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## A politics of reminding: Khoisan resurgence and environmental justice in South Africa's Sarah Baartman district

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### ABSTRACT

In the wake of colonial fragmentation and genocide, Indigenous 'Khoisan resurgence' movements in South Africa have mobilised subversive forms of authenticity, including heteroglossic and inventive translanguaging from fragments of Khoekhoegowab. In our analysis of video ethnographic texts produced in collaboration with the Gamtkwa Khoisan Council (GKC) in Hankey, the birthplace of Sarah Baartman, we explore how memory, language politics, and environmental activism are interwoven in acts of linguistic citizenship that constitute the 'rememorying' of a history that has remained persistently obscured. We argue that rememorying advances a politics of reminding which counters the Rainbow Nation's institutionalised politics of forgetting, as well as anthropological accounts that consider Indigenous activist invocations of history as merely 'therapeutic'. Through an engagement with the memory activism of the GKC, we identify how reconstructing word-histories, reliving historical traumas, retelling histories of sites of memory, seeing oneself mirrored in one's ancestors, and the nexus of land, memory, and time form the basis for shared meaning-making, bringing impetus, focus, and intergenerational continuity to struggles for environmental and land justice.

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In the lead-up to a famous recent example of resistance to fossil fuel extraction, the Standing Rock Sioux Tribal Council met representatives of the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) project for the first time in September 2014 (Estes, 2019, p. 41). Present at this meeting was Phyllis Young, a veteran since the 1970s of Red Power and Indigenous rights movements.

Young stated:

We are the protectors of our nation, of Oceti Sakowin, the Seven Council Fires. *Know who we are.* [...] We know all the tricks of the wasicu [colonizer's] world ... Our young people have

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mastered it. I have mastered your language. [...] But I also know the genetic psyche. And I also have the collective memory of the damages that have occurred to my people. And I will never submit to any pipeline to go through my homeland. Mitayuke Oyasin! (2019, p. 46, emphasis original)

Language politics, memory, and land protection are inseparable in Young's statement. The declarative phrase *Mitayuke Oyasin* means 'all my relations' and refers to the human and nonhuman world, including the Missouri River threatened by oil pollution (Estes, 2019, p. 15). In using this and other elements of Lakota language and culture in her address, Young indexes an Indigenous nation with a collective memory of harm at the hands of settlers, passed down through an inherited 'psyche'. In *reminding* her audience of the past in the present, she promises to guard the future of her people and the Missouri River.

A *politics of reminding* is frequently mobilised by Indigenous activists and their allies in struggles for land and environmental justice in ways not often explored in the scholarship on memory and memorialisation. Memorialisation often prioritises the idealised past of a socially powerful group, whose 'memory' preserves their hegemony. In this article, we present a case study of effective Indigenous land and environmental justice activism in South Africa that mobilises *reminding as a creative semiotic act* working to shape a collectivity in explicit resistance to South Africa's post-apartheid 'politics of forgetting' (Cloete, 2015, p. 112). We theorise this reminding as a form of 'linguistic citizenship' (Stroud, 2001, 2018) drawing on non-arbitrary sets of semiotic resources to articulate speakers as bearers of rights. We draw attention to how these acts connect people to specific pieces of land, and locate them in a shared historical narrative.

Indigenous experience is not universalisable, and in starting our argument with an example of Lakota activism we do not imply that concepts and categories from one context always travel well to another. In the next section, we briefly introduce the 'Khoisan resurgence' in the South African context, and the story of Sarah Baartman in the Gamtoos River Valley, before laying out the relevant scholarship on collective remembering and Indigenous mobilisation of memory as a critique of colonial modernity. We then present linguistic citizenship as a useful lens through which to engage with Indigenous activism and memory work, before laying out our analysis of the activism of the Gamtkwa Khoisan Council. In the conclusion, we connect the linguistic citizenship of a politics of reminding to decolonial land protection.

## From Graaff-Reinet to the Gamtoos River Valley

*Ilizwi Lenyaniso Lomhlaba* (the 'true voice of the land' in isiXhosa) is a digital media initiative hosted by the Support Centre for Land Change (SCLC) in Graaff-Reinet in the Eastern Cape Karoo in South Africa. Our mission, through storytelling, is to promote land and environmental justice, securing dignity for our region's marginalised and landless people. Our 'crew' includes people who identify as Khoisan and as 'Coloured', as well as isiXhosa-speaking Black and English-speaking white South Africans. But what does it mean to identify as Khoisan? The term 'Khoisan' is an etic and colonial portmanteau that conflates Khoe and San people, cultures, and languages. It has, however, widely been appropriated as an emic term in Khoisan revivalism and in the Afrikaaps language movement (Alim et al., 2021; Brown & Deumert, 2017). While South Africa is home to many

indigenous groups, it is generally agreed that Khoisan people were the ‘first nations’ of the region, though this recognition is not attached to a special status, as South Africa has not ratified ILO Convention 169<sup>1</sup> (Barnard, 2004, p. 18). Khoe and San peoples were to varying extents annihilated by the forces of colonialism and apartheid. Not at first classified as human by Linnaeus, they were placed right at the bottom of the racial hierarchy (Abrahams, 1994, p. 7). Linguistically, isolated groups in the Northern Cape are first language speakers of Khoekhoegowab or Nama, while!Xun and Khwe are spoken by migrants from Botswana and Namibia (Barnabas & Miya, 2019). Identifying as Khoisan is currently undergoing a ‘resurgence’ (Brown & Deumert, 2017) among ‘Coloured’ people who explore their heritage, engage with a brutalised history, and learn elements of Khoekhoegowab.

Our project critically engaged with the racialised dynamics of environmental activism. White people still hold disproportionate economic and symbolic power in South Africa, which is apparent both in pro-extraction and environmentalist discourses (see Burnett, 2019). ‘Voice’ in activism and media production is also inflected through these unequal power relations (Walsh & Burnett, 2022) and Indigenous groups are almost completely marginalised in debates about economic development and the environment. In order to investigate these dynamics at a local level, we conducted video ethnographic fieldwork in the small town of Hankey, the birthplace and burial site of Sarah Baartman (1789–1815) in the lush Gamtoos Valley, 300 km from Graaff-Reinet. Baartman, a beautifully curvaceous Khoe woman paraded before the prurient European gaze while alive, and exhibited as an object in a Paris museum post-mortem (Baderon, 2011), was for many years known by a moniker that combines the name of a beautiful goddess with a racial slur, as the ‘Hottentot Venus’ (Magubane, 2001). Her return to Hankey in 2002 made international headlines, providing impetus to Khoisan resurgence in the area. In 2015, the district municipality in which Hankey and Graaff-Reinet are located was named for her. The Gamtkwa Khoisan Council (GKC), the elected representative body of the Khoisan of the Kouga region,<sup>2</sup> is based in Hankey, and they focused their successful campaign to prevent the development of a nuclear power station in the area on the adverse impact it would have on heritage sites, including Baartman’s grave (Hlangani, 2019). Memory and memorialisation are thus tightly imbricated in GKC’s environmental resistance.

### **Indigeneity, memory and language: constructing and contesting the nation**

Settler colonial states are built on foundations of dehumanisation, displacement, and genocide. Memory in the postcolony thus often involves a ‘dis-membering’ of the original crimes and their victims, which counter-narratives ‘re-member’ (Phillips, 2012). Colonial crimes may be prominently detailed in historical records, and yet still be caught up in cycles of remembering and forgetting that enable the production of an innocent white settler subject position (Haebich, 2011). Saying ‘sorry’ for genocide and land theft, as Sara Ahmed (2008) shows, may even be integrated into white national pride as ‘good feeling’. Reclaiming counter-hegemonic, decolonial memory is a kind of ‘memory activism’ (Gutman, 2017). A recent example in Aotearoa New Zealand analysed by Kidman and O’Malley (2020) saw the official narrative of clashes between Maori and British imperial troops challenged by schoolchildren. The scholars draw on Marianne Hirsch’s definition

of 'postmemory' as the behaviours, narratives, and other cultural artefacts that descendants of Holocaust survivors grow up with and feel so 'deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right' (Hirsch, 2008, p. 107). The Aotearoan schoolchildren belong to 'a postmemory generation who sought to reclaim stories and memories that they feared would be lost' (Kidman & O'Malley, 2020, p. 547). In postcolonial settler societies, these 'memories' can thus never be straightforward representations of the past.

Collective remembering is 'a rhetorical accomplishment which not only constructs a "common past" but also presupposes a common/singular people who experienced this past' (Richardson & Milani, 2022). In South Africa, the Khoisan 'people' experienced a genocide both in physical and cultural terms, where survivors were forced to assimilate to 'Coloured' identity (Adhikari, 2011). The customary inverted commas around 'Coloured' index the contested status of this term, signifying its lack of stable or agreed-upon content (Cloete, 2015, p. 31). While a nascent 'Coloured' identity has been identified as emerging in the late nineteenth century (Adhikari, 2004, p. 167) it was the mid-twentieth century apartheid engineering of 'Coloured' as a 'negative' racial identity, grouping together all people who did not clearly belong in other categories, that endures (Brown & Deumert, 2017, p. 574). Encompassing the descendants of Malay slaves, people of ostensibly 'mixed' race, as well as the Khoisan people, the attachment through race-biological 'science' of degeneracy and 'Creole' status to the category of 'Coloured' served (among other dehumanising purposes) to frustrate any claims to indigeneity that might be available through Indigenous identity (Erasmus, 2011, p. 647). Given the violent white supremacist finality of these fragmentations, the question thus arises of how 'collective remembering' could ever get started. A further complicating factor is that the official story of the Khoisan – the potential elements of collective memory – was mostly told by settler scholars. Celebrated linguist Wilhelm Bleek for example attempted to 'civilise' the Khoisan imagination before committing it to paper, meaning that what was recorded was distorted by a restrictive European cultural politics (Wittenberg, 2012). Casts of 'Bushmen' as physical types locked in historical dioramas gave no indication of these people's resistance, dynamism, or agency (Davison, 1998, pp. 143–144). Khoisan people were treated as anthropological and linguistic curiosities even by supposedly sympathetic scholars, who spoke on their behalf, denying them the 'authority of cultural voice' (Abrahams, 1994, p. 3).

The end of apartheid saw a significant struggle over 'Coloured' identity, with some advocating for identification with a slave past, some for an anti-racist universalism, and a small group advocating for the 'resurgence' or 'revival' of Khoisan identity (Adhikari, 2004, p. 170). This took place in the context of a narrow focus on the crimes of the twentieth century, and the elision of earlier genocide and slavery, in 'major memory-making moments' such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Cloete, 2015, p. 59). The founding events of the 'New' South Africa relegated most of the colonial era before apartheid to the mists of time, and thus beyond the reach of justice. The new coat of arms for a non-racial South Africa uses a Khoisan language not spoken in the country (!Xam) for its motto: '!Ke e: /xarra//ke' ('Diverse people unite'). Barnard (2004, p. 19) makes the wry observation that for the new regime Khoisan people were 'safe to think with'. Whereas San and Nama people in Botswana and Namibia demand recognition, rights and reparations from the state, in South Africa

the Khoisan is an autochthonous avatar invoked by many including white environmentalists (Burnett, 2019), but lacking a clear political voice.

Khoisan erasure has been resisted on a number of fronts. The Conference on Khoisan Identities and Cultural Heritage at the University of the Western Cape in 1997 reconstituted 11 historical clans, drawing on an “eclectic” repertoire of signs, inventing tradition in the process of performance’ in a joyful celebration that established ‘ancestral connections to a pre-colonial past’ (Brown & Deumert, 2017, p. 577). This element of creativity and imagination in (re)constructing ‘Coloured’ memory has also been noted by Cloete (2015) who shows how ‘unconventional’ memory locations – including fiction and dramatic performance – fill some of the gaps in the archives left by the ‘violence, oppression and brutality’ of slavery (2015, p. 110). In literary texts, Morrison’s (1987) notion of ‘rememory’ has been invoked by Gqola (2010) as a way of ‘filling in, recasting, relooking, reformulating (both of memory and history) outside historiography’ (2010, p. 8). Cloete, Gqola and Morrison probe the complexities of telling the ‘truth’ about slavery, where what is preserved in the official record is often inadequate and history must be ‘rememoried’ in order for the truth to be known (see also Dlakavu, 2021). In the case of the truth about Khoisan history, ‘memory’ must rely on similar imaginative resources in order to oppose what Verbuyst (2021, p. 68) calls the ‘extinction discourse [...] the commonplace belief that the Khoisan have ceased being a distinct collective as a result of their decimation and dispossession by colonial aggressors, and their assimilation as coloureds through a protracted process of bureaucratic erasure’. In the face of the sheer scale of colonial and postcolonial genocidal erasures, the creative ‘filling in’ of rememory is both justified and necessary.

This inventiveness extends to efforts to learn the Khoekhoegowab language. Though the reasons for speaking it are articulated within a decolonising epistemology (Barnabas & Miya, 2019, p. 94) precolonial language purity is not a common aim. The language practices of learners tend to be profoundly heteroglossic, mobilising the ‘word-sound-power’ of language fragments (Brown & Deumert, 2017, pp. 584–590) interpellating group members into a Khoisan speech community. This linguistic creativity is a source of some controversy. The social media storm around the ‘incoherence’ of language activist Bradley van Sitters’ Khoekhoegowab in Parliament for the State of the Nation address in June 2019, for example, revealed tensions between ‘essentialist and reproductive’ theories of culture (Barnabas & Miya, 2019, p. 100). Verbuyst (2021, p. 314) argues that van Sitters’ parliamentary performance was in fact ‘all the more authentic as an act of Khoisan revivalism’ because of its ‘inaccuracy’.

The ‘subversive authenticity’ of the Khoisan resurgence comes from people’s ongoing and creative cultural expression, and can be contrasted to the ‘repressive authenticity’ of the Khoisan extinction discourse (Verbuyst, 2021, p. 320). If the only ‘authentic’ Khoisan were wiped out by the colonisers, then there are no collective memories, and no existing nation to reconstitute. Brown and Deumert (2017, p. 588) similarly observe that ‘[purity] and unification, the hallmarks of European concepts of nationalism, give way to respect for, and acceptance of, diversity and practices which allow for various forms of bricolage, heteroglossia and translanguaging’. They argue that the point of resurgence is not to recreate a long-lost past, but to form an Indigenous future based on a language activism that is ‘fundamentally open, constantly changing and in-motion’ (2017, p. 591). In the next

section, we connect this openness and future focus to the concept of linguistic citizenship.

### Linguistic citizenship in the postcolony

Stroud (2001, 2018) proposes ‘linguistic citizenship’ (LC) as a decolonial paradigm for thinking linguistic (and other social) difference. Linguistics is historically complicit in ‘constraining and containing the diversity of others’ (Stroud, 2018, p. 34) and he argues that postcolonial language policy continues the top-down imposition of metropolitan languages, now repurposed for indigenous languages (Stroud, 2001, p. 343). These policies draw on similar ‘social ideologies, class differences and standard/non-standard distinctions that led to the oppression of these languages and the hierarchisation of their speakers in the first place’ (Stroud, 2018, p. 20). LC instead works from the bottom up, constructing ‘speakers themselves [as exercising] control over their language, deciding what languages are, and what they may mean’ (Stroud, 2001, p. 353).

Building on Nancy Fraser’s (1995) distinction between a politics of recognition and a politics of transformation, LC critically interrogates the historical, sociopolitical and economic construction of languages in a transformative conceptualisation (Stroud, 2018, p. 20). LC is thus elementary to political contestations of social vision, and has a far broader application than language policy alone. Fraser’s notion of bivalency – that material inequalities and cultural recognitions are ‘primary and co-original’ (Fraser, 1995, p. 85) and not indirect effects of each other – connects the formation of the linguistic collectivity to consciousness of its material entitlements. In interpreting the LC of a collectivity, the ways its members constitute themselves and others as having rights are considered ‘acts of citizenship’ (Stroud, 2018, p. 21). Acts of linguistic citizenship are not limited to verbal codes, and may include a range of meaning-making practices and semiotic modes (2018, p. 22).

LC centres creative articulations and contestations of social vision. In the process of constructing each other as holders of rights, ‘a better world’ (2018, p. 23) as yet unrealised is prefigured. These foreshadowings of a future utopia in the present frequently take on aesthetic forms, and generate ‘euphoric resonances of subjectively experienced events or states’ (2018, p. 23). Exercising LC thus exceeds the rational or the objectively observable, working aesthetically and affectively to bind social groups.

These dynamics – interpersonal cohesion around a set of semiotic resources that locate a collectivity in time and place – are clearly highly salient to Khoisan activism. But how do they interrelate with each other? In the next section, we present a case study of the linguistic citizenship of the Gamtkwa Khoisan Council, showing how language and other forms of semiosis interact with memory, history, and storytelling to produce entitlements to place, and to unite people around a shared vision for the future.

### Analysis

Members of the *Ilizwi Lenyaniso Lomhlaba* co-creator collective travelled from Graaff-Reinet to Hankey to conduct a video ethnography of our engagement with the GKC in November 2019. We met with their head, Chief Hester Booysen, chairperson Cynthia

August, and council members Johannes Baartman (who was introduced as a relative of Sarah Baartman) and Jozef Prins, as well other community members. Our visit was facilitated by senior Inqua headman Joey Dearling from Graaff-Reinet, who participated in proceedings. We worked together on thematising and translating these video texts, paying close attention to multimodal and embodied instances of meaning-making. We will present this analysis in five parts: word-histories, telling trauma, place-histories, Khoisan woman body pride, and the land-memory-time nexus. We present our transcripts in English translation. Unmarked text was spoken in Afrikaans, and **bold text** in English. *Italics* are used for untranslated words in Khoekhoegowab or Afrikaans. Ellipsis and author commentary are indicated in square brackets.

### Word-histories

Soon after we arrive, Chief Hester Booysen ('Chief Hettie') shows us the notes she uses to educate school groups about the history of South Africa. These contain a list of racial slurs<sup>3</sup>, and how they were used to categorise people.

- (1) Look, here it is ... [...] everything about where we come from. What did these names mean? We hear of *Hotnots*, so we were *Hotnots*. And then it was *kaffirs* for the Blacks, '*Boere*' for the whites, and the *Slamse* were slaves. [...] If they say to you 'you *Hotnot!*' then you would know it means 'you idiot'.

The power of names to misrecognise people was later linked to a reclamation of real names, names connected to dignity and entitlement. Importantly, misnaming was constructed not just as racist but as incompetent. Headman Joey Dearling explained why English historians called a famous seventeenth-century Khoe leader and translator 'Harry the Beachwalker':

- (2) Now if English people say to you, you're rubbish, they say '**every Dick, Tom and Harry**'. So they gave him the name Harry the Beachwalker – that man's name was *Autshumao!* But they could not pronounce it!

The real origins of the H – slur as told by Chief Hettie trace similar themes of settler incomprehension, incompetence and misrecognition:

- (3) *H* – comes from *hautitau*. What is *hautitau*? ... It's **praise** or **worship** that the Khoisan did during the full moon. [...] Every full moon the Khoisan in the whole of South Africa prayed to the Lord the whole night. And he is the Almighty Creator *Tsui-Goab* [...] and as they prayed to Him, they raised their hands, all through the night all the Khoisan would pray. And so the settlers called them moon-worshippers!

In this extract, Chief Hettie mobilises an etymological argument to assert a precolonial Khoisan monotheism not dissimilar to the Christianity practiced by GKC members. This act of linguistic citizenship is simultaneously an act of re-remembering a lost community, finding solidarity and pride in the origins of a slur. What to settlers is incomprehensible and alien is revealed as a sacred rite. To turn an act of worship into a term of derision reflects the moral degeneracy of the colonisers, while Khoisan *hautitau* is beautiful and civilised. While the origins of the slur are explained, the word itself is not reappropriated. Similarly, as is typical of Khoisan resurgence movements, the term 'Coloured' is rejected as a coinage exemplary of a history of misrecognition. As Chief Hettie (4) and Headman Joey (5) explain:



- (4) 'Coloured' is not a nation, they're just a 'Coloured' [...] But the Blacks know they are Bantu, Xhosas, Zulus, and so on, they know their nations, and the whites know they are English, Scottish, and so on. [...] Who made us 'Coloureds'? A 'Coloured' is made.
- (5) I always say to people I am not a 'Coloured'. [...] The Population Registration Act came and made me into a Coloured! I am a Khoisan. I am a Khoisan by birth, it is my birth right.

While an appeal to the status of a 'nation' and of a cultural identity as a 'birth right' is open to the critique of exclusionism and essentialism (see Adhikari, 2004, p. 177) we read these statements primarily as attempts to dislocate a particularly odious piece of apartheid social engineering. That these gestures could open up room for a transformative politics will become clearer as we analyse the other themes.

### Telling trauma

The history of the Khoisan as a group of peoples repeatedly uprooted was related both in the broad sweep of history, and in a number of specific testimonies from members of the GKC. Nearly every member of the council had an apartheid-era displacement story to tell. One of the most powerful accounts was given by Sabine Bloemetjie, a woman in her late 70s, of a series of events from when she was five years old:

- (6) Then one day a whole group of *Boere* came [...] they wore khaki clothes and were carrying these guns. They came with their guns and said to my grandfather: 'You goddamned *H-*, you must take this goddamned lot [their livestock] butcher it, and feed on it'! Nothing must be left here! Oooh! People were scurrying, us children were hiding behind our parents, as he pointed the gun at us. [...] Then people started wailing! We didn't know what was happening, but what was said has stuck in my head. The aunty came from that side and said, 'Oh Lord, they took my small child and dashed her head [...] on the ground!'. [her voice breaks and she is crying] Oh people it was ugly how those people went on. Our people took us children [...] to a place where we could build again, and live.

She later comments that she remembers that the *Boere* came from 'the AWB' – the neo-Nazi Afrikaner Resistance Movement (*Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging*). As this organisation only came into being in the early 1970s, and the events she relates took place in the 1950s, it is possible that the men in khaki were apartheid police, or the *Ossewa Brandwag* (an Afrikaner pro-Nazi militia dissolved in 1952). Another possibility, considering she does not claim to have seen the child's murder herself, is that her testimony is an aggregation of forced removals experienced first-hand, and stories of generations of forced removals, murders, and other atrocities passed on by elders in the form of stories, behaviours, and images, and is thus an example of postmemory (Hirsch, 2008).

Experiences of distinct historical traumas are woven together into a single story of dis-possession by Cynthia August (7) and then later Chief Hettie (8):

- (7) It's heart-breaking to see [...] how the Khoekhoe [...] started in South Africa, but somewhere in history over 200 years ago we just disappeared in the middle. We were made to disappear. [...] People infiltrated from the north and from the west and from the east, and drove us from our places. And it's time we claimed back what belongs to us.
- (8) The whole of South Africa belongs to the Khoe, no matter what people tell you. When the Blacks came over the borders, they killed our great-grandfathers and took the women and children, and they coloured them [...] And then the whites, the *Boere*, came over the water with the *S-* as slaves [...]. And then they did the same thing: they killed the men and took the women and children, and then they coloured us. They made us 'Coloureds'. [...] If we can just remember that! [...] This land is a Khoisan land!

The idea that intruders ‘infiltrated’ the historical Khoisan ‘nation’ serves as a potential basis for the exclusionary, zero-sum politics of autochthony (see Geschiere & Nyamnjoh, 2000). This feature of Khoisan activism has frequently engendered scholarly discomfort with its ‘retrograde politics’ (Verbuyst, 2021, p. 22). What cannot, however, be forgotten is that the broad outlines of this story, and the historical events being related, describe historical injustice and trauma on an almost unimaginable scale. Successive waves of displacement are creatively narrativised by postmemory generations as ‘rememories’ of trauma no less true merely because they exist outside of historiography. The category of ‘Coloured’ was a discursive innovation that worked to foreclose connections to ancestral lands, and it is, therefore, politically vital that GKC leaders *remind* their members of its bivalency (Fraser, 1995): that being made ‘Coloured’ is both culturally ‘a fabrication’ and, materially, an alienation from one’s birth-right: the land.

There are, furthermore, nuances in the way the GKC presents race and identity that deserve closer attention. The process of ‘colouring’ does not treat white as an unmarked racial identity (as per Dyer, 1997) nor proximity to whiteness as desirable. The historical Others who ‘coloured’ the Khoisan through murder and rape included Black and white people. Chief Hettie points out that in her family there are dark-skinned and light-skinned people, and she is ‘one of the Blacks’. The woman quoted in extract (6) also makes it clear that the people removed from the land were Khoisan and Xhosa who ‘ate from the same bowls’. When Chief Hettie challenges the *Ilizwi Lenyaniso Lomhlaba* crew to accept their Khoisan identity, everyone present nods and agrees, including those who identify as Xhosa.<sup>5</sup> This tension does not go unnoticed. One of the isiXhosa-speaking *Ilizwi* crew, Zamuxolo Matha, remarks, to general agreement:

- (9) The cultures of the Xhosa and the Khoe are almost the same ... [...] the things we do on the land and the things we do on the water [...] our connections to nature are the same, and that’s why we protect it.

In an extended section of our visit, GKC chairperson Cynthia August, who worked as a teacher before pursuing a career in local government, shows us the different orthographic conventions of isiXhosa and Khoekhoegowab, and pronounces the sounds (the lateral and palatal clicks, the uvular fricatives) and how they are indicated with various punctuation marks or letters. Her emphasis is on how closely the languages are connected. She concludes:

- (10) We were divided into race groups. And that is wrong, people! We mustn’t divide ourselves by race, or let the government tell us who we are. [...] **History is about the past, the present, and the future: there is no getting away from that.** Children you must take your future in your hands.

This statement, immediately preceded by a discussion of phonology and orthography, is another paradigmatic example of LC in action: a social collectivity asserting its rights to determine their future bottom-up, and not see it imposed top-down, while marshalling specific semiotic resources in a shared aesthetic and affective experience. Concerns about exclusion in Khoisan resurgence movements (where Black people without ‘Coloured’ experience are unwelcome, see Verbuyst, 2021, p. 348) and the politics of autochthony might thus be complicated by attention to the acceptance of shared futures and entitlements *across* lines of supposed ethnic difference.



**Figure 1.** Chief Hettie Booyesen narrates the story of Philip's Tunnel.

### **Place-histories**

Chief Hettie guided us on a brief outing to Philip's Tunnel, a national monument close to Hankey town centre. On our way to the tunnel, she showed us the borders of her family's historical land. Much of it was expropriated under apartheid, and the buildings destroyed. She showed us where her family's houses used to be. She explained that some land was returned in a post-apartheid land claim, and that she now rents it out to white farmers who are often late with their payments. With pride in her voice, she explains that strawberries and other fruit from this valley are exported to all corners of the globe.

At Philip's Tunnel, we see a cool, and dark opening in a mountainside extending for about 230 metres to the other side of the ridge, where water from the Gamtoos River once flowed to the fertile farmlands we have just crossed. We film the official information sign set up at the tunnel, while Chief Hettie tells us the story (Figure 1).

The sign consists of a list of bullet points detailing the history of irrigation in the Gamtoos Valley. Each point foregrounds the agency of a white missionary or engineer, for example:

- (11) **In April 1843 William Philip, son of Dr John Philip of the London Missionary Society (LMS) commenced the digging of an irrigation tunnel between the farms Vensterhoek and Backhouse Hoek near Hankey. This was to be the first irrigation tunnel in South Africa and later to be declared a national monument.**

While Chief Hettie addresses similar geographical and agricultural themes in her account of the digging of the tunnel, there are significant differences between the accounts. SCLC project coordinator Neville van Rooy took a small packet of soil from the tunnel as a memento, and he engaged in an overlapping dialogue with Chief Hettie:

- (12) Chief Hettie: Now you have seen some of the loveliest history of South Africa. This tunnel is the only tunnel in South Africa that was made by hand [...] And this tunnel and the channels provided the farms with water. [...]  
Neville van Rooy: I am taking this clay as a reminder of this—  
CH and NvR overlapping: —the only tunnel in South Africa made by hand by our Khoisan people—  
CH: —with hands is important, listen, the only one!

Whereas the information board asserts that it was William Phillip who ‘commenced the digging’ (it is unlikely he ever lifted a shovel; see Oberholster, 1972) Chief Hettie centres the workers who actually dug the tunnel, most of it through solid rock with chisels, picks and shovels. And whereas the information board draws attention to its status as the *first* irrigation tunnel in a long line of (white, colonial) interventions in the area, Chief Hettie asserts very pointedly that it is, to this day, the *only* tunnel built in this way. She thus resignifies the monument as a unique and lasting Khoisan achievement, while the official history, ignoring labour entirely, locates it as the beginning of European civil engineering. Her interaction with this site of memory *resists* the colonial memorialisation in subtle but powerful ways. As Cloete (2015, p. 164) has argued, sites of memory may powerfully evoke current accountability and the enjoyment of the fruits of injustice; they may also work to sever their connections with the present, easing modern consciences by relegating colonial crimes to an eternal past. Chief Hettie’s intervention in presenting Philip’s Tunnel as she does orients the same site and the same basic facts in a very different narrative. In her broader presentation of the Gamtoos Valley, she can take pride in the important role that it plays in the global fruit trade, despite the domination of this market by white farmers. They can only do what they do, after all, because she allows them to rent her land, because of the historical labour of subjugated people, and because of the feats of engineering her people have accomplished that made fruit farming possible.

### ***Khoisan woman body pride***

The exhibition space at the GKC has a framed picture of Sarah Baartman, and when one of the authors, who is proud of her voluptuously curvy body filmed the image she narrated, warmly, ‘**Look guys there’s Tahn-dee!**’ in reference to herself: as if she was looking in a mirror. Later, Chief Hettie twice points out that the burial of Sarah Baartman in Hankey in 2002 was her first conscientisation of being a Khoisan woman. A specific connection emerges in her narrative, tracing the effect of this consciousness on her own body:

- (13) If you know where you come from, you know who you are. And then you don’t allow people to mess you around. [...] In the past, if somebody said to me, ‘Look at you, who do you think you are? Look at your this and this and this ...’ [meaningful grin]. But I did not know who I was. So I got angry. [...] However, when I found out who I was, where I came from [...] from that moment if they say the woman holds herself like this, or look at her this or this [posing, touching her midriff and hips] I say ‘Really?’ [haughty expression]. Now I make them nauseous! They won’t mess with me again. But you have to know who you are!

As Chief Hettie speaks, her posture changes, and she inhabits her body in a different way. Knowledge of the shameful display of the ‘H – Venus’ has become a source of pride. While the display of an image of a naked Sarah Baartman at the GKC arguably repeats her exposure and sustains the denial of her privacy (see Baderoon, 2011) in this moment we see her image reclaimed as a feminist ‘epicentre of agency’ (Gqola, 2008) for both Tahn-dee and Chief Hettie who see themselves mirrored in the figure of Baartman. On the occasion of her reburial and afterwards, Baartman is remembered not primarily as a victim but as a defiant and difficult woman, foreshadowing powerful women to come. Her story is a reminder of the agency of voluptuous Khoisan women, and thus prefigures their future role in liberating South Africa. Attempts to attach shame to ‘Coloured’ identity

(see Cloete, 2015, pp. 9–11) on a number of pretexts are here counteracted through pride in an Indigenous feminine icon.

### **Land, memory and time**

Land protection from environmental devastation was articulated as continuous with the preservation of local sites of memory by the GKC. Though environmental protection was thematised explicitly, we were struck by how central grave sites, memorials, and as yet undiscovered Khoisan artefacts were to resisting irresponsible development. Land protection was described in the following terms by Cynthia August:

- (14) Sarah Baartman was born there underneath the cliff, and her grave is just below the train tracks. Nobody is going to say to me they won't find artefacts here, or the remains of our people. [...] There are the graves of John Philip and William Hankey, the founders of this town, the missionaries. I tend those graves as if they belonged to my father and grandfather. If I see there is a bulldozer or something else there, or they are posting a notice, I go stand there. **'Yes lady, what can I do for you?' I say I am coming to check on you sweetheart. 'For what?' I say: 'The graves. You can run right next to them, but you are not going to run over them'.**

In earlier statements, Cynthia August explicitly connected her rootedness in her Khoisan identity to her ability to advocate for the land. She had also observed earlier (in extract 10) that 'History is about the past, the present, and the future: there is no getting away from that'. What is interesting here is that it is memory itself, of specifically located connections between the land and the ancestors that orients her engagement as a citizen with encroaching bulldozers and other developmental plans. Even white missionaries benefit from her protection. To again invoke a Lakota example: when the earth cradles the bones of the ancestors, 'history is the land itself' (Estes, 2019, p. 47). The past is present in the land, and its future is intimately tied to their descendants in the Gamtoos Valley through persistent acts of reminding, which work to locate them on the land, and envision a future in which their inclusion as full citizens has been achieved.

### **Discussion: language, affect, and 'therapeutic' history**

In the extracts above, English is the language of administrative or political engagement and Afrikaans is the most common code, while Khoekhoegowab words and sounds index the 'subversive authenticity' (Verbuyst, 2021) of a group in the process of defining a way of creating meaning that 'de-links the chains of hegemonic thought about language, its institutions and their history' (Stroud, 2018, p. 34). The eternal and essential truths of *Tsui-Goab* and the content of the Khoekhoegowab hymn; the real story of *Autshumao*, and the greeting (used by Cynthia August) '*Gâi-tsēs*' are elements of a performance of Khoisanness that are used strategically in order to articulate connection to the Gamtoos Valley, its history, and its future. These fragments (like Philip's tunnel itself, and the artefacts in the GKC exhibition) are the vital evidence that reminds people of their entitlements as a collectivity. Language, memory, and land protection are thus intimately interwoven.

Extensive energy is invested in forming this collectivity through sharing anger, trauma, and joy. When Cynthia August tells us about damage done to Sarah Baartman's grave by an irresponsible contractor, she shakes and moans in rage for nearly a minute before she

can talk. Articulations of pain ‘are the condition for the formation of a “we”, made up of different stories of pain that cannot be reduced to a ground, identity or sameness’ (Ahmed, 2004, p. 174). The formation of this ‘we’ in the wake of an Indigenous genocide that tried to erase all memory means that the songs and stories that now bind people together invoke a sense of togetherness, and the euphoria of discovering a lost community.

Can we think of these stories as ‘history’? Verbuyst (2021) argues that Khoisan activists produce ‘therapeutic history’ – a term coined to describe how Indigenous narratives judge the truth about the past by ‘the subjective experience of group affirmation’ (Niezen, 2009, p. 149) rather than an openness to critique or correction. Therapeutic history may enable political claim-staking, it is argued, but it is a shaky basis for knowledge production.

We assert that the GKC make important contributions to knowledge production that go far beyond ‘therapy’. These stories abstract from and theorise the past in order to focus political engagement on present entitlements; they do not merely affirm or comfort. They are often indictments of past gullibility or indifference, and a spur to conscientisation. Telling them is often retraumatising. But, perhaps most importantly, their truths are sometimes a better reflection of history, as we saw at Philip’s Tunnel, where the history written by ‘official’ historians falls far short of Chief Hettie’s rigour. If monument builders get away with writing that William Philip ‘commenced the digging’ of a tunnel without mentioning the people who did the actual digging, what reason do we have to believe that Chief Hettie is not a more trustworthy and honest historian? Nick Estes echoes Marx when he writes that traditional historians have ‘merely interpreted the past’ while

Radical Indigenous historians and Indigenous knowledge-keepers aim to change the colonial present, and to imagine a decolonial future by reconnecting to Indigenous places and histories. For this to occur, those suppressed practices must make a crack in history. (Estes, 2019, p. 18)

## Conclusion

Linguistic citizenship is a productive frame through which to read the activism of the GKC. *Reminding* in the context of South Africa’s politics of forgetting is an act of LC that ‘makes cracks’ in history. What is at stake in telling this history is land. Chief Hettie’s cartography of the Gamtoos Valley and the ancestral bones – whether Sarah Baartman’s or John Philip’s – anchor people and their futures to the land. This future is part of the ‘utopian surplus’ dynamic of LC, which is often articulated as tending towards conviviality, prefiguring inclusive societies. Without these things, clearly, social visions would not count as ‘better worlds’. And yet inclusiveness at all costs enervates politics. Cloete (2015, p. 113) asks the provocative question: ‘Does reconciliation require the active suppression of past injustices?’. The context for this challenge is South African Rainbowism, ‘an arid ideology’ (Adhikari, 2004, p. 176) with little to say to the felt dislocations of ‘Coloured’ identity. In exploring the ways in which Khoisan resurgence articulates the past and the future, we have tried to avoid plastering over the cracks between social groups with symbolic gestures. While we have shown that the race politics of the GKC is

nuanced and that a fundamentalist politics of autochthony is not advocated, there clearly is agonistic work being done that mobilises an ethnic category, albeit a fluid and still developing one.

## Dedication

We dedicate this article to Chief Hester 'Hettie' Booysen (18 January 1941–5 November 2020) of the Gamtkwa Khoisan Council, whose memory inspires us to keep working for land justice.

## Notes

1. The Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention was signed in 1989 and is an important and binding international treaty for securing the rights of Indigenous people around the world.
2. See [www.gamtkwa.org.za](http://www.gamtkwa.org.za). Retrieved 19 May 2022.
3. With the exception of *Boere* these names are all extremely prejudicial racial slurs. *Hotnot* is a shortening of *Hottentot*, which was used by early Dutch settlers to refer to Khoe people, and *Slamse* is a derogatory word derived from 'Muslim' in reference to Malay slaves (see Khan, 2020). We reproduced these slurs in this extract following debate between the authors and the editors about the legibility of the text to international readers. We abbreviate them elsewhere in the text.
4. Afrikaans: 'vat en slag en vreet'. Afrikaans uses the verb  *eet*  to refer to people eating, but  *vreet*  for animals. The usage here is thus dehumanizing.
5. The white South African members of the collective were not present at this meeting.

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