

Siegfried Huigen
*Knowledge and Colonialism:
Eighteenth-Century Travelers in South Africa*

Leiden – Boston: Brill, 2009
273 pp. ISBN: 978 90 04 17743 7

Within the broad topic proposed by Siegfried Huigen the first thing that requires thorough elucidation is the authorial intention to juxtapose knowledge with colonialism. While the former denotes information on South Africa gathered from texts written by eighteenth-century European travelers, the latter indicates that productions of such materials came about out of or rather contrary to the colonial context. Although these two notions seem complementary, in fact they should be read and examined separately. Faced with the above dichotomy, the author of the book aims to prove that a number of eighteenth-century, but also early nineteenth-century, writers of travel accounts had solely one purpose, namely to expose South Africa, and its interior, to scientific investigation. Thereby, he disregards opinions of twentieth-century scholars who view the afore-mentioned texts as laying a path for colonial expansion. In view of this, it is crucial to evaluate the informative character of such reports. Of equal importance, however, is to pose the question concerning Huigen's absolute criticism of post-colonial readings of the eighteenth-century travel narratives.

The volume consists of ten chapters (eight of which are analytical) wherein the author amply demonstrates how universally the criteria of empirical investigation were applied to travel writings. The general idea behind the travelers' research, as presented by Huigen, was "to establish the exact facts" (Huigen 2009: 3), and to broaden the public's knowledge of remote regions of Africa. With regard to potential beneficiaries of the travel reports, Huigen makes an important distinction between texts written for cognitive or economic aims. The first group contributed to a more rational, well-grounded dispute over the African continent in general and the region of South Africa in particular. The second group's

focus was of limited scope, specifically to investigate commercial potential of the new land. Among those who were scientifically trained, or rather scientifically motivated, one finds different individual explorers not affiliated, or sometimes barely affiliated, with financial institutions; whereas, among those who were economically minded were travelers associated with the Dutch East India Company.¹

This first group of scientific explorers seems to be far more important for Huigen than the VOC travelers. Their unbiased, as claimed by the author, approach to the land and its inhabitants, their interest in “everything between heaven and earth [which] could [...] attract [one’s] attention” (Huigen 2009: 7) made them authors of materials of which the epistemological validity and status could hardly be questioned. On reading Peter Kolb’s work,² for instance, the eighteenth-century reader was introduced to a world of which he had no cognizance. Kolb’s objective was to provide verifiable information, and due to “the accuracy of the description” his observations “ha[d] to be more credible than what little can be found in the existing literature” (Huigen 2009: 52). Another traveler discussed, a man with a genuine “scientific background,” is Robert Jacob Gordon who authored the Gordon Atlas. As Huigen notes, Gordon was widely acclaimed for his fundamental assumption that any form of cultural or racial prejudice disqualifies the researcher. His intention, thus, to write an ethnographically valuable report on the Xhosas and Khoikhoi [the Hottentots] entailed an unprejudiced treatment of non-European ethnicities. He did attempt to approach the native inhabitants most objectively which meant, inter alia, learning their language. Given his principles, Gordon reflected in his Atlas merely observable “facts [...], frequently with the aim of confirming or repudiating the European discourse on South Africa” (Huigen 2009: 110).

The epistemological enthusiasm towards accumulation of knowledge of a different kind, we observe in chapter seven, eight and nine. Firstly, Huigen gives an account of John Barrow’s travel texts in which his ethnographic interests focus not only on aboriginal populations but also on the Dutch colonists (the Boers). Interestingly, Barrow’s corresponding pictures are to indicate the level of degeneracy of the white settlers. The traveler’s criticism of the colonists, as argued by the author, derives from “arguments of natural law concerning the use of land in colonized countries” (Huigen 2009: 148). Consequently, Barrow is very meticulous in presenting the Hottentots, the Xhosas (Kaffers – to use his terminology), or the Namaquas in a favorable light. Yet, he is even more scrupulous in collecting data that are to demonstrate how – oddly enough – uncivilized the Dutch pioneers are.³ Huigen finds an analogous, that is, politically motivated slant on South

¹ Huigen throughout the entire text uses a different name, VOC that is short for Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie.

² Peter Kolb (1675-1726) is presented by Huigen in chapter two as the first traveler who, in opposition to others visiting the Cape in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, wrote extensively and evenhandedly about the region and the Hottentots.

³ According to Huigen, Barrow’s severe criticism of the colonists stemmed from “an English colonial

Africa in the Batavian travel narratives. ⁴ To make a long story short, what prevails within the accounts is one's determination to amass empirically verified information about the Cape (eye witnessing), regardless of the fact that such information when written down "had to serve the development of colonial policy" (Huigen 2009: 171).

The remainder of the book, apart from chapters three and four that are dedicated to documents of the VOC travelers, concerns "The Adventures of a Surinamese Frenchman in South Africa: The Travel Accounts of François La Vaillant." His narrative is regarded as knowledgeable about the South African background, even if, as Huigen points out, it is at odds with the other ones presented above. Unlike Kolb or Barrow, the Surinamese Frenchman aimed at "offer[ing] exciting travel stories" (Huigen 2009: 119). His texts, as maintained by Huigen, are often saturated with anecdotes or tales of egocentricity. Still, irrespective of this egocentric personal content, La Vaillant's stories titled *Voyage* (1790) and *Second Voyage* (1795) are reckoned to be embedded in the eighteenth-century scientific discourse. Descriptiveness and confrontation with previously held viewpoints are of utmost importance. Thus, even within his works some "illustrations of the botany, zoology and the ethnography of southern Africa" (Huigen 2009: 130) rise to prominence. Especially La Vaillant's description of 'savages,' particularly the Gonaquas, draws the reader's attention. Huigen underlines here that the above-mentioned portrayal is "the most extensive ethnographic description of his two travel accounts and serves as a foundation for the subsequent shorter descriptions of other peoples" (Huigen 2009: 131).

Undoubtedly, having reflected on the part of the book devoted to the question of knowledge and its accumulation by various travelers, what is discernible is the arduous work Huigen took on to illustrate his thesis regarding the scientific and informative character of such accounts. This book constitutes a mere starting point for anyone engrossed in studying eighteenth-century South Africa in terms of its socio-cultural or political background. From a scientific perspective it is evident that the book is not intended as an all-encompassing source of knowledge on the contemporary southern Africa. However, this work can and should be viewed as a comprehensive study delineating a marked pattern of eighteenth-century (in some cases even early nineteenth-century) travel writings.

Nevertheless, what requires a polemical statement on my part is the author's disagreement over some twentieth-century readings of these travel accounts. There is a noticeable disparity between Mary Louise Pratt's and Huigen's scholarly viewpoints. ⁵ He is at variance with her opinion that "travel texts from the second half of the eighteenth century

viewpoint" he adopted in order to support the natives against the Dutch (Huigen 2009: 155).

⁴ The Batavian travel accounts were the resultant documents prepared by officials of the Batavian Republic who would embark on numerous journeys "to establish their authority and familiarize themselves with the country" (Huigen 2009: 170).

⁵ Mary Louise Pratt's post-colonial stance presented, for example, in her book *Imperial Eyes* (1992) has been taken by Huigen as the most significant point of reference, and as such was weighed in the balance and found wanting.

[are] attempts to intellectually annex non-European territory and to pave the way for colonial expansion" (Huigen 2009: 28). In the above context, the travelers' role pertains to defining southern Africa "in terms of Western intellectual frameworks" (Huigen 2009: 28). Moreover, according to Pratt, they seem to have "ignored the presence of the indigenous population in their representation or degraded the population to natural phenomena" (Huigen 2009: 28). Huigen ascribes this standpoint to the ideologization of post-colonial criticism. Its a priori assumptions, he maintains, contribute to reproducing epistemological patterns of thought and as such should be exposed as fallacious.

By and large, Huigen rejects the post-colonial stance and, concurrently, attempts to highlight the trekkers' disinterested inquisitiveness. As he claims, due to "their view of science" and "the empiricist paradigm" the travelers were keen on continuing investigations that "were not regulated by centers of calculation" (Huigen 2009: 29). Taking into consideration the above, one could say that Huigen's view amounts to the following idea: the eighteenth-century authors of travel texts, as if negligent of the colonial context and colonial discourse, with high-minded goals regarding empirical exploration, managed to represent the region of southern Africa in a fairly unquestionable manner. The open repudiation of Pratt's standpoint, however, gives rise to several questions concerning Huigen's line of argumentation.

The outcome of the comprehensive report on the eighteenth-century travel texts is important inasmuch as it substantiates Huigen's claim that there were indeed authors who wrote with no intention to endorse the Western politics of colonization. Still, the question as to what extent their accounts contributed to further expansion remains relevant. What I find debatable is the author's recurring suggestions that most of the scientifically minded explorers did not act, allegedly, out of the distinctive European cultural/intellectual context. JanMohamed, referring to "colonist literature" asserted that it is "an exploration and a representation of a world at the boundaries of civilization" (JanMohamed 1995: 19). As he also noticed, it is hard to speak of a genuine exploration since "such literature [...] affirms its own ethnocentric assumptions [...], it simply [...] preserves the structures of its own mentality" (JanMohamed 1995: 19). The scientific travelers described by Huigen definitely belong to this category of writers who attempt to discover and describe territories "at the boundaries of civilization." In spite of their intentions, the Western mindset appears to have left an imprint also on their works.

Peter Kolb, for that matter, is presented as the one who defends the Hottentots in terms of their religious beliefs. According to Huigen, Kolb argued with those who claimed that the Hottentots' "religion is like Judaism - an opposite of Christianity," thus less valuable (Huigen 2009: 53). Kolb was to maintain that the status of this African population must indeed be enhanced due to their affiliation with the Jews.⁶ In this context, he made a

⁶ Huigen underlines that "from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century the image of the Jews in Protestant Europe was quite favorable" (Huigen 2009: 54).

distinction between “the ‘inner’ customs [which were] creolized Jewish customs,” and as such they were superior to “the less pleasant ‘outer’ customs” typical of the Troglodytes (Huigen 2009: 54). In other words, the Hottentots could not be perceived as mere savages because of a relatively close bond between their native spirituality and its Judeo-Christian equivalent. Hence, within the “Western intellectual framework” their status was distinguishable from and superior to the separate and undefined peoples of Africa.

In the case of Robert Jacob Gordon’s ethnographic representations, the European perspective plays a less significant role. As we are informed, he was willing and eager to learn a local language to communicate with the Xhosas more effectively. Next, he turns out to be “the most empiricist of the scientific travelers” (Huigen 2009: 212). Finally, his general attitude makes him a scientist, a naturalist, an observer who looks upon an unknown world and its inhabitants from a purely human perspective. But even Gordon introduces such categories as ‘civilized’ and ‘uncivilized’ which denote “whether the group represented corresponds more or less to the Western European standard” (Gordon in Huigen 2009: 114). Huigen points out that there is no mention of “othering” (Huigen 2009: 114) since the previously mentioned adjacent categories have not been measured on moral grounds and concern simply the natives’ technical competence. However, does Gordon’s study not, in fact, confirm the imbalance between what is arbitrarily Western and non-Western? The European author, as claimed by Said, was in a position to invent “exotic” locations, in other words, “place[s] of [...] haunting [...] landscapes, remarkable experience” (Said 1995: 87). What is more, “the scholar,” according to Said, under which we can include the scientific traveler, “was in, or thought about [such territories] because he could be there [emphasis original], or could think about it, with very little resistance on the [Other] part” (Said 1995: 90). Huigen, indicating the lack of cultural distance between Gordon and the San people provides a fragment wherein the author says: “nothing could equal the surprise of the Bushmen [...] upon seeing the drawing. They said we were curious people, but that they now realized that I [covered] everything [...], and that they saw that this was why I was wandering so far this way and which they did not understand before” (Gordon in Huigen 2009: 116). I would argue that Gordon’s remark had a condescending character as it suggested that he was in that place because he found the aboriginal people interestingly exotic, and although they had no clue as to his intentions, he was there because of their actual powerlessness and incapability of halting him.

An interesting approach is also represented by John Barrow who seems to have boldly drawn on the already mentioned categories of ‘civilized’/‘uncivilized,’ or ‘cultured’/‘uncultured.’ Huigen sees him as someone who “most certainly takes an interest in the indigenous population of South Africa” (Huigen 2009: 154). This interest is unquestionable, but still dependent on his political standpoint. Barrow, as Huigen admits, is perceived as someone who “adopted” the objectives of English “enlightened” (Huigen 2009: 157) colonialism. From this point of view, it is the Dutch (degenerated)

colonists who must be criticized, whereas the non-Europeans should be eulogized. This affirmation of the indigenous man is rather curious. Admiring the Xhosas, Barrow makes use of such terms as “healthy,” “not exposed to the debilitating influences of civilization” (Huigen 2009: 157). What he suggests is that the Xhosas have not been spoiled by the degenerated culture of the Dutch colonists. This belief, however, is not tantamount to an admission that the natives, seen as sufficiently civilized, cannot be subject to cultural modification. The Xhosas are admirable for two reasons. Firstly, “[t]hough black, or very nearly so, they have not one line of the African negro in the composition of their persons” (Barrow in Huigen 2009: 157). Secondly, they appear more like those archetypal children of nature perceived as “tablet[s]” to be written down (Locke), or “wild plant[s]” to be cultivated (Rousseau) (Ashcroft 2001: 40). Eventually, the ones who are apparently capable of such cultivation are those who share the “English [...] ‘enlightened’ viewpoint” (Huigen 2009: 155). We can find similar patronizing undertones in Francois le Vaillant’s travel accounts or some Batavian texts, but even without further elaboration on the remaining narratives, the material already discussed constitutes a case in point.

In conclusion, Huigen might be right in criticizing Pratt for ascribing evil intentions to the travelers, for closing her eyes to their genuine achievements in and contribution to the area of eighteenth-century science. Undoubtedly, the travel writings, as discussed by Huigen, illustrate how determined their authors were to put into action the standards of empirical investigation so characteristic of the Enlightenment era. Unlike their predecessors, the scientific travelers had no intention to accept the epistemological status quo that would lead to reiteration of unexamined information. Their role was to see, check and write down everything that their ‘traveling eye’ registered. Siegfried Huigen, at this point, sheds new light on a considerable portion of the eighteenth-century travel writing. It is, however, difficult to share entirely his conviction that such travel accounts were authored with no socio-cultural strings attached. As Karl Schlögel claims, our “thoughts” and ideas are always “positioned” within specific historical, social contexts (Schlögel 2009: 9). Such positioning seems to have taken place within the analyzed travel narratives; therefore, Huigen’s radical repudiation of the post-colonial stance is rather contentious.

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