Multiculturalism in Early South African Writing

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Introduction

Writers writing about South Africa in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century often sharply criticised white colonisers and sympathised with indigenous peoples. They treated cultural differences, in other words, in ways we now associate with multiculturalism. In this paper I want to give you a brief outline of this literature, to try to explain what lay behind it, and to suggest why literary criticism and cultural thinking in South Africa and elsewhere have a collective amnesia about it.

Features of the texts

I find myself in a position of some difficulty, in that I must ask you to take on trust my findings on texts that are little known, universally out of print, and yet were the major texts on South Africa in their day. If any of you are interested in these texts, I will advertise that I have written at greater length on them elsewhere, particularly in an article "The Future of the Past in South African Literary History" to appear in the *Quarterly Bulletin of the South African Library*, and that some repetition of my argument is inevitable. Here I summarise some of the major features of these texts with some supporting quotations, and with a plot summary of the most overtly multi-cultural text.

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1) These texts often criticise the Dutch colonists or the British authorities.

2) These texts try to portray the lives and speech and thought of indigenous peoples, particularly the Xhosa — usually sympathetically.

3) The texts often draw heavily on historical sources and travellers' accounts and use historical figures such as Makanna, Sandile, and Macomo, and historical incidents such as the Frontier Wars.

4) The view of the Xhosa, in particular, is strongly influenced by the sense that they are, in terms of appearance, speech, and behaviour, like Greek or Roman figures or even gods.

5) The clash between cultures may be presented as tragic, in the sense that the invading culture defeats the invaded one, or comic in that the works end with some form of accommodation that combines the best of both--occasionally in marriage; but the clash is never presented simply as the triumph of progress and civilisation over savagery.

6) The authors show, in their prefaces, or in direct comments to their readers, a highly sophisticated sense of cultural difference and the reigning prejudices in Europe that they seek to undermine.

To demonstrate the criticism of the colonists, let me take some examples from a wide range:

> The history of the founding of one colony is, I fear, the history of most, if not all--commencing in doing all that is possible to obtain the good will of the people until a firm footing has been obtained in the land then treating them with barbarity and injustice.[2]

> [She] regretted the misconceptions her countrymen had entertained of their [the Caffres'] character — an error she rightly attributed almost entirely to the selfish and resentful misrepresentations of the settlers, a race of hard, exacting men, who forget all right in the law of might.
>
> Surely it is a mistaken policy to send the sword to civilise a barbarous country. A country is discovered, the produce of which will add riches or importance. It is peopled by the Almighty, but what of that? The native races are only blacks, and, looking upon them somewhat in the light of indigenous animals, the settlers, when they cannot use them much the same as they would beasts of burthen, settle the law of mine and thine by driving them into the interior.
>
> The natives retire, as, year by year, their conquerors, or rather robbers, encroach; looking on from their hiding-places in wonder and fear, but carefully avoiding all intercourse.
>
> At last the vices of civilisation steal across the gulf, and, untaught and misguided, the simple-hearted savage becomes almost a demon in his ungovernable passions.

[2] Captain [Frederick] R. N. Marryat. *The Mission: Or, Scenes in Africa.* (London: Bohn, 1854, 1845).

> The settlers petition government, who send their peace-makers in the form of soldiers; war and extermination is the cry; and the poisoned arrow or war-club is but an unequal opponent to the trained and well-armed soldier; so that, driven to the last extremity, the ignorant wretches avenge themselves by torture and murder, until their very name becomes a by-word for crimes of the most frightful kind.
>
> They fight, murder, and die, one by one passing away; the few who remain, conquered and debased, had best have died too for all the consideration they gain by succumbing.
>
> It is a sad tale, dear reader, and one which, for the sake of Christianity, I would fain believe exaggerated. I tell it as I feel. I ask you to look round and judge for yourself.[3]

Nor should these critical views be seen as eccentric or without impact or political weight. Critical views of colonisation were held by many of those writing about the Cape in the nineteenth century from a British point of view. In part, criticism justified British control over the formerly Dutch colony, in part it stemmed from the representations made by missionaries and the blacks they represented to the English public. When we read the judgement of Charles Grant (later Lord Glenelg), the Secretary for the Dominions, on the war between black and white, in 1835, we see how strongly a hostile view of conquest held sway--at least during Whig rule in England:

> [The] Kaffirs had an ample justification of the war into which they rushed with such fatal imprudence. . . . Urged to revenge and desperation by the systematic injustice of which they had been the victims . . . they had a perfect right to hazard the experiment . . . of extorting by force that redress which they could not expect otherwise to obtain. (Cited in Theal, vol 6, 143).

These writers went further than criticising European expansion to imagining African responses. In the next quote, Makanna, based of course on the historical character, speaks to Laroon, the mysterious, Le Vaillant-like, French Creole character who wishes to help him and who replies in the last paragraph:

> After a while, instead of armed decks, and the green gardens of the west, I trod again the sun-parched wilderness, and saw around me, men, whom you call savages, in countless hordes, but each from each estranged, by petty feuds, and the low jealousy of rival Chiefs: — And worse than all, I saw the pale and crafty European, with smiles, bright as the steel he wears, and heart as cold, encroaching still by treacherous force, or fraudful barter, on the free Hunting Grounds our Fathers held for ages. — The Brown Man was but as the hound that follows on the White, repaid with kicks for service! —and, seeing this, my heart grew chill, as in a serpent's coil, — for then, there seemed no chance of retribution.

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[3] I. D. Fenton, ed., *Adventures of Mrs Colonel Somerset in Caffraria, During the War* (London: J. F. Hope, 1858), 309.

> With patience, again came hope, and then, I found a way to interlink our scattered tribes, even as a band of brothers: — and time would build them in a living wall, oppression might not dare to overleap.
>
> A noble project, and one that yet may be achieved.
>
> —Then, who would choose to die, with such a spirit-stirring call to life and enterprise?
>
> [Laroon goes on to reflect on Makanna's mission.]
>
> Under the influence of such a man, it was probable, that something far more important than a mere political diversion against the English, at the Cape, might be effected. The wandering Hordes of Southern Africa might become united under equal laws, and perchance, the foundation of a future Empire on the shores of the Indian Ocean might be laid.[4]

We see here that the militarily-inspired author of this novel was far more prescient of something that looks uncannily like the ANC (and one should not forget that the popular black name for Robben Island, used for political imprisonment since the seventeenth century, is Makanna's Island) than white South African writers would be for a century after him.

Nor was the sympathy towards the indigenous people simply at the level of political justice and military respect. Cowper Rose's description of the impact the Xhosa made physically on colonists of some sensibility was perhaps the most influential single passage and demonstrates a strong validation of cultural difference:

> The Chief is generally distinguished from his followers by a carosse of tiger's skin, and by a narrow tasteful beaded band worn round the head; and when he stands surrounded by his armed attendants, wrapped in their dark cloaks, it forms a most imposing sight, and one which, though my expectation had been raised, surprised me. Their figures are the noblest that my eye ever gazed upon, their movements the most graceful, and their attitudes the proudest, standing like forms of monumental bronze. I was much struck with the strong resemblance that a group of Kaffers bears to the Greek and Etruscan antique remains, except that the savage drapery is more scanty; and falls in simpler folds; their mantles, like those seen on the figures of the ancient vases, are generally fastened over the shoulder of the naked arm, while the other side is wholly concealed; but they have many ways of wearing the carosse, and of giving variety to their only garment.
>
> Through our interpreter, we prevailed on Enno to order a dance of the men; their movement was different to that of the women but still kept time to their voices; they threw their carosses off, and forming a semicircle, bowed their heads low, and bounded upward with a spring, which almost left it in doubt whether their dark forms belonged to the earth.[5] (87-88)

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[4] Makanna. *Makanna; Or, the Land of the Savage.* 3 vols. (London: Simpkin and Marshall, 1834).

[5] Cowper Rose. *Four Years in Southern Africa.* (London: Colburn and Bentley, 1829), 87-88.

I want to turn now to Kendall's novel,[6] which seems to me the most sustained and the most interesting attempt to think through what multiculturalism meant for the identity of the coloniser in the new colony at the Cape.

In this three volume novel, Charles Laleham, a young English lad comes with his father to join friends among the 1820 settlers in the Eastern Cape. The mother, who is ill, and other children stay behind. Near Cape Town, the ship is wrecked, and Charles saved by a figure on horseback (based on the historical hero Wolraad Woltemade) who saves several passengers but dies trying to save Charles's father. Charles is welcomed by the Governor's wife at the Cape and is sent to the Eastern Cape with a Dutch land-drost. The Dutch land-drost is ambushed by vengeful Bushmen because his father had persecuted them and Charles is taken over by a Dutch family. He leaves this family because of the sadistic mother, and then is saved by a Bushman girl and her tribe. They, in turn, are massacred by Caffres who hand Charles over to the Dutch who eventually send him back to Cape Town, in the company of an Irish sailor.

In Cape Town a new and unsympathetic Governor is in place and Charles is left to Dutch inn-keepers who neglect him. He is taken over by a Malay goldsmith and his wife who, with a sympathetic Jewish figure, arrange for him to go back to the Eastern Frontier and find his godmother. He arrives there only to find the godmother's husband had been killed, that she had been reduced to being a servant, and had returned to Britain. Charles stays on for some years and in the last few pages is taken over by a kindly Dutch farmer without heirs who makes him his heir just before he leaves on the Great Trek. Charles manages to re-establish contact with his mother and godmother who come to re-join him on the farm in the Eastern Cape.

The plot could stand as a model to multiculturalism long before its time. The other races are presented as fully equivalent to the British in virtue and the only extended glimpse we get of British behaviour in the latter part of the novel is a group of drunken British sailors invading a Malay religious service that Charles is attending with his Malay protectors. The chaos the sailors cause leads to very harsh authorial comment on the behaviour of the British abroad. The Jew is the figure whose words of wisdom are the last of their sort in the novel.

The novel precedes greater novels in the same vein, like *Oliver Twist*, *Huckleberry Finn*, and *Kim*. In all these novels, the young heroes lose or have lost a father and have to

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[6] Edward Kendall. *The English Boy at the Cape: An Anglo-African Story*. 3 vols. (London: Whittaker and Co., 1834).

seek, in various social strata, or racial and ethnic groups, to find what the best model for fatherhood is. What these plots suggest is that often the first condition of colonial life is a loss of what we might, in Lacanian terms, call the patriarchal symbolic unity, the rules that governed behaviour elsewhere. This condition of searching for a true father and guiding principles becomes, inevitably, in a colonial situation, a political and cultural matter.

If English society is to be re-made at the Cape it is to be with a new man, shaped by a range of experiences that have marked him, and without any confidence that British models work. Much of the first volume deals, precisely, with the crisis in British society and how it should or should not be resolved by emigration. Charles eventually must incorporate the wisdom gained from the range of racial experience that shaped him as a new South African, and the novel seems to me to echo this effort, in its attempts to include various vernaculars and to defamiliarise English life.

Explanations for this literature

You are, I hope, by now convinced that early South African novels were rather more sophisticated and interesting than South African literary history has allowed. Who were these writers and what made them write like this? Who, in particular, was Kendall and how did he come to write such a novel? I asked myself that question before knowing this conference was to take place and, through one of those happy coincidences, can now give you an answer that seems almost too good to be true. Kendall, if we are to trust the Dictionary of National Biography, was a writer and social polemicist who, at the age or fifteen or sixteen, translated into English several of the works of the French writer Bernardin de St Pierre, whose Rousseauistic views of the Cape and Mauritius clearly influenced his own work.

Furthermore, behind almost all the other writers stands the figure of François le Vaillant whose critical views of the colonists and praise of the Hottentots had strongly influenced European views of the Cape throughout the first half of the nineteenth century.

Let me extrapolate fairly broadly from the individual authors to offer several hypotheses for these works, with the warning that these are suggestions and challenges to myself and others for further work:

1) There were strong direct and indirect links between these works and the enlightenment critiques of colonialism by writers such as Rousseau and Diderot, often me-

diated by Le Vaillant. In the case of South Africa, we need to do lots more to clarify these links. Patrick Cullinan's work on the meeting of Diderot with Robert Gordon suggests how fruitful and significant such interchanges were[7].

2) The critical or detached view of European settler culture and the sympathetic interest in indigenous culture that we find in many of the early literary works influenced by Le Vaillant was usually the view of outsiders or visitors or travellers, often well-educated ones.

3) The key notion that the colony or new society meant that new social models or familial structures had to be explored as a way of founding a new identity is typical of St Pierre, Kendall, and later writers such as Kipling. It may often reflect social tensions in the mother culture as much as telling us about the reality of colonial life.

4) The links between the views and those of much better known missionary and evangelical views are complex, as some of the quotations suggest, but in general these writers were better educated than the missionaries, particularly in the classics, which formed one source of positive models of interpretation for the behaviour of indigenous South Africans.

5) Many of the works were written by officers of the British Army. These officers were educated, had a considerable comparative experience of empire and its shortcomings, and were often highly critical of the political aims of colonisation.

Let us examine one key episode. In the eighteenth century, key French thinkers such as Rousseau and Diderot were heavily and, on occasion, personally, influenced by personal observations on South Africa. Patrick Cullinan reminds us that the South African explorer and soldier Robert Gordon met Diderot in Holland and that Diderot drew heavily on Gordon's account of the Hottentots not only here but in the passages he is supposed to have written in the Abbé Raynal's work on the East Indies settlements in which the Dutch colonists come under sharp attack.

Let us note one or two things in particular about Gordon's account which Diderot noted. First, Gordon translated two Hottentot songs for Diderot to show, it seems, the universality of certain themes: here of the hunter returning home; or of the warriors setting out to war. The work of translation, in other words, serves to give value to the other.

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[7] Patrick Cullinan and Robert Jacob Gordon. *1743-1795: The Man and His Travels at the Cape* (Cape Town: Struik Winchester, 1992).

Second, Gordon acts as the anthropologist who explains apparently abhorrent or senseless customs:

> The Hottentots rub themselves with the fat of animals: cattle, sheep, buffaloes, snakes. By doing this, their limbs become more supple, they sweat less abundantly, their bodies are less exposed to insects, their bare feet are less sensitive to hard stones, they walk longer and are less exhausted from it.[8]

We see that the enlightenment spirit of anthropological curiosity and self criticism, found most obviously in Diderot's Supplement to Bougainville's Voyages, was a central and permeating feature of writing about South Africa as well.

The failure of the multi-cultural in the nineteenth century

Here I must confess to some intellectual ambivalence. On the one hand, we must, surely, celebrate what I would immodestly call a new beginning for South African writing, one with strong multi-cultural interest for us today, one that offers more to black South Africans in giving a more positive and humane version of their past than most colonial writing does.

On the other hand, we need to temper any enthusiasm with the sober recognition that these multi-cultural beginnings never flourished as we might have hoped. We can cite several obvious changes in South African writing and the reasons for them:

1) For many of the early writers, the Xhosa were worthy military opponents, not a defeated and credulous group. As settler culture grew more powerful and the Xhosa were defeated or self-destructed in the mid-nineteenth century, powerful local interests came to represent settler interests as paramount, resenting and repressing outside criticism. Olive Schreiner stands as the first major figure in this tradition.

2) The view of the indigenous groups in these early writings was not stereotyped in racial or physical terms in ways we associate with later vulgarised Darwinian notions. The rise of social Darwinism, in other words, worked against notions of valid cultural difference.

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[8] Ibid., 23.

3) The production of this literature was very much an affair of outsiders in one intellectual tradition. When that tradition changed, and their concerns altered, so did South African critical self-understanding.

4) Multiculturalism, in its positive sense of cultural tolerance, sympathetic treatment of difference, mutual enrichment of cultures, cannot, it seems, be something granted or given by a sympathetic outsider or even insider. Perhaps it has to reflect a balance of interests, or compromise between rival traditions and cultures.

The failure of current criticism

Why has South African literary history paid no attention to these writers? What has happened, surprisingly enough, is that they have passed from the oblivion of racist disregard to being neglected because of more modern anti-colonial prejudices. If the current academic (and here one largely means North American) debate touches on issues of colonialism it assumes a strongly Foucaultian flavour. Two highly influential works by Edward Said and Mary Louise Pratt[9] argue that the Western male Imperial Eye has imposed a discourse, whether of Orientalism or Africanism, on the hapless colonial subject of this commanding gaze. The colonising male subject, it would seem, represents the worst of Western ethnocentrism and arrogance, assuming the right to judge, view, summarise. This intellectual tradition has had a blind eye for the kinds of work I have discussed.

In South Africa, attention has focused, partly as a result of feminist scholarship, on women writers in the nineteenth century and on Olive Schreiner in particular. Schreiner is a considerable and complex figure, but she is very much the intellectual child of her place and times and her work marks the disappearance of, rather than the emergence of, the multi-cultural in South African literary life. (I have focused on Schreiner as the source of much white female racist writing with regard to the sexuality of black women in a seminar paper, "Legislating Women.")

I have argued for a counter-view to this. In my story, there is a steady interplay and mutual influence between Enlightenment thinking and travel, between the anthropological discovery of the Other, and the consequent re-thinking of the self and one's own cultural

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[9] Mary Louise Pratt. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992).

centrality and self-sufficiency. If we are not to accept the grim view that all cultures are imperialistic and exclusive, we need to see how crucial the Enlightenment self-scrutiny through the other is.

Let me make my criticism of Pratt's presuppositions most simply by pointing out that in her index Rousseau appears only once and Diderot not at all —though he is in fact mentioned in an aside on Romanticism.[10] As far as we could see from reading Pratt, the self-critical side of European thinking and writing on colonialism left little or no trace on writers. To accept that would be to distort our understanding of the past and to neglect the long and complex history of multiculturalism in South Africa. In exploring that past, we have work to do together on figures like St Pierre and Diderot, Gordon and Le Vaillant, Rousseau and the now shadowy authors of those neglected novels.

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[10] Ibid., 138.

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