A story is the wind
Representing time and space in San narratives

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an art and performance event in Clanwilliam
Clanwilliam is a small town located in the foothills of the Cederberg Mountains in the Western Cape of South Africa. For the past 5 years, Fairheads International Trust Company has sponsored art related projects in Clanwilliam, culminating in exhibitions and more recently performances and lantern parades through the town. The theme of the project is derived from San narratives and images from the rock paintings in the surrounding mountains. Hundreds of children participate in the event, making paintings and objects, attending workshops and forming part of the final procession and performance. The parade begins at dusk. The local band leads the children, carrying figures and puppets and candle powered lanterns, wearing masks and helmets, through the township. As it darkens and the procession weaves through the streets it becomes a magical display of glowing lights hovering almost disembodied against the black mountains and the deep violet sky. Hundreds of people come pouring out of the little houses and join the parade until they reach the wood mill where dancers make fire drawings from sawdust and actors tell stories. The whole performance is illuminated by the lanterns and evokes the first campfires and the story telling performances of the San who have been this project’s inspiration.
Stories and storytelling

Because the storytelling way of making social sense is by its nature continually creative and re-creative; it actually has its being only in its new performances. That is why variants in oral life are as uncountable as grains of sand. People who only encounter folktales in print should realise that any collection of living folktales is an accident ... they fail to represent the single most important truth about a folktale tradition, which is its ongoing, creative life in the minds of its narrators and listeners. (Megan Bieseles 1993:65-66)
The South African landscape is a rich archive of the lives of people who have inhabited it for thousands of years. In the soil the archaeological fragments of plants, bone and teeth, tools, bedding and artefacts tell us what people ate and made and how they lived and died. Traces of stone and foundation and domestic objects describe the nature of structures built and things crafted and suggest something of the interactions of different groups that came and went and traded and thrived and were dispossessed. In the shelters of the southwestern and eastern mountains and on the rocky planes of the interior, paintings and engravings hint at the thoughts and ideas that moved and inspired the San who made them; allude to their religious impulses and resonate with their knowledge of the origin of the world and its sustaining life forces. In addition to all this, the landscape is also an invisible archive of the
stories and narratives about animals and people, about the wind and the rain and the celestial bodies, that were part of the lived experience of the San.

For the San stories inhabited the landscape. They floated on the wind, they passed through the mountains and travelled along the tracks. They drifted to those who were alert to them. “I listen, watching for a story, which I want to hear ... I sit waiting for it; that it may float into my ear”, said a /Xam elder in the 1870s, for, “I feel that a story is the wind”. But a story was not just the wind, the wind was also a story. Once a man, then a bird, then a thing tied up in cloth, the wind carried in its seemingly shapeless form the story of its various transformations.

Stories mapped the country for the San and stories provided the basis upon which the San understood the world and its workings. This process of
mapping was a process of investing the natural features of the landscape and the heavens with human history and with narratives which, however labile and protean, were part of the continuity that linked one generation with the next.

For the San all things were potentially sentient. The identity of all things was susceptible to seemingly imminent transformation. All things marked place and referred to realities that existed beyond them. Just as a drawn map has a physical presence, the mapping of the land by the San through the stories that animated it, was conceived of by the San as a physical process. Stories could be felt and seen. They were inextricably bonded to the transformed figures, the animals, the trees, the stars that were part of everyday reality. Even the transformations brought about by the San in the present were stories. Shoes and bags were not just leather goods, they were the “children of the hartebeest” or
of the springbok—the fashioning of leather into bag or shoes was a process in which the relationship between animal and object was retained, in which the story of transformation was embodied. Similarly the arrows they carried, or the quivers made from branches, still maintained their connection to the living tree. While the maps with which we are familiar today serve to objectify and symbolise the features of the land, San mapping, through the telling of stories, sought to subjectify and make manifest the human dimension of the land and all its resources.

The San also mapped the space between the land and the sky. One of the most important of all San rituals was the killing of the rain !Kwa, a beast, and the symbolic dragging of its body over the land so that its blood would attract rainfall. For the San, the intrusion of settlers and colonists into the land
was an intrusion into the delicate mapping of spaces and places which provided a web of connectedness to both their intellectual heritage and the power that the shamans (or !giten) drew from the land. A rainmaker, shot by Boers in the 1860s described, in his last living minutes, how his killer had destroyed his connection to the rain and the rain beast that was resident in the sky. He saw that connection as a physical thong, a string that bound him to his power:

The people were those who broke for me the string/thong. Therefore, the place became/was like this to me on account of it, because the string was that which had broken for me. Therefore, the place (country) does not feel to me as the place (country) used to feel to me, on account of it. For the place
(country) feels as if it stands open before me because the string has broken for me.
Therefore, the place (country) does/did not feel pleasant to me on account of it.

(Dia!kwain 1875, in Lucy Lloyd's manuscripts, 5101-5103)

For this shaman the breaking of the string was the severing of his own life; in a symbolic sense the destruction of the fabric of San society was a process of de-mapping the land, of snapping the threads that tied place to place and people to those places.

For the San, storytelling was at the centre of social life. Stories served to illustrate both collectively held intentions and beliefs and to demonstrate
individual creativity. Stories passed from parents to children united generations, reminding them of the origins of humanity and animal life and reasons for their habits and customs. This process of telling and retelling stories ensured the continuity of important ideas without sacrificing the value of idiosyncrasy or inventiveness. Stories recorded a hundred years ago in the central Cape could be identified, albeit as differing versions, in the 1980s in the central Kalahari, or in northern Namibia. The telling of stories ensured the survival of San society just as much as did the ability to hunt and gather. But it did this through the pleasure of a form of artistry that was as much particular as communal (see for example, Guenther 1999, Bieseke 1993).

For those of us brought up outside of a hunting and gathering and indeed an exclusively oral society San stories have a quality of unreality and
paradox which is often strange and dreamlike. There is a sense of time that differs from our own, a sense of consequence that seems unexpected. The past is often brought, in an entirely unproblematic way, into the present, "truth" exists equally in stories that appear irreconcilably contradictory. Stories can violate the divisions which we, in a more divided world, have created between the real and the unreal, between the magical and the banal.

Many stories involve change and metamorphosis, the shift of the identity of one person or animal into another. Exploration of these shifts through stories appear to help their tellers to understand their own identities and, through the knowledge of stories and the artful reshaping of them, to exercise control over a seemingly capricious world.
Performing stories

The major body of stories collected from San in South Africa is the Bleek and Lloyd Collection now housed at the University of Cape Town. This collection, compiled in notebooks in the 1870s and 1880s by Wilhelm Bleek and Lucy Lloyd, is almost the only record we have of the /Xam language and of the ideas and world view of the people who spoke it. /Xam is no longer spoken anywhere and the hundreds of stories recorded by Bleek and Lloyd are no longer told or known by any /Xam descendants. The /Xam who taught Bleek and Lloyd their language came from the Kenhardt district, but there is historical as well as
archaeological evidence that the /Xam once inhabited most of the Western Cape where they painted in the rock shelters of the Cederberg and the Northern Cape where they engraved on the boulders of the plains.

Oral societies perform, rather than tell stories. In all San societies, storytelling and performing is a central part of social interaction and a way of creating both a shared art form and a shared history. For stories in such a tradition, to be written down and never performed again, is a kind of death. The story is trapped within the pages of a book, its life as an invisible presence on the wind, curtailed.

In the past decade, our own interpretative work with San narratives through art and performance (Skotnes 1991, 1996, 1999; Fleishman 1995), as well as the work of poets such as Stephen Watson (1991) and Alan James
(2001) has contributed to new efforts to re-enact, or re-interpret the performative or creative aspects of San narratives. Such work attempts to understand these narratives, not through analysis or description, but by using the inherent ambiguity and polyvalence of art to establish a dialogue with the material and to create a sense of the stories as labile, vital and complex. More than this, art, performance and poetry potentially have the capacity to access and re-animate the creative and intellectual resonance of these narratives, while at the same time making them available to a contemporary audience.

The Clanwilliam Art and Performance project, represents one such attempt to create a contemporary context for the re-animation of /Xam narratives. It is a contribution to the University of Cape Town's Living Landscape Project, initiated by archaeologist John Parkington (see Parkington 2002) as a
vehicle through which to reinvest in the community of Clanwilliam some of the insights gained through years of archaeological, geological and historical research in the region. This year (as in 2001), members of the University's Fine Art and Drama Departments as well as professionals from Magnet Theatre, Jazzart and others, ran art and performance workshops with hundreds of local school children, during which they were assisted to find creative ways to interpret the stories of the San whose paintings colour the shelters of the surrounding mountains and whose stories once floated on the wind. The result is a Spring Festival—a lantern parade and series of dances, shadow acts and fire performances. In addition, various art objects have been created and constructed, some of which have been installed at the University's field school in Clanwilliam in Park Street (see pages 22, 24, 26 and 28 and appendix).
The first Bushmen were those who first inhabited the earth ... their children were those who worked with the Sun ... When the first Bushmen had passed away, the Flat Bushmen inhabited their ground. Therefore, the Flat Bushmen taught their children about the stories of the First Bushmen. The Sun had been a man, he talked; they all talked, also the other one, the Moon. Therefore, they used to live upon the earth; while they felt that they spoke. They do not talk now, now that they live in the sky.

(Bleek and Lloyd 1911:56-7)

Time Transformed (see appendix)
Stories and time

In /Xam thought space, time and history (narrative) were inextricably bound together. Early, mythical times were alive in the here and now. Stories about daily events might drift into tales of the early people. Narratives resided in the landscape like palpable things. For the /Xam there once existed an Early Time, a First Order in which things were different from how they then became. Animals were people. Some of these people-animals had characteristics that were very close to those of the animals whose names they bore, others defied easy categorisation. People were people without the customs they later developed.
When a sorcerer dies, his heart comes out in the sky and becomes a star. His heart feels that he is no longer alive; therefore his body there, in which he was alive, becomes a star, because it feels that he used to be a sorcerer. Therefore his magic makes a star, in order to let his body in which lived walk about. For a sorcerer sees things which we, who are not sorcerers, do not see.

(Dia!kwain in Bleek 1935:24)
when things changed. The landscape of the Early Time was a landscape populated by strange and mercurial creatures, part human, part animal, part neither. Sentience was resident in almost everything from the wind to the moon and the stars. Every object had conferred upon it the qualities of being alive and taking responsibility for what happened in the world. After this Early Time, animals became wild and lost their humanity, people developed laws and the forms of creatures and heavenly bodies became more stable. Yet the First Order continued to permeate the Second. The shape shifting, changeable status of the inhabitants of the earlier world brought the past with them into the present, continuing to exert their influence, not only through the telling of history and myth, but by their very escape from history to play a role in contemporary activities. Their influence took many forms. Young girls transgressing menarcheal
The time when game were people
was the one when the quagga also
resembled us who are people. We
are like it. That was when the
baboon was also a person. It
looked like a man.

Dia!kwain in Lewis-Williams
2000:224

We who are Bushmen were once
springbucks, and the Mantis shot
us, and we really cried (like a little
child). Then the Mantis said we
should be come a person, become
people because we really cried.
Hanǂkass’o in Lloyd's manuscripts,
6365 rev.

3

Early Time (see appendix)
taboos would be whipped up by the wind, ravaged by the rain animal and she and her family turned into frogs. Clothes and bags, sticks and whisks could be turned back into animals, trees and tails. Dead buck could transform, suddenly, into the trickster //Kaggen. Stories could float in the air.

In the context of such an ambiguous, mutable, often capricious world, stories were a way of harnessing the past, of replaying history, of subjecting events outside of human control to the creative authority of art and performance. Stories created limits, but the telling of them also provided ways of undermining those limits. Telling a story was less about disclosing an outcome than about recreating the events of the story each time the context for its telling changed. Like Cavafy's Ithaca, the pleasure of the story was located in the journey it provided, rather than in its destination. For the /Xam telling

\[ \text{Signature: } \text{Oct. 1878.} \]
Dead people who come out of the ground are those of whom my parents used to say, that they rode the rain, because the thongs with which they held it were like the horse’s reins, they bound the rain. Thus they rode the rain because they owned it.

Therefore people say, when there is a big rain, that the sorcerer has gone to loosen the thong. Then the rain falls and increases, where first a little rain leg had passed by. The rain liquid it is which comes from the clouds. it is that that people call the rain’s leg, when it does not rain everywhere.

Dia!kwain in Bleek 1933:305.

After Time (see appendix)
stories not only brought the past into the present but past events and characters were encouraged into relationships with those of the present. Time was not arranged in a neat chronology, but was allowed to occupy the space of the narrator in a perpetual present.

Blended into these narratives are details of the changing seasons, of times of life and rites of passage, of times of change. Stories also tell of the time when no Dutch was known before the invasion of land by settlers, and of the times when lives were lost through the action of farmers. All through these stories, there is a sense of the irregularity of time, rather than its linearity, of the endless possibilities of collapsing the present and all its difficulties into a past or parallel time, and then bringing this back into the present.
The young wind blows because the young wind feels that his parents appear formerly to have blown; for they are wind. Therefore they blow. For the people did not tell/talk to one about the wind's parents, for they merely talked to one about the young wind.

The wind (the wind's son) was formerly a person. He became a bird and he flies; while he does not walk as he used to for he flies, and, he lives in the mountains. Therefore, he flies. He was formerly a man. Therefore, he formerly rolled (a ball) he shot while he felt that he was a person. He became a bird; hence he flies, and he inhabits a mountain's hole. And he comes out of it, he flies about, and he returns to it. And, he comes to sleep in it; and he early awakes and goes out of it; he flies away, again, he flies away. And, he again, he returns, while he feels that he seeks food. And he eats, about, about, about, about, he again, he returns. And, he again, he comes to sleep in it.

(\(\text{Han\#kass' o 1878, Lloyd manuscript 6709-6713}\))
Stories and wind

For the /Xam a story was the wind and the wind wasa story. The wind was once a man. When a man died, his own wind blew away his footprints and the story of his presence on the earth was effaced. Stories and the wind had a close and somewhat mysterious relationship, and the wind must have conjured, in the minds of the /Xam, a rich range of imagery. The wind itself, however, was never talked about, only the son of the wind. The wind was like a cat skin. The wind could hear, the wind could feel pity and the wind could hide in a woman's kaross.
The wind when we die, our (own) wind blows; for we who are people we have wind; we make clouds/our clouds come out when we die. Therefore, the wind when we die, the wind blows dust, because it intends to blow away our spoor, with which we had walked about, while we still had nothing the matter with us. Our spoor which the wind intends to blow away they would still lie plainly visible. For the things would seem as if we still lived. Therefore the wind intends to blow taking away our footprints. Therefore, our gall, when we die it sits in the sky, it sits green in the sky when we are dead. Therefore mother was wont to do this when the moon came lying down, the moon stood hollow. Mother spoke, she said: "The moon is carrying people who are dead. For ye are those who see that it lies in this manner and it lies hollow because it is killing itself by carrying people who are dead. This is why it lies hollow. It is not //kaurie for it is a moon of badness. Ye may thereafter (expect to) hear something when the moon lies in this manner. A person is the one who has died, he who the moon carries. Therefore ye may expect to hear what has happened when the moon is like this".

(Dia!kwain 1975, Lloyd manuscript 5147-5158)
/xannay /xannay lived at the Sak River where we lived with her ... When I was still a child she died I had just become a youth when the old woman died. People used to call her name although she was dead for the people believed that if they called her name the wind would blow. It seems as if the wind heard when we called her name. For she had been accustomed to act thus if people ever scolded her, and she was angry and cried, it seemed as if the wind cried with her for the tears which fell from her eyes. Because the wind did not want them to fall for the wind was not willing that she would cry. So the wind used to blow if she cried because it did not want her eye's tears to fall, for when she cried the place did not seem nice. For the wind seemed to blow away the earth, the bushes were much shaken when the wind blew because she cried. It seemed as if the wind were angry because people had scolded her. When people see that the wind is blowing strongly they say: "Dost not /xannay /xannay seem to be angry with us and she does not want us to hold together for us the sides of her kaross in which the wind hides. She is really doing harm to us and she does not seem to be grown up. For she seems as if her thought had gone astray she does not seem to have her senses.

(Dia!kwain 1876, Lloyd manuscript 5856-5870)
/kute !gaua once made fires at the holes of burrows and he entered the fire, he drew out cats, and the cats had not their equal in beauty...the fire did not burn him, the fire also did not singe his apron for he was dressed in a cat (skin) which was like the west wind. He did this when he had made a fire at the hole, he said: "/ku-te !gaua, n Cagen Cagen, !gaua". And he sprang going into the fire and he drew out cats. He laid them down, he took out a knife he skinned them; he skinned opening them, he put earth in their skins, he picked up a fire stick he went along to another lair; he went and made fire in it. He again sang, "/ku-te !gaua, n Cagen Cagen, !gaua" and he sprang into the fire and he drew out cats such cats as had no equal in beauty ... He rolled them up, and he put them on his shoulders, because he was going home. And he really went home, because the sun was setting, for he felt he was going to sleep.

(Han=κass'o 1878, Lloyd manuscript 7015-7031)
Stories and fire

Fire was a powerful force in /Xam life. Not only a source of warmth and security, fire was both at the centre of the stage of the storyteller and an instrument in many of the narratives. In San myths, fire was one of the first gifts women gave to human society. Women were those who tended the first fire and helped men discover cooking and making food taste good. Fire burnt the back of the hyena and the korhaan's head, which is why they look as they do today. The moon, which was fire, burnt the hare who brought death into the world (!nanni 10072-10117). The stars' light was fire and the eyes of lions and jackals resembled fire.
Fire, like much else in the San imaginative universe, had agency. Fire was the means by which /kaggen grew wings. In a story of the rain (an animal) and a young girl who kills a rain child, the fire hisses and extinguishes itself as it fears the wrath of the rain animal (/Han=kass'o 7473-7519).

The campfire was at the centre of storytelling, and insects that appeared around the flames were often believed to bring messages about game and animals. It was around the fire that dancers would go into trance. It was also beyond the circle of fire that the shamans would encounter figures of the spirit world and would then return to tell of their experiences. Thus fire occupied a central place in San storytelling and ritual. It is also in the presence of fire, and in the darkness of the night, that we can begin to imagine the performative magic of the stories we otherwise know only as text on the pages of a book.
The Song of the Kwa-kwara, or (Korhaan Malkop)
My younger brother-in-law
Put my head in the fire
My younger brother-in-law,
My younger brother-in-law,
Put my head in the fire.

(Han=kass'o 1878, Lloyd manuscript 6139 opp.)

The fire burnt thee
thy arms did get feathers because
thou didst lie burning in the fire
Thou didst fly out of the fire for thou was burning
when thou was writhing in the fire
thou didst get feathers.

(///Kabbo 1871, Lloyd manuscript 998-9)
... Then the moon listened and was like fire and was big. And the hare trembled for fear of the moon. And said, "Stop burning me, stop burning the hare. I am a hare, stop burning me." But the moon refused, "No, I am fire and burn thee, stop crying, be silent, I burn thee". But the hare refused, "no, I cry about death, but thou art fire and dost burn me, for I cry about death".

(Inanni 1880, Lloyd manuscript 10072-10117)
Stories are shadow

Today the stories of the San in South Africa and particularly the stories of the /Xam are like shadows. We cannot hear them, and see only a trace of the way in which they were once performed. But through their contemporary re-interpretation and the creation of new narrators and listeners, like those in Clanwilliam, the shadows are animated and the stories are potentially thrown back into the wind.
Acknowledgments

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Drawings and watercolours made by San in the 1870s and 1880s for Lucy Lloyd belong to collections at Iziko: the South African Museum, and the University of Cape Town. We are grateful for permission to reproduce these. Thanks to Lesley Hart, Patricia Davison, Lindsay Hooper and June Hosford.

Video
Camera: Thulani Nxumalo, Robert Hofmeyer, Alfred Hinkel. Editing: Ed Young
Appendix

Stories and time

The kinetic objects (clocks and wind vanes), created by Pippa Skotnes and Gwen van Embden and installed at the University of Cape Town’s field station in Park Street, Clanwilliam were inspired by a reading of the 19th century stories of the /Xam and !Kung and by images found in rock paintings in the shelters of the Western Cape and other parts of South Africa. They image and embody aspects of a San sense of time and its relationship to narrative and space. These, of course, are interpretations and they depend upon an imaginative juxtaposition of images and texts, rather than on the illustration of specific stories or ideas. The following serves as a reference to some of the texts and images used.
Figures of transformed beings from painted compositions from shelters in the Cederberg. These figures resonate with narratives of the early times when animals were people, just as they allude to the visions of the spirit people of the dancers around the campfires.

The face of the clock is taken from a watercolour made by a 'Kung boy!nanni in 1881. !nanni made many images of plants and animals from his home north west of Damaraland. Some of his stories referred to a small and strange being called /xue who had the power to transform into almost anything.

**time transformed**

The spoor at the entrance of a porcupine's hole, drawn by /Hanǂkass' o for Lucy Lloyd in 1878. Porcupines were said to watch the stars and to know when to return to their burrows before dawn, so as to be safe from the hunters.
Many rock paintings depict group scenes recalling the trance dances that took place at night around the campfire while seated spectators would clap and sing and beat out a rhythm. In the early time, a young girl tossed wood ashes into the sky and made the Milky Way. The stars are fire, but some stars were also transformed men or lions. When a shaman died his heart was said to become a star. The San are also known to have been able to use the stars as maps to find their way at night.

This detail from a watercolour by 'nanni, made for Lucy Lloyd in 1881 and printed on the upper half of the clock, shows Bushmen with their hut and food, and above them the sky with the sun and the sun’s rays.
Part of a painted composition from a site near Clanwilliam in the Cederberg, this image shows figures joined by thin lines or thongs to a scene which appears to be an armed battle. The San spoke of strings or thongs which represented consciousness, or served to connect shamans to the source of their power, so that this battle is likely to have represented a spiritual rather than a physical confrontation.

"Hanʃ-kass'o drew a portrait of Mr Schilling, a mason who was said to be an inveterate smoker (1878)

The outer ring of this clock is illuminated and holds a collection of insects from the Clanwilliam district. Insects at the evening campfire would be carefully observed as their appearance was often portentous.

Drawings made by "Hanʃ-kass'o for Lucy Lloyd in 1878. The anteater, depicted above, is credited with providing the laws which determined the shift between the early time, when animals were people, and later times when animals and people lived separate lives as different species.
Figures in flight have rich symbolic significance and are resonant of both stories of myth and the early time, and of images of performance and ritual. In the early time /Kaggen, the trickster shaman, would grow wings in fire, escaping trouble. Later, shamans, in the heat of trance, would similarly escape their physical bodies and communicate with the spirit world.

The central figure of this disk is redrawn from the Linton rock painting at the South African Museum. It is surrounded by figures of fish and transformed humans. The San said that when someone went into trance, that person died (later to be brought back to life again) so that images of trance and death are all, potentially, interwoven.

There are no more elephants in the Olifants River Valley and the foothills of the Cederberg where there once were many. This area of the country is particularly rich in paintings of elephants and their association with a variety of other painted figures and animals suggest they played an important role in the San imaginative universe.

4 after time
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Pippa Skotnes is professor of fine art at the University of Cape Town and the author and editor of several books on the San, including *Miscast: negotiating the presence of the Bushmen* (1996).

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"I listen, watching for a story, which I want to hear ... I sit waiting for it; that it may float into my ear for I feel that a story is the wind".
//Kabbo, Cape Town 1871