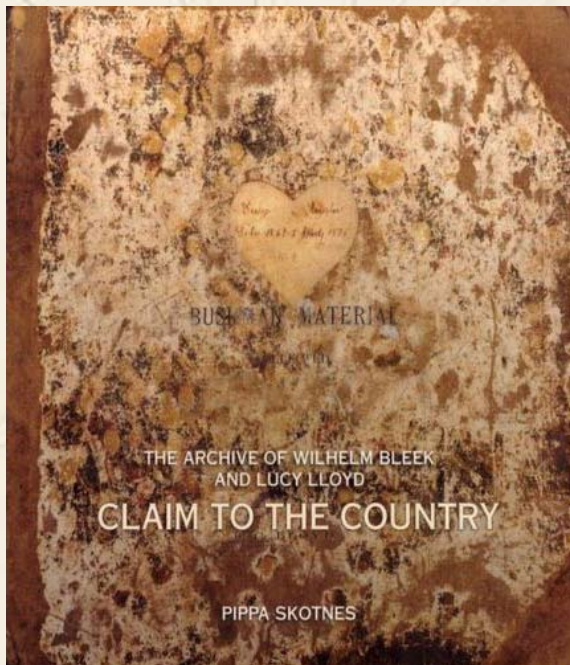


## BOOK REVIEW

### Pippa Skotnes, *Claim to the country: the archive of Wilhelm Bleek and Lucy Lloyd*. Johannesburg and Cape Town, Jacana: 2007.

Reviewed by Robyn Sassen



This is a book about empathy. It is a major achievement in terms of collaborative and research talents as well as being a brilliant and sensitive book design. In its focus and content, it vindicates the controversy garnered by Skotnes in her *Miscast: negotiating the presence of the Bushmen*, an installation and publication dating from 1996. This book focuses not so much on an interpretation of San beliefs or lifestyle, but rather on giving recognition to the research priorities of two very important and perhaps often overlooked figures. Wilhelm Bleek (1827-1875) and his sister-in-law Lucy Lloyd (1834-1914) dedicated years of their lives to documenting and preserving San culture – from its languages to its mythology, philosophies, religion and histories. They did so not by ‘external’ academic research, but by conducting ‘internal’ fieldwork, housing displaced San individuals and gradually gaining insight into their language and culture. In *Claim to the country*, Skotnes proverbially looks over Lloyd’s shoulder and into the material she amassed. She does not do it singled-handedly, but with the scholarly back up of several well-known practitioners in the related fields that manifest empathy for San culture.

During the past year, several significant books have been published on the San; research continues into their history, which remains shrouded in mystery and discrimination, as well as a complex overlaying of the sociology, history, science and psychology of religion and art.<sup>1</sup> Easily the most visually and conceptually exciting of these is *Claim to the country*. More than just an academic exercise of published essays, this book embodies a sensory treat comprising the fruits of close attention to detail in layout and composition on every page of this extraordinary book. A sense of time and magic has been preserved in these pages; this has not been compromised by the presence of digital technology, which has been tamed to yield a mature set of aims applied very successfully to the final product. Patient thoughtfulness lends the work a sense of the preciousness of an artist’s book, even though it is commercially printed.

The book represents the first published collection of translated !xam and !kun texts dictated to Lloyd and Bleek in the nineteenth century by several individuals. This is important as a resource to research in this field, but it also serves as an

extremely valid and rich contextual basis with which to access and engage with the realities of the San communities. No forced iconographic or associative meaning to the translations have been imposed, and while these translations sometimes read with opacity – often single words are explained by complex anecdotes and parables, for instance – they also offer a poignant poetic representation.

The prologue of the book is visual: poetry, objects ranging from envelopes to photographs, water colour drawings by the San contributors to the book and phonetics by Bleek and the Lloyd sisters – Jemima Bleek (1838-1909), Lucy's sister, who was involved to a lesser extent in the project – gives one an empathetic and evocative understanding of the hard work, and the keen intensity of these groundbreaking researchers. More than that, the first couple of pages contain lines from a poem about San identity, written by Skotnes, a version of which appears in an installation in the Origins Centre in Johannesburg. It is about diversity of identity, which beautifully engages not only with myths informing the San people, but real horrors too. 'I am the woman whose starving husband cut open my pregnant belly', one of them says; 'I am the Moon who must not be laughed at', says another. The focus is rich in its diversity, but also in the consistency of the message relayed: it offers a reading of these communities not in the removed and often romanticised colonialist sense, but from a range of angles. Most compelling is the list of people the book remembers – the individuals killed by their harsh circumstances, Wilhelm Bleek, who died of consumption at

the age of 48, the 'foot prints of the porcupine, coming out of and going into my burrow in the darkness of evening' (p 35); and 'the little girl who was killed by her angry father when a baby by bashing her on the ground' (p 32). The list defies logic but offers an unromantic image of people living in extreme circumstances, coloured not only by climate but by racism and persecution.

Textually, this publication is held together by Skotnes's passion for the material – she has been consumed by the archives of Lloyd and Bleek for the last twenty years, and has invested energy in not only documenting them, but in making art that surrounds the people and their history. Her identity as artist as well as art historian infiltrate this book, giving flesh and blood to an old archive, and in the process, contemporary relevance.

'In presenting this archive, I have considered its borders', according to Skotnes (p 42). This describes more than academic decisions, and rests on her intellect as printmaker. It is the photographed borders of the yellowing pages, dog-eared by time and frazzled by handling that form such a beautiful and compelling part of this book and that marry the content and appearance of the work so well, giving a sense of the smell, feel and taste of the archival material.

Furthermore, the book is collaborative. Skotnes blends the writings of scholars associated with the field from diverse specialisations, commenting that the research contributes

to the archive, enriching its context and to the ability of contemporary readers to engage with more sensitivity to the complexity of the San. Contributors to the book who have been equally passionate in investing their energies in researching specialised aspects of San culture, include Cognitive Archaeologist David Lewis-Williams, who claims the title Senior Mentor at the Rock Art Research Institute at Wits University, to Anthony Traill, a former Linguistics professor at Wits University, to San-specialist archaeologist, Anne Solomon, as well as Eustacia Riley, a researcher in the Lucy Lloyd Archive, Resource and Exhibition Centre, in Cape Town.

So, this is a history book. It is a book of ancient geographies. It is a book of poems and of linguistics. It is a book in which the author muses about the woman central to much of the story, yet it is not a feminist account, but rather a prism through which Skotnes looks at Lloyd and Lloyd looks at people of this country and their stories and histories. Above all, it is a magnificent achievement, from a visual and design perspective as well as an academic one.

## Note

- 1 These include publications as diverse as Hitchcock, R, Ikeya, K, Biesele, M and Lee, RB (eds). 2006 *Updating the San: image and reality of an African people in the 21st century*. Japan: National Museum of Ethnology; and Robbins, D. 2007. *On the bridge of goodbye: the story of South Africa's discarded San soldiers*. Johannesburg/Cape Town: Jonathan Ball.

1. *Bemba ya, 'nuciro me ta*

2. *Uka 'nyibbu + ma ya'*

Meaning  
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