

# “Before God This Was Their Country”

History and Guilt in Stuart Cloete’s *Turning Wheels* and the  
Voortrekker Monument

Rebecca Weaver-Hightower

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It was the seepage of a small, great-hearted people into a continent. Secure in the knowledge that they were the chosen race, certain of their capacity to endure, and forced on by the Boer necessity for space and freedom, they followed rivers to their sources, crossed the great watersheds and followed new rivers; hunting, fighting, and reading the Bible as they wandered.

(*Turning Wheels* 2)

This epigraph from the opening of Stuart Cloete's 1937 novel *Turning Wheels*, about the Great Trek, the 1830s migration of Afrikaners into the interior of South Africa, illustrates the literary paradox that the novel embodies. *Turning Wheels* describes the Great Trek in romantic, even loving terms, yet it was banned in South Africa by descendants of the trekkers who themselves frequently romanticized the Trek. While initially merely curious, this paradox ultimately provides insight into the nationalist project of twentieth-century white South Africa, and into the role of literature and representation in that project.

*Turning Wheels* follows a convoy of Voortrekkers as they journey, battle "natives," marry, and procreate, settling in their land of milk and honey away from the strictures of the British, only to be massacred at the novel's end by combined Xhosa and Zulu forces. Despite this, the novel concludes on an optimistic note by forecasting that the settlement's two surviving children will contribute to the future Afrikaner race, which will rebuild itself, for "much had been destroyed, but something remained" (434). On the whole, *Turning Wheels* lauds the hardships and triumphs of Dutch settlement in South Africa, in passage after passage extolling the strength, boldness, and glory of "the Afrikaner race," while giving insight into Voortrekker psychology and culture.<sup>1</sup> Yet the novel was banned in South Africa in 1938, a ban that was only lifted in 1974. As *Time* and *Profile* magazines explain, the novel sold 164,000 copies in the U.S., 50,000 copies in England, was a Book-of-the-Month selection, was translated into ten languages, and became a best seller in South Africa before being banned. But it was banned in SA because it was deemed "an insult to Boer heroes," and "filthy, discourteous, inaccurate, [and] misleading to foreign readers" (*Time* 67). In his analysis of reaction to the novel, "Defending the Great Trek Myth," Frederick Hale argues that the novel was deemed offensive for numerous reasons, all stemming from a climate of what he calls the "defensive ethnocentricity" of Afrikaners. As Hale explains at some length, though English presses in North America, Britain, and South Africa generally published positive reviews of Cloete's novel, Afrikaner reaction in South Africa was

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<sup>1</sup> *The Encyclopedia of Post-Colonial Literatures in English*, in an entry on "Popular Writing (South Africa)," shares this sentiment about *Turning Wheels* offering a positive portrayal of the Voortrekkers: "His work [*Turning Wheels*], setting a course to be emulated by many later practitioners of the popular genre, often displays a self-consciously ideological intention, not merely to mythologize Afrikaner history but also to rehabilitate it for contemporary international consumption. As an essayist and publicist, Cloete promoted the image of the apartheid 'experiment,' although sometimes simultaneously fighting governmental bans imposed on several of his novels" (1298).

quite virulent, involving heatedly negative reviews, protests, rallies, book burnings, and letter writing campaigns – all urging that the book be nationally and officially banned.

In the absence of satisfactory explanation from the censoring agency, critics like Hale and Peter McDonald in *The Literature Police* have debated just why the novel was banned. The consensus, in short, is that Cloete’s romanticized version of the Trek was not idealized enough. One objection cited is that the novel includes a story of miscegenation, an occurrence not uncommon but not often so blatantly admitted, especially in a story about the Voortrekkers.<sup>2</sup> Second, as Hale recognizes, *Turning Wheels* fictionalized the Trek at a time when other Trek “novels” were near-beatifications of the Voortrekkers thinly disguised as histories. As a sensational writer out for a good story, that was certainly not Cloete’s approach. Cloete’s style of writing, which Henrietta Roos terms “purple prose,” included larger-than-life characters, with passions and intrigues fitting the popular romance genre. Such writing was excusable, even entertaining, when portraying other historical objects, but it became unsuitable to the Afrikaner public when applied to the sacrosanct Trek.<sup>3</sup>

A third potential objection concerns the novel’s simultaneous assertion that the Voortrekkers believed their endeavour to be blessed by God and the novel’s questioning of that belief. As one of the novel’s characters puts it, “Before God this was their country” – “their” meaning the Afrikaners – implying both the belief that the Afrikaner right to the land comes from their vow before God and also suggesting a strange logic of ownership based on priority, since South Africa was their land before even God. Again and again Cloete’s characters assert the divine providence of their mission, yet the novel simultaneously questions that belief through the story of the convoy leader Hendrik van der Berg, who believes he has received a sign from God to kill his only son in order to eliminate him as a rival for a much younger woman – a plot point fitting for a potboiler. Not surprisingly, such a story of a crime against nature being prompted and justified by an alleged sign from God could be read as questioning the

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<sup>2</sup> Peter McDonald’s *The Literature Police* explains that the censors of the time did not object to the novel’s mild sexuality, even though the novel included both adultery and miscegenation. The objection was to its portrayal of Afrikaners, which was found to be caricaturing them (51–52). The *Standard Encyclopedia of Southern Africa* admits that “partly because of the publicity [surrounding the banning of *Turning Wheels*], Stuart Cloete became one of the most widely discussed of contemporary authors” (54). Annalisa Oboe, in *Fiction, History and Nation in South Africa*, however, claims the novel’s portrayal of miscegenation was the reason for its banning, for “the white South African ethics could not tolerate the idea of tainted origins and of having to recognize too close a link with the blacks” (158).

<sup>3</sup> Readers were possibly also primed to be defensive against Cloete’s portrayal because of his own biography. Cloete was descended from Dutch settlers but was himself born in Paris and educated in Great Britain, making him suspiciously cosmopolitan, especially because connected to the British. Though a prosperous farmer in SA for a while after leaving the British army post-WWI, Cloete left South Africa for England to become a writer, penning *Turning Wheels* while in England. Cloete also went on to write historical romances on a range of subjects, including the Slagtersneck rebellion and the Anglo-Boer War.

very religious underpinnings of the Trek and the Afrikaner race, calling into question all their claims to a divine calling.

Though such points of criticism do not fully explain the banning of this novel, they do highlight its ambivalence about the colonizing project of the Voortrekkers: the same novel that chronicles and extols the glory of the Great Trek also paints a more complicated picture than its predecessors, one not palatable to many Afrikaners. This complicated picture led to the mixed reaction the novel received in South Africa, a reaction, which, I will argue, also points to a complicated relationship to colonization writ large in South Africa. This essay endeavours to show that a close reading of *Turning Wheels* and its reception reveals a surprising latent guilt on the part of some South African readers in the 1930s, giving rise to the defensiveness that Dora Taylor in *They Speak of Africa* calls a “fanatic veneration” of the Great Trek (64). As Hale also remarks: “the intensity of the reaction to Cloete’s alleged calumnious treatment of the Voortrekkers indicates the strength of early twentieth-century Afrikaners’ identity with their migrating forebears and, perhaps, underscores the success of the efforts [...] to cultivate an almost pristine image of these pioneers” (117). As Hale indicates, the defensive reaction tells us as much about Afrikaners’ need for the national myth of the Trek as it does about Cloete’s actual portrayal. It is clear that for some 1930s white South Africans, even a moderately ambivalent version of their history would remind them too much of their own collective guilt for comfort; hence the book’s banning.

A historical novel, *Turning Wheels* tells a story set in the past in order to help its reading public to make sense of the present. The novel is set in the 1840s, a time when the frontier was being settled, when fears of indigenous Africans were rampant, contact between Africans and settlers was not in the safe confines of the town or farm, and when the possibility existed that the land would ultimately remain in the hands of Africa’s indigenous people. Race relations were, of course, equally tense one hundred years later when *Turning Wheels* was published. South Africa in the 1930s was still very much a colonial state, with black South Africans forced by the white minority to be legally second-class citizens in their own country.<sup>4</sup> Afrikaner nationalism was on the swell in the 1930s, with the Great Trek re-enacted and the building of the Voortrekker Monument – the massive granite structure in Pretoria housing a cenotaph and a sculptural frieze depicting the Trek – being commenced in the same year as the publication of *Turning Wheels*. Indeed, I shall argue that one can see a link between

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<sup>4</sup> As is well known, some conservative white South Africans of the time worked to deny black South Africans the right to vote and be in Parliament, to own more than 13% of their own country or to live on farmland desired by white farmers (in the Natives’ Land Acts of 1913 and 1936). In the two decades after the publication of *Turning Wheels*, under a series of “apartheid” laws, Black South Africans would be forced to have to work for whites for low wages by the imposition of high taxes, forced into inferior schools by the Bantu Education Act (1953), and forced into a culture of surveillance by Pass Laws (1952). They were also kept separate from white South Africans (unless working for them) by the Mixed Marriages Act (1949), Group Areas Act (1950), Population Registration Act (1950) and Separate Amenities Act (1953).

the monument and the novel in terms of the types of narratives they present about the Voortrekkers, though one was lauded and the other censored.

In this essay I approach *Turning Wheels* as an attempt to work through social issues of the time when it was written, including anxieties and guilt over race relations and the legacies of settlement, as well as insecurities about the future of the Afrikaner people. I build on Hale's thorough investigation of the book's reception to analyze further the psycho-cultural work that the book was primed to perform if it had actually been widely read by its South African audience. In short, I endeavour to show throughout that *Turning Wheels* contains defensive narratives within its stories, thereby providing a means for readers to deal with feelings of guilt inherent in the continuing violence of a nation built on colonization. Ironically, the novel's potential as a therapeutic narrative made it, I argue, too painful and dangerous to read. Its banning makes *Turning Wheels* a particularly telling example of the repression of guilt. Thus, whatever its artistic merits – it is largely a pulp novel – *Turning Wheels* demands further attention for sociological reasons. The book captures part of the zeitgeist of 1930s South Africa, for it elicited a strong reaction that I identify as collective guilt. My contrasting, further, of Cloete's novel with the Voortrekker Monument in Pretoria, where moments of ambivalence were carefully stamped out, extends my argument for the centrality of the denial of white guilt to the nationalist/colonialist project.<sup>5</sup>

## Guilt and History in *Turning Wheels*

Before performing a close examination of *Turning Wheels* as a text shot through with guilt, it is important to explain more fully the concept of collective guilt and how literature can be used to process it. Collective guilt, psychologists theorize, is different from individual guilt. Though individual guilt is “an unpleasant feeling that accompanies the belief that the harmful act one committed was not justified” (Wohl, Branscombe, and Klar 3), *collective* guilt “stems from the distress that group members experience when they accept that their ingroup is responsible for immoral actions that harmed another group” (Branscombe and Doosje 3). Collective guilt, that is, need not involve actual participation in any harm-doing; all that is needed is for one to feel allegiance to or categorize oneself as a member of a group (based on family, race, nationality, ideology or others) that is responsible for harm-doing. When collective guilt occurs, and obviously people are not equally sensitive to guilt-inducing situations, one way to manage it involves individual attempts to atone for the ingroup's guilt. One

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<sup>5</sup> In recent years historians and cultural critics have increasingly read the Voortrekker Monument as a historic text presenting a narrative. Many look at what contemporary multicultural SA is trying to do with this text that was built to promote white supremacy. Critics (Annie Coombes in *History After Apartheid* and Albert Grundlingh in “A Cultural Conundrum? Old Monuments and New Regimes: The Voortrekker Monument as Symbol of Afrikaner Power in a Postapartheid South Africa,” especially) have also discussed how the monument's grounds have been changed or the site itself perceived differently during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This paper, however, is concerned with its meaning in the 1930s.

might, for instance, donate to a charity that feeds the hungry children of a place one's nation is oppressing. Other methods entail trying to avoid the collective guilt by disidentifying with the group or reconfiguring the logic of the event, perhaps deciding to unsubscribe from an offending organization or declaring that an offensive behaviour must have been misconstrued. *Turning Wheels*, as I demonstrate below, provides an excellent example of both methods of managing the residual guilt for its contemporary readers, who might have felt traces of guilt for their ancestors' colonization of South Africa and for their own contemporary oppression of black South Africans through law and culture.

In order to understand exactly how literary narratives assist readers in managing guilty feelings, it is useful to draw upon psychoanalyst Anna Freud's concepts of defence mechanisms. Freud argues that some people try to defend against different forms of anxiety (including guilt) by thinking in such a way as to deny, falsify, or distort reality. That is, ordinary people under stress, Freud says, create stories of their own lives that operate on the unconscious level but present reality in a way more palatable to them. Primary defence mechanisms (like repression and denial), she says, serve to prevent unacceptable ideas or impulses from entering the conscious, while secondary defence mechanisms (including identification, projection, and rationalization) grow out of these primary defence mechanisms to alter or subvert reality, thereby keeping the individual from feeling anxiety or, in the case of this study, guilt.<sup>6</sup> This essay draws an analogy between the stories that individuals tell themselves to defend against guilty feelings and the stories that writers produce, which, I argue, work like defence mechanisms on the communal level. Just as a person might deny a thought or action in order to avoid the associated guilt, literature can also contain stories that deny a thought or action, thereby letting readers also experience the release from guilt that denial brings. All of these actions can occur on the unconscious level so that writers and readers might not realize the function of the stories they are creating or consuming. Though it is true that not every reader would react to these stories with psychological defence mechanisms or even experience guilt for colonizing actions in the first place, such stories would certainly affect or provoke some readers' collective guilt.<sup>7</sup>

The best evidence for the existence of collective guilt and the complicated response it brings comes through the literature itself, where we find some texts working to deny the harm of an ingroup's actions, and other texts that record or proclaim complicity,

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<sup>6</sup> This explanation draws from that of Anna Freud in *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense*, from Sandler and Freud's *The Analysis of Defense: The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense Revisited*, and from Michael Kahn's *Basic Freud: Psychoanalytic Thought for the Twenty First Century*.

<sup>7</sup> Other theorists interested in empire and collective guilt have used psychoanalytic theory to study the interaction of culture and literature. Diane Simmons's "The Curse of Empire: Grandiosity and Guilt in the Stories of Arthur Conan Doyle" argues, as I do, that literature can contain plot elements that function on the cultural level as defense mechanisms. Positing that Doyle's Sherlock Holmes tales functioned as vehicles for 19<sup>th</sup> century England to process its ambivalence towards empire, Simmons argues that these stories "took on the task of managing a repressed but corrosive guilt over imperial 'loot,' a constant battle against a feared 'curse' of empire" (534).

even culpability. Instead of working in opposition, such texts instead work in tandem to aid the processing of guilt for readers with differing levels of self-awareness. As well as being an attempt to atone for an ingroup's actions, a text admitting guilt can also aid its processing by allowing readers to exorcize painful feelings through reading instead of acting in the real world. Individual texts also provide evidence of these complicated feelings in the very act of presenting stories that defend against guilt, for they would not contain such narratives if there was not an uncomfortable sense of collective guilt alive in the culture somewhere that needed to be dissipated or exorcized. It is of course impossible to know if such work is being done on a conscious or unconscious level by the authors concerned, that is, if they were intending to provoke debate or smooth over troubled waters, or if they were unintentionally responding to cultural anxiety through the stories they told. Nevertheless, it is important that we do this critique in order to elucidate how literature impacts upon (and not just reflects) culture.

In South African literature of the later twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, when introspection about guilt has become more widespread within Western culture generally, there have been a number of attempts to provide a public space for discussions of collective guilt. Beyond the Truth and Reconciliation Commission itself, which produced a public venue for the transmission of stories of oppression and apology after the end of apartheid, books based on the Truth Commission, like Anjie Krog's *Country of My Skull* and Gillian Slovo's *Red Dust*, have brought debates about collective guilt, complicity, and reparations in South Africa to the international stage. Other novels and films of this period have also undertaken analysis of white guilt and atonement, simply by telling stories about ordinary people in transition from apartheid. J. M. Coetzee's novel *Disgrace*, for instance, is told through the tale of one aging white man coming to terms with his altered situation, owning up to his mistreatment of others, and apologizing to the student he raped, to the daughter he all but abandoned, and to the black neighbours he scorned. Through the story of one man learning to manage his sense of guilt over his privilege in the old racist regime, the novel has brought discussions of guilt and apology into the public sphere, which in turn promotes national healing.

Though not as obviously as *Disgrace* or as effectively (since it was banned in South Africa), *Turning Wheels* also provides a space for analysis of collective guilt, in that it contains plot lines that mirror some of the psychological defence mechanisms that Freud analyzes. Whether consciously or unconsciously, Cloete's *Turning Wheels* presents stories with the capacity to help his readers work through uncomfortable emotions of collective guilt. Of course, many of his readers responded with hostility instead of healing.<sup>8</sup> In *Turning Wheels* we see stories of *identification* and *projection*, which could help address both an individual and a cultural or collective sense of guilt for readers by altering their perceptions of reality.

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<sup>8</sup> I am not able to make any claim about intentionality, since I have not been able to find any place where Cloete voiced his motivations for writing the novel or writing it as he did.

## Identification and the Victim Fantasy

Identification, as Anna Freud explains the term, means imaginatively taking on characteristics of the Other in order to expiate uncomfortable feelings. In *Turning Wheels* we see identification in the Voortrekkers taking on characteristics of their Other, indigenous Africans, so that the settlers assume the defensive role. That is, *Turning Wheels* depicts the settlers as the real victims, both of indigenous people and/or of the English colonizers the Trekkers were determined to escape, reflecting the settler's interesting interstitial position as both colonizer and colonized. The settler as victim, then, is justified in expanding into land legally and psychologically constructed as "empty" (though in reality, already inhabited) and in declaring himself the "empty" land's rightful owner. That same settler as victim endures in *Turning Wheels*, for the settlers are shown as having constantly to defend themselves from groups of black Africans; this victim portrayal, of course, ignores the fact that the Voortrekkers were the ones invading the interior and not the other way around.

To illustrate, *Turning Wheels* both begins and ends with scenes of settlers defending against an attack, as in the following passage from the novel's final scene:

It came at dawn. Massed in serried ranks, the natives ringed them below the mountain. The Kaffirs were on the flanks, and the Zulus in the centre. Their minds misted by the blood in their brains, their wide nostrils dilated by smell of battle, they were eager and impatient as horses stamping their feet. Soon their spear tips would bite into flesh, soon they would feel their edges grind against bone [...] . Like a black wave crested with white plumes the Zulus leapt upwards and were met by bullets fired so close that the explosion of the guns burnt their chests. Falling back, the attackers were replaced by a second wave and a third. The weight of the attack was such that it rocked the wagons, and the dead were piled higher than the hubs of the wheels. [...] Here and there, standing back to back, men and women still fought, with their dead children at their feet, fought and were overwhelmed.

(427)

Such passages were written one hundred years after the events portrayed to convince twentieth-century readers – both South African and not – of the victimhood of the Afrikaners. The warriors are relentlessly offensive (a series of "black waves" of "attackers"), acting only out of an animalistic ("as horses stamping their feet") blood lust, an immediate threat (so close that "the explosion of the guns burnt their chests") but illogically undeterred by their losses. Contrastingly, the settlers are defensive, enclosed within the circle of their settlement, "standing back to back" and fighting valiantly despite their losses, their "dead children at their feet." An earlier passage explaining preparation for the attack describes the laager: "the wagons were lashed together in a great circle [...] the patient oxen [...] tied to trek tows, a wall of living flesh about the

wagons" (403), the entire community arranged in layers of bodies and possessions defending the vulnerable settler, like layers of armour protecting the body's vital organs.

Passages such as these, even though about the destruction of a community, serve as a space of wish fulfilment where the settlers' colonial advance into already inhabited lands becomes cast as justifiable expansion into available territory, and where the settler has to defend himself against a violent and illogically aggressive indigenous Other. Of course, another view of events would show the Zulu and Xhosa as victims of a settler land grab, as fighting back to stop the tide of white intruders. Yet the novel tells a story that allows its twentieth-century white South African reader to identify with the victim role, thus insulating him or her from nagging feelings of collective guilt over having benefitted from past dispossession and being in the process of planning more. Such passages would provide the reader, who might well go on to support the system of apartheid laws, with a justification for his or her existence in South Africa. Whites were reliant on the myths of their forebears to convince themselves of their right to the land and of their right to oppress black South Africans.

Alongside stories defending against guilt are others that are more complicated, suggesting the novel's ambivalence over its own project and perhaps contributing to its hostile reception. As one example, not all of the novel's non-white Africans are shown as mindlessly aggressive. The novel pulls a few "black" characters from the "serried ranks" and fleshes them out into complicated individuals. One of these is Rinkals, companion of the young hunter and ultimate protagonist of the book, Swarte Pietie, and his sister Sara. Rinkals is a shrewd, wily man who knows enough of the white and black worlds to be able to survive in either. For instance, Rinkals tricks an African chief into giving him wives and cattle, but he also tricks Swarte Pietie into sparing his life and taking him on as manservant. The novel exhibits a kind of admiration for Rinkals, showing him as one of the only survivors of the battle at the novel's end, perhaps implying a lesson about how black South Africans must adapt to the white man's world being built in the 1930s: a controversial suggestion indeed, since Rinkals is smart and not entirely obedient.

The novel also undercuts its own defence of the Trek through the words of the character who is arguably the novel's protagonist, Swarte Pietie. Despite his belief that he hates "kaffirs" because they killed his father, Swarte Pietie expresses an insight into their position that the other white characters in the novel seem to lack; this insight is further suggested by his name, which literally refers to his dark hair and beard but also suggests a relationship to blackness and black Africa. Piet challenges his own people when they tell him that the black South Africans are of a lesser bloodline and happy to serve: "But do the Kaffirs know of this?" he asks. "Do they understand that they are the children of Ham? I do not think they do, on the contrary it is in my mind that they think they are the people who have been dispossessed, and they are angry. You can see the anger in their eyes." Only Swarte Pietie recognizes the complicated feelings of the novel's natives; and by having these words come from him, the novel brings into question its many other assertions of black South African incompetence, providing

moments of atonement alongside defensiveness. Also telling is that alongside stories of the Voortrekker as victim are stories of black South Africans as empowered by their cunning, which could perhaps also be part of the defensive portrayal, suggesting that the black South African is not a helpless victim but instead the architect of his own destiny.

Around the time *Turning Wheels* was published, another major “text” about the Great Trek was initiated: the Voortrekker Monument in Pretoria, which contains sculptural narratives similar to Cloete’s, but which was received quite differently. As John Peffer comments in *Art and the End of Apartheid*, “the monument was designed as a focal point for the celebration of Afrikaner nationalism, in the context of commemorating ‘The Day of the Vow,’ a mythic event in 1838 when the Voortrekkers, greatly outnumbered by their enemy in Zululand, were said to have made a covenant with God in exchange for the defeat of the Zulus in the Battle of Blood River” (229). Though not unveiled until 1949, groundbreaking on the monument began in 1938 and was accompanied by an elaborate buildup, including a reenactment of the Trek and several weeks of celebrations.<sup>9</sup> It is likely that Cloete was inspired to write his novel by the events surrounding the Great Trek centenary, perhaps hoping to cash in on raised levels of historical awareness among the general public. Also making this connection, Hale begins his analysis of the censorship of *Turning Wheels* with a discussion of the Great Trek Centenary of 1938, which he describes as “a galvanizing event in the unfolding of Afrikaner nationalism” (102).

Like all monuments, the Voortrekker Monument presents a narrative of its own through its construction, the art it contains, the stories it chooses to tell, and the perspective it promotes. Not at all surprisingly, the monument dedicated to the Voortrekkers depicts them as the heroes of their story. A ring of sixty-four granite replica wagons encircles the monument itself, as if the monument’s work as a psychological defence mechanism must itself be protected from the discerning lens of history and from South Africans who might question its story. As *The Voortrekker Monument Pretoria, Official Guide* explains, the wagons represent those used at the battle of Blood River, but also “stand for defence against any and everything which clashes with the ideals of the Voortrekkers and warding them off from this national shrine of the Afrikaner” (37).<sup>10</sup> Sabine Marschall likewise describes the structure of the entire monument as defensive (though she doesn’t use that word), “as a series of protective layers radiating out from the innermost core, the cenotaph of Piet Retief [a Trek

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<sup>9</sup> Elizabeth Delmont in “The Voortrekker Monument: Monolith to Myth” gives a detailed description of how the monument was conceived, supported and built, along with how it has been understood and regarded since then.

<sup>10</sup> *The Voortrekker Monument Pretoria, Official Guide* that I quote is undated, but I would speculate that it was not written very recently, or it would be more careful with its language and less apparent with its ideology. Elizabeth Delmont in quoting the same or a similar guide gives the year of the first edition as 1954 and the 6<sup>th</sup> as 1969. *The Guide* presents an unadulterated defense of Afrikaner culture and the Trek as a heroic mission.

leader] in the crypt below the ‘hall of heroes’” (165). Marschall uses terms suggestive of psychological defence, both for its builders – 1930s Afrikaners obsessed with the mythology of the Trek – and for its visitors, who would have a range of reactions to the monument’s rather explicit psychological work.

*The Voortrekker Monument Pretoria, Official Guide* explains another architectural feature that is also explicitly defensive: the bronze statue of the Voortrekker mother and her children. The statue of the mother is roughly life-sized. Dressed in an ankle-length dress, wearing a bonnet and carrying a basket, she protectively clutches two children, who gaze up at her adoringly from her sides. The *Official Guide* explains that this statue was given a place of honour because “it was she [the Voortrekker woman] who ensured the success of the Great Trek and thus brought civilization into the interior of South Africa” (36). The statue of the mother and children is positioned among four black *bas relief* carvings of wildebeest, two on either side of the statue, all turning away from her, heads lowered as if to attack. The *Official Guide* explains that “the statue of the Voortrekker Mother and her children symbolizes white civilization while the black wildebeest portray the everthreatening dangers of Africa” (36). The tableau, then, is another defensive one, with the mother protecting her children against the animalistic African Other. Moreover, the tableau argues the triumph of white civilization, as the *Official Guide* explains: “The determined attitude and triumphant expression on the woman’s face while confidently gazing into the future, and the retreating attitude of the wildebeest, suggest that the dangers are receding and that the victory of civilization is an accomplished fact” (36). As a narrative of denial, however, this compulsion prematurely to assert conservative Afrikaner triumph, argues for an underlying doubt, fear, and even guilt.

The massive frieze in the main chamber also presents a defensive story. Its 27 marble panels were sculpted in high relief to echo those of the Parthenon “Elgin” Marbles, a symbolic assertion, Delmont says, that “the Voortrekkers have a long established history” (87), and to place the whole complex and the Afrikaner people, as Richard Evans argues, in the classical tradition. Building the monument out of granite similarly promotes a fantasy of the immortality of the Afrikaner culture. The *Official Guide* makes much of the durability of the monument’s granite and of its classical antecedents. Thus the construction of the monument itself could be understood as a defensive gesture in the face of the feared eradication of Afrikaner culture. In a collective state of panic, the Afrikaner community of the early twentieth century decided to build a monument to itself, in heavy stone, to solidify its crumbling foundation, leaving evidence of this panic in that very gesture.

The frieze’s narrative also is highly defensive. Of the 27 scenes of the frieze, 8 depict the Voortrekkers under attack by barbarous and invading Africans. Panel 14, for instance, “The Massacre at Bloukrans,” stresses the offensive position of the bestialized Other. The panel shows five Zulus, four with spears about to be plunged into unarmed white women and children who are kneeling as if pleading for their lives, the other Zulu dancing triumphantly. The *Official Guide* explains that the panel was meant to convey

“that natives in their primitive state grow drunk when they smell or drink blood” so that “the scene depicted gives an impression of a drunken orgy” (48). These Others have not only attacked the victimized Voortrekker without cause; they have done it with a sexualized relish. A complementary narrative comes in panel 5, “The Battle of Vegkop,” which stresses the defensiveness of the Voortrekkers by showing battle from the perspective of within the laager. In the foreground the panel shows women loading guns, casting bullets, and assisting a wounded man. Slightly further back, the panel places a ring of wagons with the backs of white men shooting from between or over them, while in the far background are hordes of faceless attacking black Africans. This arrangement puts the museum visitor in the position of the defensive Voortrekker against the offensive black African, encouraging identification with the victim position and the heroic Afrikaner.

Even though largely a heroic presentation, the process of designing the frieze also hints at some cultural ambivalence regarding the Voortrekker colonizing project. As Alta Steenkamp explains in “Apartheid to Democracy: Representation and Politics in the Voortrekker Monument and Red Location Museum,” two panels were altered from their original design. In one panel, the image of a Zulu soldier killing a baby was changed to a milder scene of a soldier setting a wagon alight, after the South African public, upon learning of the scene from a newspaper report, protested. The public that wanted their ancestors mythologized was squeamish about depicting that level of violence, perhaps in a moment of collective guilt, feeling that extreme image was unfair. In response to this aversion, the monument’s designers needed to redesign the image or risk an unintended mixed reaction on the part of visitors to the monument. Another panel was altered, Steenkamp explains, but in this case at the request of the planning committee, not the public, and ironically, to make the indigenous person look less “civilized:” “the depiction of the Zulu king Dingaan in the scene of his meeting with the Boers was deemed too ‘civil,’ and the artists were instructed by the planning committee to make him appear more inept” (251). These two acts of self-censorship are significant in that they reveal some of the psychological processes behind the monument’s design and how hints of ambivalence had to be carefully erased. This erasure could occur, of course, because the monument, unlike the novel, was collaborative. One might wonder whether Cloete, should he have had some advance warning of the strong emotions his novel would elicit, would also have excised moments of ambivalence from his text.

## Projection and the Good Colonizer

Narratives of identification were not the only defence mechanisms apparent in *Turning Wheels*, for the novel also contains stories resembling narratives of projection, where, as Anna Freud observes, individuals imagine their own undesired qualities or behaviours as belonging to another person, all in order to relieve emotional dissonance. “I hate him” becomes recast as “he hates me,” for instance, relieving the subject of re-

sponsibility for the uncomfortable feeling. As with stories of identification, narratives of projection in literature could create a space for readers to work through their own sense of guilt through the individual act of reading the novel, which when compiled, could function to help the larger culture process its collective guilt.

One of the primary ways projection works in settler literature involves the good/bad colonizer split. In short, the novel differentiates between good and bad colonizers as a way of one group projecting its undesirable qualities onto another. Typically in settler literature, the “good” colonizers are those who have legitimacy in their land claim, those whom God blesses, and who understand indigenous people well enough to treat them in an appropriate manner. The “bad” colonizers are illegitimate in their land claim and colonial administration, lack divine assistance, and treat indigenous people either too leniently or too harshly, creating problems for the “good” colonizers. Again the ascribed traits of the “bad” Other colonizer come from the imagined “good” colonizer’s fears about themselves. In *Turning Wheels* the two competing colonial groups are the Dutch and the English, reflecting the reality of both the time in which the novel was set and the time in which it was written. In the 1830s the Voortrekkers were motivated to migrate in part to escape the British colonial overlords; and at the turn of the twentieth century, just thirty years before the novel’s publication, the Afrikaners and British fought a second civil war on South African soil, the Second Anglo-Boer War.

Despite the hostile reception of *Turning Wheels* and despite its being written in English and not Afrikaans, the novel clearly depicts the Dutch settlers as the “good” colonizers, with the “bad” British only mentioned as backdrop and, as the novel’s opening stipulates, motivation for the trek:

It was the great trek. The logical outcome of the freeing of the slaves by the English in the middle of a harvest, so that the farmer starved while their crops stood ungarnered, rotting. Of compensation paid at a flat rate, as if among slavers, like other livestock, one was not worth more than the sum collected. Of the hangings at Slagtersnek and of the ravagings of the Kaffirs with which they were no longer allowed to deal after their own fashion.

(3)

This passage refers to a string of grievances against the British as colonial administrators, one being that they intentionally chose a time to free the Boers’ African slaves in order to financially ruin – perhaps starve – them. A second grievance glossed here is that the British government offered to pay compensation for the freed slaves but only at a flat rate for each slave (with no account taken for more worthy slaves) and only if the Dutch settlers travelled to London to claim the compensation or paid an agent to collect it for them.

The final grievance glossed in that opening concerns the Slagtersnek Rebellion, where the British-controlled colonial government attempted to arrest a white farmer for the mistreatment of one of his “Hottentot” or Khoi servants. Part of the offense

of the incident concerned the white colonial officer bringing Khoi troops with him to arrest the white farmer. The farmer, believing himself in the right and a good colonizer, fired on the troops and was killed when they returned fire, leading his brother and other disaffected settlers to plan a rebellion against the British. The skirmish occurred at Slagtersnek, and afterwards the five rebels were sentenced to be hanged. Compounding Boer animosity was the fact that four of the five hanging ropes broke, which the Boers saw as an act of God, arguing for clemency. Though they begged for mercy, the men were re-hanged, giving the Boers even greater cause to curse British cruelty; and the memory became a rallying cry for Afrikaner nationalism. By raising Slagtersnek as a grievance, the novel further separates the colonizing English from its Boer protagonists, reminding readers of all the ways the Boers condemned the British as “bad” colonizers. And because the novel lacks British characters to counter this depiction, it sticks. The passage just quoted also charges the British as being unfairly and unwisely lenient to black Africans, which, this logic suggests, only caused problems for the Boers. In contrast, the Boers who earned the land through their suffering, know how properly to manage black servants. By depicting the British as bad colonizers, who not only forced the Boers to move North into new territory but also created the problems the Boers had with black Africans, the novel creates a situation where its contemporary readers could again imagine their ancestors as colonial victims/heroes and themselves as rightful heirs, thus militating against any residual or contemporary collective guilt over the treatment of black South Africans and the taking of their land.

Just as the novel’s stories of victimhood are complicated by the nonwhite characters it features, its depiction of the Voortrekkers as the good colonizers is complicated by the character of Anna de Jong, the obese middle-aged Boervrou and aunt of Sannie, the young woman the convoy leader, Henrik van der Berg, so desired that he killed his son to have her. In *Fiction, History and Nation in South Africa*, Annalisa Oboe characterizes Anna de Jong, along with other female characters in novels about the Great Trek, as “the conscience and memory of their race” (79). Anna certainly collects the memory of her race, for she spends much of her time observing the world around her, missing nothing. Her role as the conscience, however, is questionable, since she senses danger in advance but does nothing to stop it. She surmises, for instance, that Henrik has killed his son to marry Sannie, who will not only make him a bad wife, but will be miserable herself. Yet Anna encourages Sannie to marry Henrik anyway. Later in the novel Anna senses that an attack is coming on the Voortrekker settlement, which she avoids by going to live elsewhere. But she does not adequately convey the magnitude of the threat in warning the others, so they do not take her seriously and follow her exodus. A fatalist, she believes that she cannot stop pain but can only watch and endure, epitomizing the observer whose passivity allows injustice to flourish. In this way, Anna does not create the oppression of others, but neither does she stop it. One of the strongest characters in the novel and one of the few who survive the carnage at its end to carry on the race, she perhaps provides, as does Rinkals, an implicit argument about how to survive. Her conduct offers a parable about noninterference – even to

stop murder and injustice – yet because Anna is a Boer, she complicates the novel’s portrayal of the Boers as good colonizers, providing a means for self-reflection in the minds of its few South African readers.

Anna also complicates the novel’s good/bad colonizer split by questioning the Voortrekker hatred of the British. Seeing the animosity of the Voortrekkers towards the British, she realizes: “They were using the English as something on which to vent their hatred of the things they did not understand. Just as a woman who had spilt the cream she was about to churn would slap the face of one of her children, or a man whose bull had died beat a Kaffir” (253). The narrative does not allow this thought to linger for long, however, for Anna soon turns to meditating on the strength of Afrikaners and the inevitable greatness of their race: “Tante Anna de Jong realised that her people, that she herself, were not more than the shear of a plough which would in time be worn down by the stress of the life they led and that in their wearing down they would achieve great things which few of them would live to see” (254). The moment does not leave unquestioned the underpinnings of the Boer’s hatred of the British, but it does again assert the immortality of the Afrikaner culture and its as-yet-unrealized greatness. Again, in these two juxtaposed thoughts we see moments of near *admission* of the flaws or wrongs of Cloete’s Afrikaner ingroup – one response to collective guilt – balanced by the novel’s *denial* of that flaw or wrong – the other response to collective guilt. Thus the novel itself evidences the ambivalence that characterized its reception.

Again, the Voortrekker Monument provides an interesting corollary to the work being done in *Turning Wheels*. Just as we see stories of identification in the Voortrekker monument with images of the Voortrekker as victim, we also see narratives of projection in its good colonizer/bad colonizer split. As Delmont has argued, in the Voortrekker monument we see the recording of history “as part of a deliberate campaign to construct, foster and mobilize Afrikaner identity in the 1930s” (76). Moreover, she argues that the scenes of the frieze deliberately distorted history (despite the Monument builders’ claims) to present a heroic image of the Voortrekker in opposition to both the British (bad colonizers) and the Zulu. The final panel, Panel 21, for instance, both symbolizes the Voortrekker victory over the Zulus in the Battle of Blood River and the “temporary victory against the British” achieved through Britain’s recognition of the “independence of the Transvaal” (94). As Delmont explains: “That this panel is the last in the frieze, conveys the intention that the visitor should leave the monument suitably inspired by the heroic deeds of his ancestors to strive for the ultimate ideal of an independent republic in the future” (94). Other panels in the frieze also decry the British as bad colonizers of Africa and bad colonial masters under which the Dutch settlers had suffered. The eighteenth panel on the marble frieze, for instance, depicts a scene of Voortrekker women declaring that they would rather walk barefoot over the Drakensberg (mountain range) than again submit to the rule of the British. The panel shows five women in profile, heads held high, each touching one of four dejected-looking men and, as the panel’s description reads, “encourag[ing] the men” with their declaration (42).

As well as creating a good/bad colonizer split with the British, the Voortrekker monument contains elements that construct the Voortrekker as good colonizer and, somewhat oddly, the native as bad colonizer. First the monument and the *Official Guide* argue that black South Africans are no more “native” to the region than the Voortrekkers, and that all South Africans migrated from different parts of Africa more or less simultaneously, making black South Africans as much settlers as whites. As the *Official Guide* asserts, “[i]t is nonsensical to suppose that the interior of Southern Africa belonged to the Bantu and that the white man took it away from him. The Bantu penetrated from the north almost at the same time as the white man entered from the south. They had equal title to this country” (31). Because the monument considers black South Africans of all language groups as competing colonizers, like the British, of empty land, it is not surprising that the frieze also uses scenes of conflict and contact between white settlers and black South Africans, just as with the British, as a way to establish the Voortrekkers as good colonizers.

Panel 8, for instance, shows negotiations between the Boers and the indigenous leader Moroka in order to, the *Official Guide* explains, “emphasize the peaceful intentions of the Voortrekkers,” who, in a claim surprisingly at odds with events depicted in the rest of the frieze, “consistently tried to obtain land from the natives by means of negotiation and not by force of arms” (46). As the *Official Guide* asserts, “there were no conquerors among the Voortrekkers, no Cortez, no Napoleon, no Genghis Khan, no Tamburlaine” (46). Moreover, it is significant that this panel shows negotiations with Moroka, who is said to have saved the Voortrekkers after a battle with the Matabele by giving them sustenance and assistance, thus in a way sanctioning their colonizing of that land by enabling their continued existence and settlement. Panel 10, showing Debora Retief writing her father’s name on a rock, was also, the *Official Guide* explains, intended to show the “peaceful intentions of the Voortrekkers, a community in search of a new home who laid emphasis upon the family and its ties,” but in this panel through the depiction of a “happy childhood scene” rather than relations between settler and indigene. Stressing that the Boers are peaceful implies that their bad colonizer adversaries are to blame for the violence.

Yet another panel shows a treaty being struck between the white settlers and indigenous Africans in order to portray the Voortrekker as the good colonizer. Panel 12 depicts the signing of the treaty between Retief and Dingaan, the leader of the Zulu people, who would kill Retief and his fellow settlers soon after the alleged signing. Behind the seated Retief on the panel’s right is a crowd of hat-wearing white settlers, with two boys in the front witnessing the historic event. Across a small table from Retief sits Dingaan, with a large group of seated and kneeling supporters behind him, the small panel crowded with bodies on both sides. The *Official Guide* concedes that the existence of the treaty depicted is held in doubt by historians, which is perhaps why the designers of the frieze so wanted to include this episode. Special care was taken to ensure that the detail in this panel was historically accurate. The table between the two men, the chair on which Dingaan is seated, and the leather wallet that Retief

wears were all copied from existing objects associated with the Trek. In sum, the frieze attempts to (re)create a moment in history, purporting to record a document that does not in fact exist in any other form. This moment of attempting to reify legend into history through the medium of granite also calls attention to the existence of the doubt that it attempts to quell – in a way similar to the points in the narrative of *Turning Wheels* when the Afrikaner’s identity as good colonizer is questioned. Further, the existence of the treaty is vital to the frieze’s argument in other panels that Dingaan’s subsequent attack on the settlers was not an act of self-defence against invaders but rather the treacherous act of a man pretending to be a neighbour but turning out to be a deadly enemy, a bad competing colonizer who violates the rules of neighbourly competition. The Voortrekker Monument works literally to concretize the good/bad colonizer split. The only suggestion of guilt comes in the fact that the monument’s narrative was so carefully constructed to omit any suggestion of ambivalence, and that the monument and its story have been so fervently embraced by Afrikaners, suggesting a deep psychocultural need on their part for the romantic, heroic stories it presents.

The grand irony of the differing reactions to *Turning Wheels* and the Voortrekker Monument is that Cloete’s novel backfired so comprehensively. Instead of selling at home, it was popular abroad. It did not spark any public conversation about historical guilt (except for the defensive reaction of Afrikaners who believed that the novel was actually persecuting them, an additional layer of imagined victimhood). It is ironic that the novel was deemed so objectionable as to be censored because that act prevented people from reading it. The novel might have helped its public to process a sense of guilt and, through perhaps alleviating the obsessive defensiveness of Afrikaners, fed by their guilt, helped change the feelings that were to lead to their support for the exclusionary politics of Apartheid.

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Rebecca Weaver-Hightower

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