199, 198), doi: 10.26443/jiows.v5i2.115.

[6] Thomas Pringle, 'A Sabbath in the Wilderness', *Penny Magazine*, 9 February 1833, pp. 51–52 (p. 51).

[7] Letter to Harry Ellis, Baviaan's River, 18 July 1820, in *The South African Letters of Thomas Pringle*, ed. by Randolph Vigne (Van Riebeeck Society, 2011), pp. 23–24.

The colonial cotter: translocal vision and settler-colonial belonging

Pringle's Scottish identity has long been recognized as central to both the theme and form of his poetry.[8] I want to argue that his identity as a Lowland Scot hailing from 'that class of plain, respectable Scottish husbandmen' or tenant farmers is integral to the vision of settler-colonial belonging articulated in his writings from the eastern frontier.[9] In his memoir, *Narrative of a Residence in South Africa* (1834), Pringle is explicit about the importance of the promise of independence to the family's decision to emigrate as the only viable option and the centrality of land ownership to this vision:

> My father had been a respectable Roxburghshire farmer; and all his sons [...] had been bred to the same profession, except myself. The change in times, however, and the loss of capital, had completely overclouded their prospects in our native country. (p. 3)

Emigration, with all its challenges, offered Pringle the opportunity of 're-uniting my father's family, which fortune has so widely dispersed, into one circle and society, in my own immediate neighbourhood' (p. xvi). This emphasis on rural independence has both an economic and symbolic function, with farming not only central to the economic survival of settlers but also, as Wolfe has argued, 'a potent symbol for settler-colonial identity' (p. 396). By analysing representations of the labour of cultivation and settlement, this article aims to explore how settler poetry became a tool for Scottish emigrants to reclaim the economic independence many had lost as a result of the Scottish agricultural revolution. Additionally, the settler farm operated symbolically to articulate a particular modality of settler-colonial belonging that is both distinctly Scottish and compatible with a wider trans-imperial Britishness.

Three years after his departure from Cape Town at the end of an abortive literary career, and after a period of travel and ill health, Pringle wrote to his friend John Fairbairn from Baviaan's River. In this letter Pringle describes, with gentle irony, how he had become 'patriarch, priest and King' of the location:

> I have Boors [Dutch farmers] for clients and Bastards [mixed race farmers] for vassals. I have set afoot a Sunday School and perform service every Sunday in Dutch to an audience of about fifty souls — who come in waggons and on horseback, male and female — old and young — the black chivalry of the Bavan's River [*sic*].[10]

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[8] See, for example, Angus Calder, 'Thomas Pringle (1789–1834): A Scottish Poet in South Africa', in *The History and Historiography of Commonwealth Literature*, ed. by Dieter Riemenschneider (Narr, 1983), pp. 198–210; and Sarah Sharp, 'Exporting "The Cotter's Saturday Night": Robert Burns, Scottish Romantic Nationalism and Colonial Settler Identity', *Romanticism*, 25.1 (2019), pp. 81–89, doi: 10.3366/rom.2019.0403.

[9] Thomas Pringle, *Narrative of a Residence in South Africa*, new edn (Moxon, 1835), p. vii.

[10] Letter to John Fairbairn, Baviaan's River, 13 May 1825, in *South African Letters*, ed. by Vigne, p. 181.

As T. M. Devine has argued, whereas in Scotland even wealthy tenant farmers were wedded to landlords, 'in the colonies, on the other hand, owner-occupation, the much desired "independence" and the right to bequeath the hard-worked land to the family were all on offer at reasonable rates.'[11] Pringle's time as an 'African patriarch' at Baviaan's River recalls the dream of rural independence articulated in his *Narrative* as the main motive behind his emigration to the Cape. After his departure from Cape Town, Pringle was 'scribbling' poetry and prose articles for the Cape Colony's two newspapers, *South African Commercial Advertiser* and *South African Chronicle*. Among these writings, Pringle penned a cotter poem titled 'The Albany Emigrant'.

Published in July 1825 in the *South African Chronicle*, the short-lived title edited by the Scot Alexander Johnstone Jardine, 'The Albany Emigrant' uses the poetic trope of the Burnsian cotter to write an autoethnography of the settler-farmer. It begins with a scene of rural, domestic seclusion that recalls Burns's 'The Cotter's Saturday Night':

> The sun has sunk and I seek my cot,
> Each early scene and friend forgot;
> With little to long for or regret,
> For she I love best is beside me set:
> And the Hottentot maid is singing and churning.[12]

Here, the African farm embodies a rural independence denied to families like the Pringles by the agricultural revolution and its disastrous impact upon the customary rights enjoyed by tenant farmers. The 'Hottentot maid' here operates as a synecdoche for all the Indigenous servants employed by the Pringles on their Eildon farm, with dispossession in the face of the expanding settler frontier and constant warfare making Indigenous labour particularly cheap and plentiful in the Eastern Cape at this time. In fact, 'The Albany Emigrant', with its valorization of the labour of cultivation and its pose of rural hospitality, works to effect the transfer of Indigeneity from the Indigenous figures onto the settler-farmer:

> I guard my flocks, and plough and plant
> And prune my vines, and graft my trees,
> And work or saunter as I please.
> To strangers I can aye afford
> Kind welcome and a plenteous board.

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[11] T. M. Devine, *To the Ends of the Earth: Scotland's Global Diaspora 1750–2010* (Allen Lane, 2011), p. 101.

[12] 'Agricola', 'The Albany Emigrant', *South African Chronicle*, 26 July 1825, p. 3.

The civilizing discourse of hospitality masks the transfer of Indigeneity from the prior occupants of the land onto the settler-farmer, enabling the settler-farm to function metonymically for the broader processes of settler-colonial nation-building that Pringle and the Scottish party were participating in.

As well as presenting a reimagined social order that reflects the racialized labour economy of the Cape, Pringle's linguistic choices reflect the cultural hybridity of the colony. In what is the first example of the use of Cape Dutch (later known as Afrikaans) in anglophone poetry, 'The Albany Emigrant' is peppered with Cape Dutch loanwords: 'No Caffre [amaXhosa] nor *schelm* dare venture nigh | The hedge of my Kraal where the wolfhounds lie'. '*Kraal*' (farm) was originally a Portuguese word, which had migrated into common usage in Cape Dutch, and finally into English via European encounter narratives, while '*schelm*' has German origins but was widely used by Cape Dutch farmers to describe Indigenous peoples who stole livestock in order to feed their destitute families. In his correspondence with John Fairbairn, Pringle uses *schelms* specifically to denote a band of San 'bushmen' based in the caves or *kranzes* above the Koonap River and whose resistance to white settlement posed an almost existential threat to his Baviaan's River settlement.

In a letter to Fairbairn, written just a month before 'The Albany Emigrant' appeared in print, Pringle explains that he wrote to the colonial authorities requesting a 'commando', an armed local militia, to aid him in his 'war' against the San:

> The Bushmen [San] of Koonap continue to plague us — *ungrateful schelms!* Even after I have celebrated them in song. They stole all my brother's riding possessions last week and severely wounded a Bastard Hottentot [Khoekhoe] with poisoned arrows. So I have declared war against them and have this day written to the Landdrost for a commando to attack them in their rocky dens. You see we back Settlers grow all savage and bloody by coming in continual collision with savages.[13]

As Damian Shaw has noted, Pringle's poems of this period, most notably 'Song of the Wild Bushman' (1825), evidence a respect for the 'Bushman' 'threatening to resist Pringle's own commando against him'.[14] In contrast to the Khoekhoen, who are represented in Pringle's Indigenous poetry as docile servants like the 'Hottentot maid' of 'The Albany Emigrant', Pringle's respect for the fierce resistance of the San came from the existential danger they posed to his party. His bloodthirsty enthusiasm

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[13] Letter to John Fairbairn, Baviaan's River, 29 June 1825, in *South African Letters*, ed. by Vigne, p. 192.

[14] Damian Shaw, 'Thomas Pringle's Bushmen: Images of Flesh and Blood', *English in Africa*, 25.2 (1998), pp. 37–61 (p. 45) <https://hdl.handle.net/10520/AJA03768902_554> [accessed 19 January 2025].

to ‘attack them in their rocky dens’ reveals how the material realities of the settler frontier put severe pressure on his humanitarianism, which only came to the fore after he returned to Britain from South Africa and actively involved himself in ‘the great cause’.[15] Interestingly, in ‘The Albany Emigrant’ and his letters, Pringle uses the Cape Dutch word *schelm* to refer to the San, with Cape Dutch offering a mask that distances him from the horrors of what he has requested: what South African historian Mohamed Adhikari has described as the genocidal extermination of an Indigenous community.[16]

Pringle’s unresolved conflict with the San is expressed on a linguistic and ideological level in another cotter poem he was also working on in the 1820s but which was not published until long after his return to England in 1826. ‘The Emigrant’s Cabin’ (1834) has been analysed for its debt to Burns’s evocation of the ‘myth of the thrifty, humble and pious Scottish cottager’. Sarah Sharp has argued that the poem represents the recently colonized space of the Eastern Cape ‘as the cotter’s historic home and birth right’ in order to ‘assert the legitimacy of the colonial project’ (p. 89). Similarly, Matthew Shum has maintained that the poem should be read as ‘the presentation of an imagined “polity” of British humanitarian colonial standing as a kind of proxy for some future colonial state’.[17] Pringle’s ‘verse epistle’ draws on eighteenth-century English and Scottish poetic conventions to represent the Eastern Cape as a space of rustic retirement and cultured white sociability in order to imagine into being a white settler state that is unified by Protestant religion, rural independence, and an adherence to the aesthetic and moral values of the British culture of taste. However, this vision of white settler possession is undercut by the material and figural traces of the original Indigenous inhabitants of the land — a presence that Pringle’s speaker persistently disavows but fails to entirely occlude.

Rural life in the Eastern Cape in ‘The Emigrant’s Cabin’ is represented using some of the classic tropes of the Burnsian cotter poem. The scene of pastoral retirement is set in the opening stanza as Pringle invites his friend John Fairbairn into his ‘rustic cabin, thatched with reeds’. In the poem, Pringle extends a warm welcome to his absent friend:

> Enter, my friend, our beehive-cottage door:
> No carpet hides the humble earthen floor,

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[15] From 1827 Pringle was secretary of the Anti-Slavery Society and co-editor with Zachary Macaulay of the *Antislavery Recorder*. He also edited and published Mary Prince’s *The History of Mary Prince* (1831), the first biographical narrative of a female slave to be published in Britain. Prince was also a member of Pringle’s household at the time.

[16] Mohamed Adhikari outlines the case for defining the commando system as a genocide against the San in *The Anatomy of a South African Genocide: The Extermination of the Cape San Peoples* (University of Cape Town Press, 2010).

[17] Matthew Shum, ‘Thomas Pringle’s “The Emigrant Cabin” and the Invention of Settler Colonialism’, *English in Africa*, 38.3 (2011), pp. 35–38 (p. 36), doi: 10.4314/eia.v38i3.2.

> But it is hard as brick, clean-swept, and cool.
> You must be wearied? Take that jointed stool;
> Or on this couch of leopard-skin recline;
> You'll find it soft — the workmanship is mine.[18]

As in Burns's 'Cotter', Pringle figures himself as a self-sufficient rural yeoman, returning to rest in a clean, frugal dwelling. Although localized to the setting of South Africa's Eastern Cape, with Burns's 'lonely cot' transformed into Pringle's 'beehive-cottage', a dwelling that mimics the beehive-shaped huts constructed by local Indigenous groups, many of the tropes of Burns's 'Cotter' are evident in Pringle's poem, particularly the link made between the primitive simplicity of rural independence, domesticity, and piety:

> I have my farm and garden, tools and pen;
> My schemes for civilising savage men;
> Our Sunday service, till the sabbath-bell
> Shall wake its welcome chime in Lynden dell. (ll. 148–51)

Pringle's evocation of the Burnsian cotter operates, as Sharp has argued, as a form of cultural shorthand that unified Scottish settlers in the colonies into an imagined community. Sharp has demonstrated how Burnsian poetic tropes became a form of 'portable property', a poetic resource that was used by settler poets to forge diasporic colonial identities.[19] I want to argue that Pringle's blending of Scottish and English linguistic and poetic markers operated to articulate a specifically settler-colonial identity that discloses the anxieties of a 'settler consciousness' that is haunted by the material traces and ethical claims of the Indigenous communities who Pringle and his fellow Scottish settlers sought to displace.[20]

According to Australian political theorist Lorenzo Veracini, settler-colonial nationalisms are characterized by 'ambivalent emotional strategies relating to location and origin'. Veracini writes:

> Settler colonial nationalisms [...] focus on at least two spaces of origin. On the one hand, the [...] 'frontier' [...] the 'True North' and so on provide a mythical reference for 'indigenisation' processes, allowing for crucial settler investment in place and landscape. One the other, settlers also routinely articulate diasporic identities via a

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[18] Thomas Pringle, 'The Emigrant's Cabin', in *African Poems of Thomas Pringle*, ed. by Ernst Pereira and Michael Chapman (University of Natal Press, 1989), pp. 25–38 (ll. 17–22).

[19] John Plotz, *Portable Property: Victorian Culture on the Move* (Princeton University Press, 2008); Sharp, p. 88.

[20] Lorenzo Veracini, *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* (Palgrave, 2010), p. 82, doi: 10.1057/9780230299191.

> focus on ancestral 'roots' that are located elsewhere. The settler has a filiative and affiliative connection with 'home', but 'home' is alternatively (or simultaneously) both the 'old' and the 'new' place. (p. 21)

In 'The Emigrant's Cabin' this conflict between an affective allegiance to Pringle's two homes of Roxburghshire, Scotland and the Eastern Cape is given aesthetic expression through the poem's complex poetic and linguistic affiliations. The landscape is the site onto which these translocal affiliations are mapped, with linguistic code-switching signalling the multiple ways in which the landscape can be read according to what Dorothy Driver has termed the 'interaction' between multiple ways of experiencing and inhabiting a particular space, 'a multiplicity dependent on complex histories and/or different discursive embeddings'.[21]

Scots dialect is used very sparingly in the poem, reflecting Pringle's broader preference for the neo-Augustan poetic modes that he thought would give him a wide readership within the culture of taste of metropolitan England. It is notable that when Scots does surface it is to express another Burnsian trope: the nostalgic evocation of absent friends in a scene of settler sociability located in the pastoral setting of the Pringles' Eildon farm:

> Fill now a parting glass of generous wine —
> The *doch-an-dorris* cup — for *'Auld Lang Syne'*;
> For my good Margaret summons us to tea,
> In her green drawing-room — beneath the tree; —
> And lo! Miss Brown has a whole *cairn* of stones
> To pose us with — plants, shells, and fossil bones. (ll. 237–42)

The frozen tableau of the Scottish settlers drinking their 'cup of kindness' for the sake of 'auld lang syne' almost asks to be read ironically, so strong is the association between Burns's song and a diasporic yearning for a romanticized image of home. Yet Jason Rudy has highlighted the important cultural work performed by these derivative evocations of Scottish culture that are registered through the use of Scots dialect words (many of which are derived from Gaelic) in the settler-colonial context.[22] According to Rudy, Scots dialect and song become generic rather than specific in the colonial context, transmitting a diasporic Scottish identity that would form the foundations of a nascent settler-colonial identity.

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[21] Dorothy Driver, 'Zoe Wicomb's Translocal: Troubling the Politics of Location', in *Zoe Wicomb and the Translocal: Writing Scotland and South Africa*, ed. by Kai Easton and Derek Attridge (Routledge, 2017), pp. 7–34 (p. 10).

[22] Jason R. Rudy, 'Scottish Sounds in Colonial South Africa: Thomas Pringle, Dialect, and the Overhearing of Ballad', *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 71.2 (2016), pp. 197–214 (p. 212), doi: 10.1525/ncl.2016.71.2.197.

In Pringle's poetry this regional identity is enlarged into a settler-colonial identity through his use of the conventions of eighteenth-century topographic poetry to reinscribe the landscape. Both settler and Indigenous national identities are predicated on land-based notions of sovereignty and, in 'The Emigrant's Cabin', Pringle's cartographic imagination maps the contours of a new settler polity by tracing the location of settler farms in the Eastern Cape:

> Our Lothian Friends with their good Mother dwell,
> Beside yon *Kranz* whose pictured records tell
> Of bushman's huntings in the days of old,
> Ere here Bezuidenhout had fixed his fold.
> — Then up the widening vale extend your view,
> Beyond the clump that skirts the Lion's Cleugh,
> Past our old camp, the willow-trees among,
> Where first these mountains heard our sabbath song;
> And mark the Settlers' homes, as they appear
> With cultured fields and orchard-gardens near,
> And cattle-kraals, associate or single,
> From fair Craig-Rennie up to Clifton-Pringle. (ll. 172–83)

The sublime landscape of mountains and cloughs is rendered knowable through the act of European settlement. The naming and claiming of the land by Scottish, English, and Dutch families is represented in a visual and temporal register. The time between the settlers' arrival in 1820 and the present of the poem is marked by the enclosure of the landscape in 'cattle-kraals', 'cultured fields', and 'orchard-gardens' and the transition of the settlers from temporary 'camps' to settled dwellings — a key index of sociocultural progress according to the stadial theory developed by Adam Smith in his Glasgow lectures. Thus, Pringle adapts the conventions of eighteenth-century topographical poetry to make a case for the Eastern Cape colony, demonstrating to his imagined metropolitan audience the progress they have made towards civilized existence in the wilds of rural South Africa.

The 'possessive logics' underwriting Pringle's mapping of the Baviaan's River valley via the names of the Scottish and Boer families located there represents a very different ontological understanding of the relationship between the land and its inhabitants from that shared by the Indigenous Khoekhoe and San people who continued to resist settler occupancy. Griqua Khoesan scholar Berte van Wyk explains:

> The Khoisan philosophy towards land is: the land is not ours, we belong to the land. This philosophy stems from the fact that early Khoisan people were hunter-gatherers with a nomadic lifestyle. [...] This nomadic lifestyle resulted in parts of the land being uninhabited for periods of time, and also no formal or Western style of ownership of land. Colonialists exploited this indigenous approach to land and legally claimed Khoisan ancestral lands for themselves and, in the process, prevented access to land.[23]

As van Wyk suggests, the peripatetic movements of the San which Pringle and other white settlers found so unsettling were both a response to displacement and a manifestation of a pre-contact way of relationally managing the balance between the community's needs and the resources available. Without the settler's need to extract produce from the land to sell for profit, the San left little trace upon the landscapes beyond the elaborate rock art that remains present in many of the *kranzes* or caves of the Eastern and Western Cape. Ironically, it was this ability to sustain a lifestyle that respected the integrity of the natural world that made San communities particularly vulnerable to dispossession when compared to amaXhosa and Griqua pastoralists, who enclosed land for farms and erected permanent dwellings.

Rhetorically, the naming and claiming of land creates the illusion of permanence and stability for a settler community that was leading an economically precarious existence on unceded territory that the British government had unilaterally annexed from Indigenous communities. Ideologically, it enacts the settler-colonial logics of 'dispossession' and 'transfer' that were a defining feature of settler colonialism as a distinct set of practices. Lorenzo Veracini and Rafael Verbuyst explain:

> Contrary to colonialism, which seeks to subjugate and exploit the native, settler colonialism aims for the 'elimination of the native' in two interrelated domains: dispossession (i.e., strategies pursued to alienate and destroy the native, such as physical destruction of indigenous communities, or the forcible occupation of indigenous lands) and transfer (i.e. strategies pursued to replace the native with the settler, such as assimilationist policies of the disavowal of Indigenous presence).[24]

That the Cape Colony is founded upon the dispossession and genocidal murder of Indigenous people is registered through the absent presence of the San 'bushman'.

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[23] Berte van Wyk, 'Indigenous Rights, Indigenous Epistemologies, and Language: (Re)Construction of Modern Khoisan Identities', *Knowledge Cultures*, 4.4 (2016), pp. 33–45 (pp. 38–39) <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/188219938.pdf> [accessed 19 January 2025].

[24] Lorenzo Veracini and Rafael Verbuyst, 'South Africa's Settler-Colonial Present: Khoisan Revivalism and the Question of Indigeneity', *Social Dynamics*, 46.2 (2020), pp. 259–76 (p. 261), doi: 10.1080/02533952.2020.1805883.

Interestingly, the material presence of San people as the original inhabitants of the land now occupied by Pringle and other European settlers is not wholly disavowed: Pringle acknowledges that the 'pictured records', an allusion to the rock art that was the San's traditional method of recording their history and religious practices, constitute evidence of prior occupancy. However, what is disavowed is any sense of culpability for the dispossession and systematic extermination of the San, a disavowal that is unsurprising given Pringle's own involvement in raising settler militias to 'hunt' the San off settler-occupied land.[25] The material traces of the San, registered in a poem that seeks to represent the Eastern Cape as a space in which displaced Scottish tenant farmers like the Pringles might find a new home, disrupt the straightforward transfer of Indigeneity from the San onto the Scottish settlers, posing an ontological threat to the nascent settler polity.

However, that this attempt at transfer was not entirely successful is evident in the ways in which a disavowed Indigenous presence keeps resurfacing in the poem, a resurfacing that is always accompanied by linguistic code-switching from English into Cape Dutch. In the above example the persistent presence of the San is signalled by Pringle's italicized use of the Cape Dutch word *kranz*. Derived from the Dutch *krans* meaning a wreath, the *OED* first records the word *krans* entering the English language via George Forster's 1785 translation of Swedish naturalist Anders Spaarman's *Voyage to the Cape of Good Hope* to describe a particular topographical feature of the South African landscape. Forster's translation of Spaarman reads: 'He looked out for a *klipkrans* (so they generally call a rocky place level and plain at top, and having a perpendicular precipice on one side of it).'[26] 'The Emigrant's Cabin' is recorded by the *OED* as the second occurrence of *kranz* in English-language writing and the first in non-fiction writing. The *kranz* in 'The Emigrant's Cabin' both marks and obscures the material traces of persistent San presence on settler-occupied land.

Elsewhere in the poem, Cape Dutch is more overtly associated with the Indigenous people still present at Baviaan's River. Most notably, it is the language spoken by the Khoekhoen servants resident in the Pringle household, Flink and Vytje. In a 'move to innocence', whereby Pringle attempts to absolve himself of responsibility for settling on land from which the amaTembu had recently been violently displaced,[27] he depicts a fictional visit from the amaTembu chief Powana, who has arrived on a 'friendly visit' to 'smoke the Pipe of Peace with Scottish men' (l. 258). Powana's arrival at Eildon, which

[25] See Shaw, 'Thomas Pringle's Bushmen'.

[26] See the entry 'krantz' in *Oxford English Dictionary* <https://www.oed.com> [accessed 19 January 2025].

[27] Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, 'Decolonization is Not a Metaphor', *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education and Society*, 1.1 (2012), pp. 1–40 (p. 10) <https://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/des/article/view/18630> [accessed 19 January 2025].

brings with it an implicit questioning of the right of the Pringles to claim Eildon as their own, is signalled by an exchange in Cape Dutch between Pringle and his servant Flink:

> Well, Flink, what says the Chief?
> *Flink*: Powana wagh'
> Tot dat de Baas hem binnenshuis zal vraagh'.
> *P.* — In boorish Dutch which means, 'Powana waits,
> Till Master bids him welcome to our gates.' (ll. 269–73)

This occasion gives Pringle the opportunity to performatively display the hospitality expected from a rural patriarch, which he sanctimoniously represents as the fulfilment of a divinely ordained 'command' to 'kindly treat the Stranger in our Land'.[28] Yet Pringle seems completely unaware of the irony inherent in this transfer of Indigeneity from the native amaTembu, who are cast as 'strangers', to the Scottish emigrants who lay claim to their unceded territory.

Earlier in the poem, the first instance of Cape Dutch occurs when Pringle is addressing his Khoekhoe servant, Vytje Vaal:

> But here comes dinner (the best bill of fare),
> Drest by the 'Nut-Brown Maiden', Vytje Vaal.
> [*To the Hottentot Girl*,] Meid, roep de Juffrouwen naar't middagmaal:
> [*To F.*] Which means — 'The ladies in to dinner call.' (ll. 40–43)

Cape Dutch, as it was known in Pringle's time, was both the language of the Dutch settler population and the main lingua franca among the colony's slave and Indigenous populations. Such fluency in Cape Dutch was unusual among British settlers, so Pringle is demonstrating the lengths he has gone to assimilate into South African colonial culture. However, the gap between Pringle's genteel English translation and the original Cape Dutch discloses the racialized power dynamic underwriting this scene of intercultural sociability. 'Meid' — an abbreviation of the Dutch *meisje*, meaning 'girl', was used by Boer settlers to address Indigenous servants. Pringle deliberately excludes this racialized and derogatory mode of address from the English translation in order to present a scene of racial equality that aligns with his liberal humanitarian politics.

The racial hierarchy that underwrites such apparently harmonious cross-cultural communication is also made visible through the etymology of the woman's name: 'Vytje', Pringle explains in his notes to the poem, 'is a Dutch diminutive for Sophia.'[29]

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[28] Line 280. The Bible verse alluded to is Leviticus 19. 33–34.

[29] *African Poems*, ed. by Pereira and Chapman, p. 96.

Here, the biopolitics of settler colonialism are materialized through the practice of reinscription, with Vytje's Indigenous heritage effaced by her conversion to Christianity and consequent adoption of a European name. We are also told in the footnote that Vytje was 'a native of Bethelsdorp', a mission station in the Eastern Cape run by the London Mission Society that attracted many Khoekhoen people who had been displaced from their ancestral lands by the expanding settler-colonial frontier. We are told that 'Vytje Dragoener' was her real name (although it is unclear whether that is a name given by missionaries or the name with which she was born), with her original identity erased first by the abbreviation of her name from Sophia to Vytje and then by Pringle's aestheticization of her into the exoticized figure of the 'nut-brown maiden', with *vaal* being (wrongly — the word actually means 'grey') glossed by Pringle as the Cape Dutch for 'brown', the colour often used to describe Khoekhoen people in colonial travelogues. This act of misnaming, and its justification in Pringle's footnote, is addressed by Zoë Wicomb in her recent novel *Still Life*.

'This history thing': re-visioning colonial history in Zoë Wicomb's *Still Life*

In *Still Life* Scottish-based South African writer Zoë Wicomb critically revises the literary historiography of the liberal South African tradition in which Thomas Pringle has been canonized as 'the Father of South African Poetry'.[30] In the novel an unnamed author wrestles with the complexities of writing a biography of Thomas Pringle, a figure who embodies a white anglophone literary tradition that has been critiqued for its racial and gender exclusions. The novel is playfully polyphonic, with the spectral traces of Indigenous figures marginalized in Pringle's writings materialized as an eclectic array of characters with varied critical investments in the literary-historical project of recovering Pringle from the footnotes of history. Mary Prince, the enslaved woman whose biography Pringle edited, is the voice of counter-history, telling the would-be biographer in no uncertain terms that 'we've had enough of being trapped in this derelict pondok of history' (p. 10). The word *pondok* is a peculiarly South African word for a Bermudan woman to choose. Deriving from Malay and migrating into Cape Dutch with the movement of slaves to southern Africa from the Dutch East Indies, *pondok* denotes an improvised dwelling or 'shanty' made of wood, corrugated iron, and other improvised building materials. According to Andrew van der Vlies, 'early references (from 1815 and 1818) associate the word with the wood-framed huts, covered with reed, thatch or hide, of the autochthonous peoples of the Cape.'[31] Wicomb's 'pondok

[30] Zoë Wicomb, *Still Life* (New Press, 2020), p. 13.

[31] Andrew van der Vlies, 'Zoë Wicomb's Angels of History: Literary Historiography and Historical Materialism in *Still Life*', *Research in African Literatures*, 53.1 (2022), pp. 45–66 (p. 47), doi: 10.2979/reseafrilite.53.1.04.

of history' is a structuring metaphor for the novel's work of historical re-visioning, which uses a specifically South African idiolect within the anglophone tradition of postcolonial historical re-visioning to voice Indigenous claims to sovereignty within a still-postcolonizing, post-post-transition South African nation.

Ever sceptical of the quest for original narratives that might authenticate one particular definition of Indigenous South African identity, the I-narrator responds to Mary's urgent request that she write a recuperative counter-history to the white-dominated mainstream history with an aside to the reader: 'If only she knew that I could house them in little more than another pondok — of another order, yes, but the house of fiction within my means, with its rusted tin roof, may be no less leaky' (p. 10). Yet rather than retreat exhausted from such epistemological anxiety, the novel's playful cacophony of revivified Indigenous characters each elaborate their own identities as counter-narratives to those constructed for them by Pringle. As Peter Macdonald has noted, one of the most 'astute commentators on *Still Life*'s literary-philosophical preoccupations with writing and knowledge' is Vytje Vaal, rescued from a highly suggestive trace in 'The Emigrant's Cabin' and given a voice and a history by Wicomb.[32]

When Vytje enters the narrative, it is a belated and reluctant entrance, made as the main characters have begun to grow sceptical of the whole project of recovering Pringle's reputation. She states that her purpose is 'to give witness' to the brutalities of slavery and indenture at the Cape as documented in Pringle's journalism on the subject, stating that 'there is no question that his accounts of barbaric punishments — hangings, flayings with sjamboks, shots fired into buttocks and thighs — these were witnessed by him' (p. 131). She also bears witness to the epistemological violence of her mischaracterization by Pringle in 'The Emigrant's Cabin' by correcting his misrepresentation:

> Our family name was Windvogel, Dutch for the original Khoe word for bird-of-the-wind, and I have no reason to believe that there is anything to be ashamed of in such a name. Rather, I fancy it tells of times when the master hunters, our great-tatas, all but flew through the veld, skimming the ghannabush like birds driven by a powerful wind, not touching ground until they'd pinioned their prey. Windvogel might not be an easy name for a rhyming poem in English, but that is hardly our concern. (p. 167)

Vytje's lyrical idiolect combines English, Afrikaans (*Windvogel*, *veld*), Khoekhoegowab (*ghanabush* derives from *!khan*, denoting a bush used to make soap) and isiXhosa (*tata*,

[32] Peter D. Macdonald, 'Zoe Wicomb', Artefacts of Writing, n.d., <https://artefactsofwriting.com/zoe-wicomb/> [accessed 19 January 2025].

from the isiXhosa for 'father'). This linguistic polyphony reflects the multicultural heritage of the Cape Coloured population who are the descendants of Vytje and other Khoekhoe, San, and Griqua people, whose histories are often lost to the record due to centuries of displacement and erasure first by Dutch and British colonialism and later by the South African apartheid regime. Wicomb's effort to give voice to Vytje's story reflects a broader effort to re-vision Khoekhoe and San histories, and to reflect upon what these histories might mean to Cape Coloured people today.

Yet throughout the novel, Wicomb's use of multiple, conflicting narrators also articulates a suspicion of the postcolonial search for 'authentic' Indigenous voices. Vytje describes herself as originating from the Goniqua people, a Khoekhoe Indigenous group from the Eastern Cape who, by the early nineteenth century, had amalgamated with local amaXhosa groups. As she notes, finding authentic 'roots' or origins is impossible for Khoekhoen whose 'blood has flown in many directions since the world had been stirred up by the settlers' (p. 167). Vytje's scepticism towards origin myths is reflected in a generalized scepticism towards writing, a pose that is consistent with her historical position as a woman who has been misrepresented in both 'The Emigrant's Cabin' and in Pringle's own historical footnotes on the poem.

Vytje's role in the novel is to foreground the status of the Khoekhoen and the San as the Indigenous inhabitants of South Africa whose presence in the Western, Northern, and Eastern Cape predates the arrival of both white settlers and the Black Nguni communities who dominate post-apartheid South Africa. She states: 'It is the Khoekhoen who waited on the strand at Table Bay all those centuries ago, expecting the Europeans in their funny clothes to be humble visitors, until they produced their guns and beads and bibles' (p. 132). Specifically, she speaks for not only the Khoekhoen servants on Pringle's Eildon farm but also the San, referring to Pringle's location at Eildon as 'the land of the San, who still lurked about in the veld, helping themselves by night to livestock. Bushmen they were called, as if there were no women' (p. 132). Vytje's articulation of Khoekhoen and San sovereignty is a political act in light of the repeated erasure of Khoekhoen and San people from colonial, apartheid, and post-apartheid political dispensations.[33] Speaking of the *kranz* mentioned in 'The Emigrant's Cabin', Vytje says, 'the krans with its cave paintings was sacred, filled with the spirit of the San, with the powers of healing, that ought not to be defaced by the marks of strangers' (p. 142). Here, Vytje refers to Thomas Pringle's famous 'graffiti' in the Baviaan's River

[33] It was only in 2019 that the South African state officially recognized Khoi and San people as distinct from Nguni Black South Africans. See 'Traditional and Khoi-San Leadership Act 3 of 2019 (English/Afrikaans)', South African Government, 2019 <https://www.gov.za/documents/acts/traditional-and-khoi-san-leadership-act-3-2019-english-afrikaans-28-nov-2019> [accessed 19 January 2025].

kranz, which was visible to visitors in the nineteenth century, as Thomas Baines's sketch vividly demonstrates.[34]

By drawing attention to the violence done to Indigenous histories by settler-colonial writers such as Pringle through acts of inscription, represented as both material and epistemological violence, Wicomb is recognizing the enduring power of colonial-era texts to contribute to the erasure of Indigenous histories, an erasure which persists in the legal structures and official historiographies of post-transition South Africa. Most emblematic of this erasure was Thabo Mbeki's 'I am an African' speech in which he honoured the Black freedom fighters whose historical struggles against colonialism and apartheid culminated in South Africa's transition from apartheid to democracy. In this speech, delivered on the eve of South Africa's transition from apartheid to democracy, he begins this genealogy with

> the Khoi [*sic*] and the San whose desolate souls haunt the great expanses of the beautiful Cape — they who fell victim to the most merciless genocide our native land has ever seen, they who were the first to lose their lives in the struggle to defend our freedom and independence and they who, as a people, perished in the result.[35]

Mbeki's 'commemorative inclusion' of South Africa's earliest inhabitants in his historical narrative of the foundation of the new South Africa simultaneously involves, as South African literary critic Shane Moran points out, a process of 'reification and forgetting'.[36] In Mbeki's reading, the Khoekhoen and San 'souls' that 'haunt' the landscape of the Eastern and Western Cape are evoked to mourn the absence of the peoples and cultures they represent. This register of commemorative mourning effaces the continuing presence of those who identify as Khoekhoe, San, or Khoesan in modern South Africa and speaks to the ongoing struggle of Khoekhoe and San people for both political recognition and land rights in the post-apartheid dispensation.

In *Still Life* Wicomb uses Vytje to assert the importance of Khoekhoe and San histories to South African history *tout court*. For Wicomb it is only through the creative act of reinscription that what Vytje refers to as 'this history thing, invading other people's

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[34] The British painter and explorer Thomas Baines's sketch 'Bushman's Krantz Baviaans River. Animals painted on the rock by Bushman [*sic*]. Much visited by the poet Pringle', 26 January 1849, is available to view in the Iziko Museum collection, Cape Town. Thomas Pringle's signature above the San paintings is visible in the sketch.

[35] Thabo Mbeki, 'I am an African', speech delivered in Cape Town, 8 May 1996, following the adaptation of South Africa's post-apartheid constitution, in *The South Africa Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, ed. by Clifton Crais and Thomas V. McClendon (Duke University Press, 2014), pp. 475–80.

[36] Shane Moran, *Representing Bushmen: South Africa and the Origin of Language* (University of Rochester Press, 2009), p. 139.

countries and spitting contempt on the conquered' can be countered and critiqued (p. 174). By directly challenging Pringle's misrepresentations of slave and Indigenous people, Mary and Hinza (Pringle's adopted son) provide alternative histories that centre slave and Indigenous subjectivities. What makes Vytje's voice the most radical is her insistence upon Khoekhoe and San sovereignty, a political stance that aligns her with contemporary Khoesan revivalists who exist on the margins of South Africa's post-transition political order.[37]

Wicomb is also alert in the novel to the enduring power of colonial-era texts to shape the historical consciousness of postcolonial states such as South Africa. In particular, the idiolects of her Black and Indigenous characters point to the power that language and dialect have in enabling the resurfacing of these occluded histories both in her own contemporary metafictional commentary on Pringle's canon and also in Pringle's own original poems. Where Pringle's conscious blending of Scottish and English linguistic and poetic markers pointed towards a white settler world-building, Cape Dutch works to undercut the comforting image of settler-belonging in its moment of articulation by gesturing towards the racialized violence that enabled the Pringles to claim belonging in the settler-colonial state known to them as the Cape Colony. By returning to these textual traces of Khoekhoe and San presence, Wicomb reads against the grain of the settler-colonial archive in order to recover Khoekhoe and San subjectivities from the violent historical erasures of colonization and apartheid and the ongoing epistemological violence of a post-transition South African polity that continues to deny them full political recognition.

[37] For more on Khoesan revivalism at the Cape, see Rafael Verbuyst, *Khoisan Consciousness: An Ethnography of Emic Histories and Indigenous Revivalism in Post-Apartheid Cape Town* (Brill, 2022).