Imaginations and Constructions of Literary Spaces: The Lower !Garib / Orange River Region in Literature

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Introduction

As a *border area*, a *political space*, and a historically *contested terrain*, with its massive river a *majestic sight*; in various ways the Orange River region is a rich site of interest and fascination. Even so, it has received little academic attention, as lamented by the organisers of the conference 'Space in Time – Landscape Narratives along the Lower !Garib / Orange River', held in Oranjemund in 2020, and the editors of this collection. As scholars of literary and cultural studies, we wanted to explore how this discrepancy translates into the literary sphere. Hence, in this contribution, we look more closely at anglophone literature to examine the ways in which the Lower Orange River features in these texts. With this essay, we wish to offer an insight into three works written by 'outsiders' to the region, who use the area as a stage for their imaginations. In our analyses we explore the different roles, functions and forms that the area takes in the chosen texts, identifying certain tropes and styles that are activated to (re)produce the !Garib River region as a literary space.

As part of our engagement with the literature written in English and set in the region, we encountered how various examples of 'white writing' – to use J.M. Coetzee's terminology here – repeatedly activate the motifs of either the *traveller tale* / the *explorer narrative* or the *escape journey*.[1] In our essay's opening we examine these prominent themes in more detail. In the three case studies that follow, we investigate how the area emerges as a setting for the authors, produced to raise a certain critique, to evoke specific associations, or to unwind larger political debates. Following a chronological approach, we begin with a discussion of J.M. Coetzee's 'The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee', published in 1974. We explore the strategies used by South African writer Coetzee in his novella to produce space literarily with a specific focus on the textual construction and negotiation of the *traveller tale*. In a second step we move to more contemporary writing, offering an analysis of the novel *The Lie of the Land* (2017) by UK-based author Jaspar David Utley who works with the

1 Coetzee 1988

motif of the *escape journey*. Towards the end of our essay, we shift the attention to a voice from democratic South Africa through examining the poem 'Mountain' (2017) by the poet and writer Koleka Putuma, who appropriates the idea of motion via taking her readers on a bicycle tour through Namaqualand, and with this journey, articulates a critique of land claims and property rights. As we shall see, these versatile perspectives on and distinct functions of the Lower Orange River region in writing further an understanding of the area as a political and cultural space that bears layers of histories and meanings.

Considering the traveller tale / the explorer narrative and the escape journey

In our attempt to understand what kind of literary texts employ the river area as a setting, our research has shown how the notion of movement features prominently in various forms of writing located in the Lower Orange River region. In a broad number of texts – particularly those written by white authors – this notion either takes the form of the main protagonist's travels or escapes. Taking a closer look at the former motif, we encountered the rich repository of the *travelogue*-genre – one insightful example of this form of writing being William John Burchell's *Travels in the Interior of Southern Africa* from 1822.[2] It revolves around Burchell's travels to the South African 'hinterland', scientifically investigating, recording, and documenting his journey and the region.[3] The ethnographic, geographic, and ecological interest of the first-person narrator who explores the area is central to and characteristic of this genre. In a similar vein, yet quite distinctively, the traveller's tale in Coetzee's 'The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee', published in 1974, equally deploys the concept of a white explorer, traveling from the Cape northwards, naming and claiming the space. However, written by the Nobel Price-winning author, who is famous for his critique of issues around colonialism, apartheid, and white supremacy, 'The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee' rather takes the form of a *travelogue parody*, a critical reinterpretation of this genre, as further elaborated at a later point in this essay.

The *escape* theme that we identified in literary pieces set along the Orange River shares with the traveller's tale the element of motion, either from south to north (as in 'The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee') or vice versa. The trajectory of the escapees is rigidly structured along these binary lines – either depicting an escape from today's Namibia southwards to the river or following an escapee moving from the Cape northwards to the !Garib River. What is more, the escape stories we encountered share the common focus on narratives of European oppression, violence and danger while taking on the perspectives of the *Othered* – the colonised and formerly enslaved people in these histories. One contemporary novel devoted to such experiences is *Philida* (2012) by well-known South African writer André Brink. The book tells the story of a slave girl, fleeing from South Africa to the 'Promised Land' – the !Garib.[4] Seeing through Philida's eyes, the reader envisions the river as a paradise, evoked through comparisons with the 'land of Canaan' or depictions

2 Burchell 2015

3 Easton 1995

4 Brink 2012: p. 297

of it as a place from where 'the land is open and everything is free'.[5] The physical space is idealised and depicted as 'an in-between space that acts as a metaphor for the futility of slave freedom at the official slave emancipation in 1834', as Serah Namulisa Kasembeli explores in her dissertation on the literary representations of slavery in post-apartheid South Africa.[6]

It is vital to consider *Philida* in the context of the broader literary oeuvre of Brink, with his strong commitment to the country's history, the 'intimate brutalities of a society founded on a dehumanizing ideology' and his engagement with 'feminist and subaltern politics', focusing on women's roles in these histories.[7] In this vein, it is important to reflect on Brink's position as a white, male South African author conjuring up these issues, and choosing the Lower !Garib River region as his setting for such narratives to play out. This consideration is equally crucial in our first analysis, which focuses on a text written by Brink's contemporary J.M. Coetzee.

Spatial Reading of 'The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee'

Our first case study investigates how the !Garib River region is designed in 'The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee' which is the second part of J.M. Coetzee's first novel *Dusklands*, published in 1974. Our prime concern with this text is to offer a spatial reading that illuminates how the narrative is constructed to produce a certain conception of space, closely tied to a particular colonial trope: the idea of *empty land*, which Rizzo describes as follows: 'Vacant land is a well-known *topos* in imperial and colonial imagery, suggesting the absence of indigenous people and visualising territorial claims by the colonisers.'[8]

In our analysis of 'The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee', we take our cue from Renzo Baas' *Fictioning Namibia as a Space of Desire,* in which he analyses the production of literary space in texts that are set in (German) South West Africa. Yet, while we share interest with Baas in 'how narrators and characters engage with, imagine, and inhabit this specific type of space', in our reading of Coetzee, we focus particularly on how space is produced through a specific multi-layered narrative construction, towards thinking about why the author designs his text in this way.[9] As our reading of 'The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee' will show, we argue that Coetzee deploys a tripartite narrative structure as a way to *empty* and simultaneously *design* the Orange River region in front of the reader's eyes.

'The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee' is, according to Baas, 'a multi-layered account of the trip undertaken by Jacobus Coetsé, the Dutch colonial farmer who is considered the first white person to have crossed the Orange River.'[10] While Jacobus Coetsé is the name of the historical figure, the name of the protagonist in the novella is Jacobus Coetzee. What is more, two further contributors (author J.M. Coetzee and his father S.J. Coetzee)

5 Brink 2012: pp. 285; 297

6 Kasembeli 2018: p. 78

7 Dovey 2013, The New York Times, https://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/17/books/review/philida-by-andre-brink.html (accessed 03 October 2020).

8 Rizzo 2005: p. 690

9 Baas 2019: pp. 6; 162

10 Baas 2019: p. 162

are named Coetzee – these 'strong ties accorded to the name … further complicate the narrative layers' as well as an understanding of the texts' relation to history and fiction.[11] Due to the limited scope of this paper, we cannot offer a more in-depth analysis of these aspects, however, they contribute significantly to the novella's complexity. Another notion that adds to this complexity is the text's composition of multiple units with distinct perspectives on Jacobus' journey to Great Namaqualand and each of the units' 'strong claims to truthfulness and historicity'.[12] And yet, due to this rather unconventional structure, Baas argues 'that the narrative is in fact the product of a fictionalised, manipulated history.'[13] Drawing from this we argue that the novella appears as a fictionalised version of the *explorer narrative*. In many ways, the plot of the central narrative evolving around Jacobus Coetzee's travels bears characteristics of the colonialist travelogue, focalising 'the archetypal hunter-explorer' that embarks on his journey into the yet 'unknown' South African interior, 'treks through the wilderness, naming it and claiming it as he goes along.'[14] On his route, he crosses the Orange River and enters Great Namaqualand where he encounters its inhabitants, who show little enthusiasm or hospitality towards their new visitor. During the course of his stay, Jacobus Coetzee falls sick and is designated to the margins of the village, where he suffers from poor health in solitude. The villagers' hostility towards their white visitor increases, finally culminating in a fight at the river where Coetzee bites off a young boy's ear and is consequently forced to leave the village. At this point, the Boer frontiersman's hunting expedition turns into an ironic failure story for the explorer, as Coetzee is deserted by most of his servants and forced to embark on his homeward journey alone, only accompanied by his loyal servant Klawer. Coetzee later returns to the village in a second expedition on a revenge campaign, killing the inhabitants and *emptying* the place.

What struck us as remarkable, as we engaged with the novella, is that the emptying of the place and the construction of an uninhabited African space, happens not only on the level of plot but particularly emerges through the form and structure of 'The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee'. The novella begins with a 'Translator's Preface' written by J.M. Coetzee, in which he declares:

> The present publication is an integral translation of the Dutch of Jacobus Coetzee's narrative and the Afrikaans of my father's Introduction, which I have taken the liberty of placing after the text in the form of an Afterword. In an Appendix I have added a translation of Coetzee's official 1760 deposition. Otherwise the sole changes I have made have been to restore two or three brief passages omitted from my father's edition and to reduce Nama words to the standard Krönlein orthography.[15]

Hence, at this point, we find out about the organisation of the text as well as about certain textual modifications made by J.M. Coetzee. After this preface, the main narrative (as

11 Baas 2019: p. 191
12 Baas: 2019: p. 169
13 Baas 2019: p.192
14 Easton 1995: p. 592
15 Coetzee 2004: p. 55

outlined above) follows. This narrative makes up the main part of the text as well as portraying the core story that the novella centres on. It is followed by the Afterword, which 'was drawn from a course of lectures on the early explorers of South Africa given annually' by the historian S.J. Coetzee and then followed by an Appendix – the official deposition of Jacobus Coetzee at the Castle of Good Hope.[16] These units inform the tripartite narrative structure in which space is produced.

Let us now take a closer look at these single units and at the ways in which space – and particularly the !Garib River region – is designed and imagined. As readers enter the main narrative with Jacobus Coetzee as the I-narrator, they dive into the first stage of spatial production. On Jacobus' travels to the north, he punctually maps his route, mechanically recounting certain stages and naming particular places: 'We stopped short of the Oliphants River…'; 'Between August 2 and August 6 we covered the fifty miles to the Groene River. The going was hard.'[17] Yet, despite these spatial markers, we are left with only sparse information about the space the protagonist treks through. We can only fathom the route he journeys roughly, being provided with little knowledge about the landscapes he passes. Interestingly, however, the I-narrator recurrently refers to traces of people that he identified along the way, pointing to signs of the inhabitants: 'Two days north of the Groene River we passed an abandoned Namaqua kraal' or: '…we found traces of Bushman encampments.'[18] This imagery of a *peopled space* increases at the point where he reaches the village in Great Namaqualand – the place where he would later come into violent conflict with the inhabitants. Through this climatic structure, readers encounter the landscapes around the Orange River region as *essentially peopled*. The little details on the setting where the encounters take place are then coupled with the explorer's dreams and fantasies when he suffers from poor health and solitude after being designated to the margins of the village:

> I move through the wilderness with my gun at the shoulder of my eye and slay elephants, hippopotami, rhinoceros, buffalo, lions, leopards, dogs, giraffes, antelope and buck of all descriptions, fowl of all descriptions, hares, and snakes; I leave behind me a mountain of skin, bones, inedible gristle, and excrement.[19]

Jacobus is envisioning himself as the masculine, fearless discoverer in the wilderness hunting animals with his gun – a conception that strongly resonates with colonialist fantasies and ideas about colonial travellers. However, the imagery of his dream is in stark contrast to the protagonist's reality, as he is too weak to move and wrapped sickly in a blanket.[20] Jacobus emerges as an emasculated character, suffering from illness in solitude.[21] This motif points to the author's strategy to parody the explorer narrative and the traveller's tale.[22] The colonialist's desire for untamed space and uninhabited wilderness

16 Coetzee 2004: p. 55
17 Coetzee 2004: p. 63
18 Coetzee 2004: pp. 63–64
19 Coetzee 2004: p. 79
20 Coetzee 2004: p. 75
21 Which is taken to the extreme, as Jacobus 'fouled' his blankets and suffers from a large, purulent fistula on his buttocks; pp. 76, 89.
22 Attwell 1991: pp. 8–15

is opposed to the situation Jacobus encounters in Great Namaqualand. Thus, on his second journey to the Great Namaqualand, Jacobus sidesteps 'the apparent "lack" of "empty space" … by creating it', as Renzo Baas explains.[23]

In the depiction of this second journey of Coetzee, the I-narrator again disregards the landscape which he passes, instead focusing on his plan of emptying the village, which he then brutally does.[24] A spatial reading of this unit of 'The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee' revealed that on the level of the plot a first step of *depeopling* the space around the Orange River has taken shape.

The second section of the *tripartite narrative structure* is then heralded with the Afterword, which would formally serve as an introduction (as we have learned in the preface), but which was moved to follow the main narrative. This Afterword is part of a lecture series from the years 1934–48 by S.J. Coetzee, and functions as an 'appraisal of Jacobus Coetzee's achievements' and his persona as a whole.[25] This informs the production of space as follows: S.J. Coetzee's depiction of Jacobus' travel route is much more elaborate than what we previously learned about the path, as S.J. Coetzee offers pictorial as well as factual information on the journey. For example, we are informed about Jacobus' 'slow progress through country of strange pyramidal sandstone hills and sandy plains where his wheels sank axle-deep', and that as he moved further, '[o]n July 18 Coetzee crossed the Olifants River at latitude 31°51", where he then 'turned in a north-easterly direction to avoid the coastal desert'.[26] As S.J. Coetzee explains, Jacobus moved along and skirted the Onder Bokkeveld and with 'the crossing of latitude 31°S the party entered the country of the Namaquas.'[27] He then describes how Jacobus 'glanced to neither right nor left as he passed through the defiles of the Khamies mountains' which 'abounded in game', moving further into deserts that were 'barren and presented a variety of dangers' as he trekked towards and finally passed the Great River.[28]

S.J. Coetzee then speculates quite elaborately on how Jacobus and his team spent their days at the Great River: 'The sight which greeted him was majestic, the waters flowing broad and strong, the cliffs resounding with their roar. Here he might have rested all day…'[29] These musings deserve further attention as part of our spatial reading. However, what is interesting for us is at this point is how S.J. Coetzee paints a pastoral scenery of the river region, envisioning Jacobus Coetzee within this idyllic landscape, where '[t]he cooing of doves soothed his ear. The cattle, unyoked, drank at the water's edge. He saw that the banks, clothed in trees (*zwartebast, karrehout*), might furnish timber for all the wants of colonization.'[30] The lecturer elaborates extensively on Jacobus Coetzee in the Southern African nature, painting a picture for the readers – or listeners in his classroom – to imagine the traveller within the landscape. Interestingly, S.J. Coetzee's further recounts Jacobus' subsequent journey into the Great Namaqualand while being ignorant

23 Baas 2019: p. 171
24 Coetzee 2004: p. 100 ff
25 Baas 2019: p. 262
26 Coetzee 2004: pp. 112–113
27 Coetzee 2004: p. 117
28 Coetzee 2004: pp. 118–119
29 Coetzee 2004: p. 120
30 Coetzee 2004: p. 120

of the events that took place between Jacobus and the inhabitants of Namaqualand. Neither Jacobus' time spent in the village, nor his fight with the people receive any attention. Instead, S.J. Coetzee continues to talk about Jacobus' travels further up north, where he discovered and claimed places, and 'camped at a warm spring which he named Warmbad'.[31]

These exemplary quotes portray how in front of the reader's eyes a certain conception of space is taking shape. We learn about the variety in soil and weather conditions as much as we picture a multitude of sceneries and landscapes (mountainous, sandy etc.) Jacobus Coetzee trekked through. This idea of a sole wanderer moving through an untamed, picturesque landscape resonates strongly with the earlier introduced, 'imperial-born myth of the "unsettled" land.'[32] It is striking here, how S.J. Coetzee increasingly paints a more and more nuanced picture of the space, particularly in contrast to the sparse information we gained with regards to the landscape in the first unit, the main text of the novella.

However, when taking a closer look at the word choice, the imaginative character of S.J. Coetzee's depiction comes to the fore. Phrasings such as 'We picture him…', or: 'Here he might have rested all day…' dismantle his report as a retrospective *construction* of a colonial explorer journey.[33] Nevertheless, the reader is left with these ideas of the space, while the indigenous people Jacobus had met remain unaccounted for. Their role and position in the space as well as their violent encounter with Jacobus Coetzee becomes secondary, as S.J. Coetzee instead focusses on crafting an imagined idyllic and ideal colonialist landscape. This narrative structure thus creates the second step of *depeopling* the space.

The third point and climax of the spatial construction is reached with the official deposition at the Castle of Good Hope – the last unit of the novella. Taking the function of an Appendix, the deposition portrays a concise summary of Jacobus journey, pointing to certain places, outlining the rough route and dates of the expedition, referencing earlier explorer's discoveries and mapping the space. The places, flora, fauna, and rivers referred to are claimed as Jacobus' discoveries. The authorities recount:

> The Narrator also told of finding in the said land of the Great Namaqua's heavy trees, the heart or innermost wood being of an uncommon deep red hue and the branches bathed in large clover-leaves and yellow flowers. He the Narrator having, besides divers as yet unknown copper mountains, encountered about four days' journey from the Great River a mountain covered all over in a glittering yellow ore, of which small fragments were broken off and brought hither by him.[34]

Space, as it is depicted and envisioned in this quote is essentially a *space of interest* for the authorities at the Castle of Good Hope. In the report of the expedition, at this third stage of the narrative structure, the encounter with the inhabitants of the Great Namaqualand is yet again disregarded. Great Namaqualand is solely depicted as a space that was 'not without danger to his Person' but there is no further indication of the violent conflicts and

31 Coetzee 2004: p. 121

32 Easton 1995: p. 588

33 Coetzee 2004: pp. 109; 120

34 Coetzee 2004: p. 125

his annihilation of the village.[35] Through the deposition, space is once again solidified as discovered, named, claimed and possessed.

Considering the absence of the massacre in the reports on Jacobus' travel in the last two units of the novella and their 'claims to truthfulness and historicity', might indicate that such a brutal encounter had never occurred in the life of the historical figure Jacobus Coetsé.[36] However, J.M. Coetzee's choice to include these allegedly 'official reports' may also be a gesture to the contrary: the violence might have taken place but had been unattended to in the myth-making around colonialists' travels. From Coetzee's broader oeuvre we know that it became a central concern for the author to dismantle colonial violence, oppressive regimes and racist ideologies.[37] In 'The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee' the author scrutinises colonial 'notions of space' by deploying the *tripartite narrative structure*.[38] Coetzee uncovers the conception of empty, pastoral space as a colonial fantasy that had to be actively (and brutally) constructed. The author's critique of colonial violence, the traveller myth, and the travelogue as a genre 'works by means of an explicit parody of a particular text or group of texts' as David Attwell describes.[39] Appropriating and parodying the travelogue and – as our spatial reading has shown – with the unconventional composition of the different units in the novella, Coetzee questions colonial conceptions of space and landscapes, and colonial tropes and imaginaries. Only the *depeopling* allowed colonialists to 'freely' claim it. What is more, through the complex, climactic composition of the novella, space (the river region) is increasingly *shaped* and *designed* in the readers' mental image, while it is simultaneously being *emptied* of its people.

A safe haven – Utley's *The Lie of the Land*

UK-based author Jaspar David Utley places his novel in a violent and atrocious period in the history of southern Africa. *The Lie of the Land* revolves around the Herero and Nama Genocide in 1904–1908, when the territory that is now Namibia was under German colonial rule and during which Herero and Nama fought against German settlement, land acquisition and colonial politics. The novel centres on themes such as war, death, colonialism, deception, physical and psychological violence, as well as perseverance and love. In light of this complex social and political landscape, the Orange River region is portrayed as a source of life, refuge and riches. It is the space where Sam – a British agent and the main protagonist of the novel – finds himself, on his quest to rescue Leah, the African woman he had fallen for. Leah had been captured by the German soldiers and taken to the concentration camps where she is expected to be a source of cheap labour. Within the narration, the significance of the river is emphasised and envisioned through particular

35 Coetzee 2004: p. 124

36 Baas: 2019: p. 169

37 He knew about the Nama and Herero genocide that would happen from 1904–8 and other 'punitive expeditions' that colonists launched in the region, which had motivated him to write *Dusklands*, as described in an article from 1984, https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/97/11/02/home/coetzee-learned.html (accessed 03 January 2021).

38 Attwell 1991: p. 11

39 Attwell 1991: pp. 8–15

narrative strategies: When applying an ecocritical approach this becomes apparent, as the nexus between humans and nature is vital within the text. A glance at specific passages from *The Lie of the Land* illuminates this. The following is a quote by Sam when he comes to the Orange River:

> First … I stripped off and trusting there were no crocodiles, I slipped into the cool water. My God it was good! I scrapped off the dirt and dust and then lay on the bank, drying myself in the sun, contemplating how I was on the junction of two worlds in more ways than one.[40]

Scrapping off the dirt and dust in the river can be seen as symbolic of a symbiotic human-nature interaction: The cleaner Sam is, the more invigorated and regenerated he becomes in his search for his love Leah. The Orange River provides a space for temporary refuge and peace – it is a safe haven in light of extremely confining circumstances. Sam's bathing in the river is his momentary escape from the horrors of the ongoing war. In the previous quote, Sam talks about being on 'the junction of two worlds in more ways than one' which may be interpreted as the Orange River being the boundary that separates two different territories:[41] the one to the northern part of the river being under German control and the one to the southern part of the river falling under British administration. At this line of demarcation, Sam has choices: Firstly, to cross the river and be free from the raging war; or secondly, to stay on the northern part of the river and continue with his search for Leah. Thus, the Orange River may be viewed as a hallway that allows Sam to escape and be free if he chooses to cross into the British territory. However, Sam remains on the northern part of the river to continue his journey to find Leah.

Still on the Orange River and the region surrounding it, Sam draws from the region's power to sustain human life. The reader learns about the area's vast supply of minerals and resources such as copper and zinc as well as diamonds, and Sam has the chance to access 'some quartz pebbles from the river'.[42] In contrast to this, the more people move away from the Orange River region into the country's interior, the more problematic life becomes. In this respect, Lüderitz Bay (away from the Orange River) is described as 'a place of pain and darkness … it is a home of the dead and the near dead.'[43] The area in-between the Orange River in the south and Zambezi River to the north is German colonial territory and described as a terrain which has 'nothing except waterholes and dry river beds hoping for a rare downpour.'[44] This comparison between the dry and bleak land further up north and the beauty, water and richness of the river region furthers the idea of the border area as an oasis, a space of possibility, choice and peace for those who manage to escape from the more populated areas.

Looking at the setting construction with this more eco-critical lens, we see how Utley imagines spaces that are touched by people as arid, bleak, in conflict and at war. He portrays them in stark contrast to those areas that yet evaded human influence, colonial

40 Utley 2017: p. 115
41 Utley 2017: p. 115
42 Utley 2017: pp. 121; 117
43 Utley 2017: p. 118
44 Utley 2017: p. 115

settlement, land claims or wars resulting from European invasion, such as the one taking place in German-South-West-Africa further north from the river. However, within *The Lie of the Land*'s strong focus on the love story between Sam and Leah, the emotions evoked by the imagination of the Orange River region are mainly personal and connected to the protagonist's quest to find Leah. While the colonial war forms the context in which the narrative unfolds, broader issues connected to the region, such as land claims or border politics, are rather bracketed in the novel. In light of this, the aesthetics of the place as a safe haven seem to almost arise from a lack of historical attachment to the place – a notion that signals again, as established earlier, the fact that the book invokes and centres outsiders' perspectives.

These two spatial readings of Utley's *The Lie of the Land* and Coetzee's 'The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee' offer exemplary insights into the ways in which the Lower !Garib River region is constructed through certain modes: in both cases, it is a territory marked heavily by colonial structures, interests, and influences. Yet, at the same time, the narratives allow the reader to envision the region as beautiful, bountiful, rich with natural resources and promise for the people who encounter or inhabit it. While being a critique of colonialist politics and land claims, both texts also speak to inequalities and injustices of the past that continue to be inscribed in the space. These colonial continuities are at the centre of our last case study.

Land as Property

'Mountain' was published as part of Koleka Putuma's poetry collection *Collective Amnesia*, in 2017. It is a powerful account of the ways in which land dispossession, white settlement, and conflicting land claims echo forcefully into the present. As stated in the introduction, the lyrical-I takes us to a bicycle tour through Namaqualand, 'Trying to locate the start of the mountain / Or the entry point of it / Every entrance (we see) is fenced.'[45] As readers, we envision a small group of bicyclists exploring a bountiful territory – a leisure activity that is associated with the urban middle or upper class. This clue serves to establish how the actors in the poem are visitors to the region. Hence, we are engaging again with 'outsiders' perspectives' on the area – not only is the poet Putuma born in the Eastern Cape and now living in Cape Town, but also her protagonists emerge as tourists to Namaqualand.

The landscapes that the bicyclists traverse is heavily marked by human property claims, with the *landlords* eagerly safeguarding what they consider as *theirs*, protecting it from the outside:

> When the old white lady in her pyjamas turns my /
> back with her Afrikaans /
> And says, *You are on* ***private property***… /
> I question why I understand what she has said/
> And the mountain she calls private. /

45 Putuma 2020: p. 174

You can't go up the mountain without going past my /
property, /
She says. /
I ask if she owns the mountain /
And she says she owns this land. /
Namaqualand?[46]

The absurdity of this claim 'to own the land' ('Namaqualand?') is coupled with the lyrical I's perplexity about their understanding of these bizarre assertions ('I question why I understand what she has said'). It is this notion that defines the tone of the following lines, in which the theme of 'private property' is explored further. 'Private property' becomes a metaphor for the abuse, discrimination and violence experienced by Black people – in the past, just as much as in the present:

It's just private property, …/
In the way that your freedom is private property, /
In the way that your obsessive partner thinks that you are his/her private property, /
In the way that your body is private property, /
In the way private property was lynched and sold back /
in the day.[47]

This link between past and present becomes even more specific:

And, of course, we are people who cannot go anywhere /
Or inherit anything unless we embody roles of servitude. /
And yet our forefathers built kingdoms /
We do not own or live on /
As an inherent aspect of your settling and our /
consequential migration.[48]

These lines speak to the troubling double-bind of colonial legacies: While the descendants of colonial settlers inherit what is allegedly their and their families' 'private property', Black people in Southern Africa remain empty-handed in the face of what was built by their 'forefathers'. [49] With this statement, Putuma uses the region as a backdrop for a broader debate on land disputes between white colonialists and African kingdoms, resulting wars and relocations. The legacies of these histories leave Black people with the imperative to migrate, 'to move', as dictated by the 'this current Native Land Act:'[50]

Move, because the three dogs on a leash need more /
space on the pavement. /…
Move the last two syllables of your name off your ID, so /
I can swallow who you are. /…

46 Putuma 2020: p. 174, original emphasis.
47 Putuma 2020: p. 176
48 Putuma 2020: p. 176
49 Putuma 2020: p. 176
50 Putuma 2020: p. 176

> Telling us our movements do not matter /
> Unless we are moving out of the way, /
> Or moving to make way, /
> Or moving out, /
> Or moving in together to squat like sardines in tin /
> squares they call houses.[51]

The poem powerfully evokes how the ways in which land, ownership, colonial history, racism, discrimination, economic status, township life and the physical and psychological violence inflicted on Black people remain ubiquitous. It is this trauma that manifests itself as the bicyclists in Namaqualand are urged to halt in front of the fence, facing the mountain and the land they wish to access, yet incapable of reaching it, unable to overcome the barriers imposed by white people who continue to control the space. This trauma of the past defines present realities in many ways. Land as depicted in 'Mountain' is a symbol that gestures towards these multiple, unjust power structures. The poem ends with the imagined voice of the white property owner, declaring:

> And anyway, you, you can't go up the mountain /
> It does not belong to you. /
> Like everything else around here.[52]

Conclusion

Reflecting on the resonances, the tone and voice of Koleka Putuma's poem, in comparison to Jasper David Utley and J.M. Coetzee's texts, elucidates how space – the river region or Namaqualand in general – is much more than a setting for literary texts to evoke questions around colonialism, slavery or white movement through African landscapes. History played out on these specific spaces, and it marks the land to this day. What is more, there are vast horizons of experiences connected to these sites and places and Putuma's poem is a powerful request to attend to these.

While our investigations of Utley's *The Lie of the Land* (2017) and Coetzee's 'The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee' (1974) show how both authors design and imagine space as a way to explore and critique colonial tropes, or to question political and territorial entities and the battles that emerge from land claims, Putuma's 'Mountain' opens up new perspectives on literary space. Her poem reminds us of the emotional dimensions and the painful realities that colonial constructions of space imply for Southern Africans to this day. The contrasts of the three different texts show how their evocations of particular resonances strongly rely on the issues of voice and format. The two novels/novellas centre the experiences of their main protagonists whereby the role and function of the river region relies strongly on its potential as a setting in which certain actions play out and decisions are made. In comparison, Koleka Putuma's poem deploys more emotive registers in the depiction of the area, narrating loss and injustice from the perspective of the

51 Putuma 2020: pp. 176–180

52 Putuma 2020: p. 180

lyrical I. This lyrical-I powerfully questions and unsettles white claims to Namaqualand. What is more, the text's vividness also emerges from its particular mode of expression. Reflecting on the significance of poetry, South African poet Toni Stuart states:

> Poetry gives people the power to make their voices heard in a clear, discernible and distinct way. The brevity, the intentional use of language and the use of metaphor and imagery, allow people to talk about complicated, difficult and large political issues in a human way. It allows us to engage with the human voice, the human experience of these political issues.[53]

In comparison, our 'spatial readings' of *The Lie of the Land* and 'The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee' have shown how fiction and the novel as narrative forms can function to transmit 'not just "what happened" or "what was said to have happened," but rather "what may have happened"', as Wendy W. Walters writes.[54] Similarly, scholar and literary critic Abiole Irele emphasises how narrative emerges as 'an imaginative mode of reconstruction: of consciousness, of spirit, and, ultimately, of vision.'[55]

We hope that our selection of 'spatial readings' may function as a starting point for more in-depth investigations of a broad variety of forms of text that (re-)imagine the Orange River region, and that it may ignite further analyses of the ways in which authors imagine the area as a way to raise political, historical or social issues. Further research is needed that focuses more closely on the perspectives of 'insiders' from the region. Such discussions may engage with Afrikaans-speaking texts or explore the vast repositories of oral narratives from local communities that speak to or are set in the river area. These additional investigations together with our case studies might allow us to generate a more nuanced understanding of the region's significance for insiders *and* outsiders, who all share an interest in the space and – through the medium of text or narrative – claim a certain power of defining and generating knowledge on the area.

We hope that this essay can show how moving our attention to the role and constructions of literary spaces might engender new conversations on and (re)considerations of the landscapes we see, cherish, live in, pass through or imagine.

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53 Lecznar 2016, https://africainwords.com/2016/05/23/qa-with-toni-stuart-poetry-gives-people-the-power-to-make-their-voices-heard/ (accessed 12 June 2022).

54 Walters 2013: p. 1

55 Irele 1993: p. 169

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