Shifting frameworks for understanding otherness


Maas, T.A.J.

Publication date
2020

Document Version
Other version

License
Other

Citation for published version (APA):

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.
Introduction
Framing the (un)familiar

To make visible the unseen can also mean a change of level, addressing oneself to a layer of material which had hitherto had no pertinence for history and which had not been recognised as having any moral, aesthetic or historical value.

Foucault (1972, 50-51)

In November 2019, the municipality of Amsterdam developed a walking tour through the historical city centre that passes nine sites where 17th century philosophers lived or where their books were published. Each site is marked by a tile in the sidewalk with a quote from the relevant philosopher. A stone’s throw away from the former headquarters of the Amsterdam Chamber of the Dutch East India Company (VOC), one finds the tile commemorating Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) (figure 0.1). The quote, taken from Leviathan (1651), reads: ‘[in the natural condition] the life of man is solitary, poore [sic], nasty, brutish, 

Figure 0.1 Thomas Hobbes’ tile shortly after being placed. It is located at the crossing of the Molsteeg and the Spuistraat. Photo by me, TM.
and short’.\(^1\) Hobbes was writing about what human nature might have been prior to civilisation.\(^2\) In this Hobbesian natural condition – outside of society – there is a war of every natural man against the others.

Writing roughly a year before Jan van Riebeeck founded the VOC refreshment station at the Cape in South Africa, Hobbes was addressing pressing issues for early modern Europe. The continent’s major seafaring nations – the Portuguese, Spanish, English and Dutch – had been pushing back horizons since the dawn of the 16\(^{\text{th}}\) century, bringing home not only physical goods but also knowledge about ‘newly discovered’ lands and peoples. In terms of the number of copies printed, reports, travelogues and encyclopedias on the world’s peoples were as popular in the 17\(^{\text{th}}\) century as the novel is today.\(^3\) The main question the exploration of the world raised for Christian Europe was where to position these peoples in relation to the European self. Hobbes’ answer was to distinguish between a natural and a civil state of man, maintaining that the ‘savage people of America’ approximated the former.\(^4\)

Hobbes was only one of many philosophers attempting to meaningfully frame the new. Throughout history, concepts and theoretical perspectives have continuously been developed to frame the new and to reframe the familiar, thereby creating and recreating an understanding of the world. In this thesis I examine the framing and reframing of the Khoi, the native inhabitants of the Cape peninsula and its hinterlands in what is now South Africa.\(^5\) An important aim is to make apparent that the formation of knowledge about the Khoi is a matter of framing and not of discovering ‘facts’. Factual knowledge is surrounded by a host of interpretive frameworks or worldviews that generate meaning. Hence, I examine what the dominant frames for interpreting the Khoi looked like – what aspects of the Khoi and their way of life these frames highlighted – and what image of the Khoi they

---

\(^1\) Hobbes, \textit{Leviathan} 1.XIII.9 quoted from Pogson Smith (1909). I have not been able to identify the author of the slightly free Dutch translation.

\(^2\) Hobbes, \textit{Leviathan} 1.XIII.8 quoted from Pogson Smith (1909), maintains that a strong king is needed to control society: ‘[D]uring the time men live without a common Power to keep them all in awe, they are in a condition which is called War; and such a war, as if of every man, against every man’.

\(^3\) Baggerman (1993).

\(^4\) Hobbes, \textit{Leviathan} 2.XXX.176 quoted from Pogson Smith (1909). For an overview of scholarship on Hobbes’ understanding of the natural state, see, for example, Schochet (1967).

\(^5\) I use ‘Khoi’ as an umbrella term to refer to a variety of native tribes and peoples at the Cape. See A Note on Nomenclature.
created in the light of South Africa’s ongoing renegotiation of its past and in the context of European intellectual history.

I organise my discussion around two key moments in South African (literary) history. 1652 and 1994 are two major hinges in the nation’s interpretation of the present in light of the past, and the past in light of the present. 1652 marks the first permanent settlement of Europeans at the Cape, the VOC refreshment station under the command of the Dutchman Jan van Riebeeck. This has been the traditional starting point for much South African (literary) history. 1994 saw South Africa’s first democratic elections, marking the formal end of apartheid and prompting a host of refraamings of the 1652 events and of South African history at large. In these refraamings – for the first time in the country’s history – all the country’s peoples could freely have their voices and perspectives heard alongside each other.

I use the term ‘framing’ rather than ‘contextualising’ or ‘representing’. This term has several advantages, as outlined in Jonathan Culler’s *Framing the Sign* (1988):

[The term] reminds us that framing is something we do; it hints of the frame-up (‘falsifying evidence beforehand in order to make someone appear guilty’), a major use of context; and it eludes the incipient positivism of ‘context’ by alluding to the semiotic function of framing in art, where the frame is determining, setting off the object or event as art, and yet the frame itself may be nothing tangible, pure articulation.⁶

As I illustrate in this thesis, European knowledge about the Khoi in Van Riebeeck’s time was generated through very different lenses than the image of the Khoi in more recent years. During apartheid (circa 1948-early 1990s), South African literature produced in the wake of 1652 was framed positivistically as the expression of an early Afrikaner national spirit.⁷ Elizabeth Conradie’s *Hollandse skrywers uit Suid-Afrika. ’n Kultuurhistoriese studie (1652-1875)* (1934) was the first sizeable effort at an exhaustive, systematic survey of texts written in Dutch in South Africa.⁸ Given the title of her first chapter, ‘[t]he grafting of Dutch culture onto South African soil’, it is not surprising that the first text she analyses is Van Riebeeck’s

---

⁶ Culler (1988, ix).
⁷ Huigen (2006, 5): “’n uitdrukking van ’n vroeë Afrikaanse nasionale bewussyn’. In Apartheid ideology, Afrikaners had a longer history than English South Africans and their European ancestry proved cultural refinement over the indigenous population.
⁸ Conradie sees Dutch literature in South Africa ending in 1875, the founding year of the (First) Afrikaans Language Movement, an effort to have Afrikaans recognised as a separate language from Dutch.
Daghregister, the Commander’s daily log, kept for his employers in Amsterdam. The Daghregister is also presented as the cradle of Afrikaans literature in J.C. Kannemeyer’s seminal Geskiedenis van die Afrikaanse literatuur (1984), where he argues that the ‘Dutch-South African literature may be regarded as the origin of Afrikaans literature’.

Although 1652 has since the birth of the democratic Republic of South Africa in 1994 remained a relevant starting point for Afrikaans literary historiography, a shift has taken place from a nationalistic ideological to a linguistic framing. Thus, in his contribution to H.P. van Coller’s Perspektief en profiel. ’n Afrikaanse literatuurgeskiedenis (2006), Siegfried Huigen takes 1652 as his departure point but names the volume’s opening chapter ‘South-African literature written in Dutch, 1652 to 1925’. Similarly, in A History of South African Literature. Afrikaans Literature 17th – 19th Centuries (2015), Jerzy Koch’s opening text is again the Daghregister, based on the argument that

[a]n indirect effect of the VOC’s decision to set up a supply station was the emergence in Africa of a distinctive Germanic language. [...] South African texts in Dutch are [in this book] treated as the protoliterature of Afrikaans.

At the same time, recent South African literary histories reflect the 1994 democratic turn by including texts from previously deprivileged groups, including the Khoi, and by challenging the tendency to trace any national literature to a single starting date. Notably, Michael Chapman’s New Century of South African Poetry (2002) features native oral lyric as the subject of its opening chapter, while H.P. van Coller, in his contribution to David Attwell’s

---

9 Conradie (1934, 3ff.): ‘Die oorplanting van die Hollandse kultuur na Suid-Afrika’. The Daghregister was kept by Van Riebeeck from December 1651 to May 1652 for the VOC’s directors, the Lord’s XVII in Amsterdam (‘Heeren XVII’).
11 ‘Nederlandstalige Suid-Afrikaanse letterkunde, 1652 tot 1925’. Huigen puts the start of Afrikaans literature in 1925, when Afrikaans replaced Dutch as South Africa’s official language.
12 Koch (2015, 16; 18). Interestingly, in Dutch literary historiography, Jonckbloet (1855 and 1888), Kalf (1906-1912), Te Winkel (last edition 1922), Van Mierlo (last edition 1949) and Knuvelder (1970) confine their scope to the Netherlands, without considering literature written in its overseas dominions. The same goes for Anbeek (1993). South African literature is represented in Schenkeveld-Van der Dussen (1994) through Elisabeth Eybers, the first non-Dutch citizen to have won the most prestigious Dutch literary award, the P.C. Hooftprijs, in 1991. Francken and Praamstra (2012) suggest that ‘Zuid-Afrikaanse Nederlandse letterkunde’ (South African Dutch literature) should be included in Dutch literary history because it is a corpus ‘that is in part written and published outside the motherland’ (‘die deels geschreven en gepubliceerd is buiten het moederland’). In the latest comprehensive Dutch literary history, Bel (2015, 820) suggests that colonial literature only found an audience in the Netherlands and Belgium in the interbellum. She touches upon the Congo, the Dutch East Indies, Surinam and the Dutch Antilles, but South African colonial literature remains outside her scope.
and Derek Attridge’s *Cambridge History of South African Literature* (2012), argues that the beginning of Afrikaans language or Afrikaans literature cannot be pinned down to one particular text or moment in time.\(^\text{13}\)

The fact that different frames can lead to opposing views of the same people or a corpus of texts has been noted for South African travel accounts by Siegfried Huigen in *Knowledge and Colonialism. Eighteenth-Century Travellers in South Africa* (2009). Huigen writes that

\begin{quote}
[i]n studying the South African travel accounts, the existing critical literature broadly follows two approaches: on the one hand, in the older studies, a positivistic reconstruction of the routes followed by the expeditions, and on the other, in recent literature, a postcolonial accusation against colonial representations.\(^\text{14}\)
\end{quote}

He rightly observes that ‘[t]he new approach is in many ways the ideological mirror image of this [older] approach and is nurtured by indignation about apartheid and colonialism’.\(^\text{15}\)

In Huigen’s earlier study *De weg naar Monomotapa. Nederlandstalige representaties van geografische, historische en sociale werkelijkheden in Zuid-Afrika* (1996), his concern is with representations of particular realities in texts about South Africa written in Dutch. Using the Khoi as an example, Huigen points out that he is not so much interested in the historical realities or the accuracy of ethnic nomenclature, but focuses primarily on the ‘paper people’.\(^\text{16}\) In five chapters, he analyses the way in which the landscape, society and, above all, the history of the country are represented in Dutch texts. Moving from 1652 to the 20\(^\text{th}\) century, Huigen successfully reclaims works written in, or about South Africa in Dutch for South African literary studies. Yet, it has been pointed out by Robert Ross that his attempt ‘to reposition writing in Dutch as part of the central white South African literary tradition is probably overdrawn’ because Huigen’s analyses make apparent that the texts engage discourses that are relevant to a much broader South African intellectual history.\(^\text{17}\)

---

13 Chapman (2002). Van Coller (2012, 264) also focuses on language to frame Afrikaans literature: ‘The origins and development of Afrikaans literature need to be understood in relation to the development of the language’.
14 Huigen (2009\(^\text{1}\), 26).
15 Huigen (2009\(^\text{1}\), 28).
Andrea Kieskamp, in De Khoekhoe tijdens het bewind van Jan van Riebeeck 1652-1662. Een bronnonderzoek (2000), compares literary historical sources about the Khoi from the period 1652 to 1662 with those in the fields of archaeology, history, anthropology and linguistics. She concludes that literary studies long centred around Van Riebeeck and the experiences of the Dutch in ‘dark’ Africa. Only in the 1990s did literary scholarship – like in other fields – put the Khoi centre stage.\(^{18}\)

This brief overview of literary historiography makes clear that an interpretation of literature from the early Cape benefits from an approach which includes a variety of texts that – in Huigen’s words – do not exclusively answer to ‘aesthetic definitions of literature’ and which engages historical frames that are not necessarily nationalistic or based on the language in which the text is written.\(^{19}\) Culler points out that the framing of texts usually takes place along the lines of ‘fiction’ and ‘non-fiction’, which remain ‘the appropriate way[s] of dividing the multifarious corpus of publications’, be it in a bookstore, library or bestseller list.\(^{20}\) He proposes a break from this usual hierarchical relation between ‘real situations or events and imagined ones’, maintaining that ‘[real-world] discourses prove to function according to principles and processes most dramatically and explicitly manifested in literature’.\(^{21}\) Studying framing through narrative, then, is to treat both fiction and non-fiction as ‘models that enable us to make sense of the world’.\(^{22}\)

In this thesis, accordingly, I illustrate the importance of framing through a comparative close-reading of pre-1652 European travel accounts, a letter in (early modern) Latin about the Khoi written by a retired secretary from the Dutch colonial administration in 1695, and Dan Sleigh’s 2002 Afrikaans novel Eilandene. In Chapter 1, my focus is on outlining the frameworks within which the native Cape people were appreciated by the first Europeans to encounter them. I start with the first attested European rounding of the Cape of Good Hope by the Portuguese explorer Bartolomeu Dias (1488), and end with the first permanent (Dutch) settlement at the Cape under Jan van Riebeeck (1652). As Huigen observes for Dutch texts from the early Cape in his contribution to Perspektief en profiel. ‘n

\(^{18}\) Kieskamp (2000, 200): ‘[In het centrum stond] de persoon van Van Riebeeck en/of de belevenssen van de Hollanders in het verre, onbekende Afrika. [...] Pas in de jaren negentig is er literatuur verschenen waarin de Khoekhoe centraal staan’.

\(^{19}\) Huigen (1996, 4n9). See also Huigen (2009\(^2\)).

\(^{20}\) Culler (1988, 201).

\(^{21}\) Culler (1988, 201, 209).

\(^{22}\) Culler (1988, 210).
Afrikaanse literatuurgeskiedenis (Volume 3, 2006): ‘Dutch is the oldest written word in South Africa and to date remains the writing language that has been used longest. There are 273 years of history that have been practically forgotten’.23 If Dutch texts from the period 1652-1925 are already an understudied part of South African literary history, pre-Van Riebeeck texts have hardly been studied at all, let alone in relation to a broader cultural context. Looking at an extra 164 years’ worth of European texts about the Khoi significantly extends the national canon of South Africa and demarginalises a previously unprivileged and under-represented people. Finally, reading these texts with a focus on the contemporary frameworks used in them contributes to both South African and European cultural history.

Major Rowland Raven-Hart’s Before Van Riebeeck. Callers at South Africa from 1488 to 1652 (1967) is an early effort to illustrate the amount of attention paid to the Cape natives in pre-Van Riebeeck times across languages and nationalities.24 Gathered from archives and repositories throughout South Africa, the anthology includes ‘records of travels containing the stories of ships and visitors who called [at South Africa] which have never been translated into English and are relatively unknown to the average reader’.25 Raven-Hart stakes no claim to exhaustiveness, and Malvern van Wyk Smith has called his selection of sources and extracts on the Khoi ‘highly selective and heavily edited’ and ‘itself the product of a mentality that saw nothing amiss in projecting the Hottentots as simply idle’.

My own project in Chapter 1 is to trace the gradual development of dominant ethnographic criteria about the Khoi in travelogues, diaries, VOC logs and archives. I show that European discourse about the Khoi was never singular or stable but always in flux, although by 1652 particular Christian parameters had developed within which Khoi customs were predominantly described as a negation of European ones, and thus deemed uncivilised. The use of the term ‘Hottentot’ to refer to the Khoi reflects this pejorative stance and the increasingly one-dimensional image of the Khoi Europeans disseminated.

The reiteration of stock images as fixed knowledge by Europeans in early modern times has been described by the South African writer, translator and Nobel laureate J.M.

---

23 Huigen (2006, 3): ‘[Nederlands is] die oudste skryftaal in Suid-Afrika en is tot nog toe steeds die skryftaal wat die langste in gebruik was. In dié 273 jaar het ‘n Nederlandstalige Suid-Afrikaanse letterkunde ontstaan wat vrywel vergete is’.
24 Against Raven-Hart, Anderson (1983) contends that only in the 18th century, with the rise of the nation-state, did national frameworks begin to have interpretative force for literary historiography.
Coetzee as the ‘echo chamber of the discourse of the Cape’.\textsuperscript{27} Noting that the early modern European image of the Cape was built around a body of exclusively white writing, bound by an evident ideological bias, Coetzee argues in his book \textit{White Writing. On the Culture of Letters in South Africa} (1988) that knowledge about the Khoi did not actually advance. Also, he maintains that the question as to why the Khoi should rank below the civil, Christian state was never asked:

> Nowhere in the great echo chamber of the Discourse of the Cape is a voice raised to ask whether the life of the Hottentot may not be a version of life before the Fall [...] a life in which man is not yet condemned to eat his bread in the sweat of his brow, but instead may spend his days dozing in the sun, or in the shade when the sun grows too hot, half-aware of the singing of the birds and the breeze on his skin, bestirring himself to eat when hunger overtakes him, enjoying a pipe of tobacco when it is available, at one with his surroundings and unreflectively content. The idea that the Hottentot may be Adam is not even entertained for the sake of being dismissed.\textsuperscript{28}

As Van Wyk Smith points out in a review of Coetzee’s book, the latter relies heavily on Raven-Hart’s 1967 anthology and, as a result, misses out on ‘the more positive and revisionary discourse about the Khoi’.\textsuperscript{29} In his paper “‘The Most Wretched of the Human Race”. The Iconography of the Khoikhoi (Hottentots)” (1992), Van Wyk Smith asserts that the iconography of the Khoi in early European travelogues about Africa reveals that the Khoi were considered in two ways: ‘either indigenes were beings of natural innocence [...] or they were still in a state of brute savagery exiled even from divine grace’.\textsuperscript{30} He shows that the analogy between the Cape and Paradise, and the accompanying interpretation of the Khoi as living in a state of positive primitivism was common, albeit less so than the pejorative voices.

My own reading of the framing of the Khoi in various early European sources makes apparent that the dominant European discourse depicted the Khoi as ‘the opposite of the European’. I agree with Coetzee that the majority of 17\textsuperscript{th} century European accounts used certain criteria to confirm the common opinion that the Khoi were living without the Christian-Jewish faith and hence were bereft of all civility.\textsuperscript{31} Moreover, my findings

\textsuperscript{27} Coetzee (1988, Chapter ‘Idleness in South Africa’).
\textsuperscript{28} Coetzee (1988, 18).
\textsuperscript{29} Van Wyk Smith (1990, 94).
\textsuperscript{30} Van Wyk Smith (1992, 287).
\textsuperscript{31} Van Wyk Smith (1992, 285).
emphasise how neither positive nor negative primitivism puts the ethnographic and Christian frameworks of appreciation into question.

There were few Europeans who challenged the prevailing image of the Khoi or the frameworks on which this image was based, but, as I will argue in Chapters 2 and 3, the Dutchman Jan Willem van Grevenbroek (1644-circa 1725) was one. He produced one of the most extensive descriptions of the Cape’s native people of his time: *Elegans & accurata gentis Africanae, circa Promontorium Capitis Bonae Spei, vulgo Hottentotten nuncupatae, descriptio epistolaris*, ‘An elegant and accurate description in letter form about the African people commonly called Hottentots, who inhabit the Cape of Good Hope’ (figure 0.2). The letter survives in a single manuscript copy, which is kept at the National Library of South Africa (NLSA), Special Collections.\(^3\) A censored Dutch translation was published in two parts

\(^3\) MSB203.
by Jan van Oordt as ‘Elegans et accurata […]’ in the January and February 1886 issues of Zuid-Afrikaansch tijdschrift.

These parts were later edited by Everhardus Godée-Molsbergen and republished as Volume XXXVI of the Linschooten-Vereeniging-series, Reizen in Zuid-Afrika in de Hollandse tijd. Deel IV (1932). In 1933, the classicist Benjamin Farrington and the anthropologist Isaac Schapera produced the ‘first English translation, [and] the first transcription and publication of the Latin text’. Published as Volume 14 in the Van Riebeeck Society Series, it remains the only English translation available and the sole Latin edition to date. I discuss the manuscript and the text editions in detail in Appendix 1.

My central argument in Chapters 2 and 3 is that Grevenbroek’s text embodies a key transition in the framing of the Khoi that reflects the beginnings of a radical epistemological shift in the European history of thought. Grevenbroek, secretary of the Dutch East India Company at the Cape from 1684 to 1694, acknowledges a gap between the dominant European image of the Khoi and his own observations of them. Rather than denying the Khoi their humanity on the basis of ostensible differences with early modern European customs, in his letter, Grevenbroek reframes the Khoi, critically reflecting on the way knowledge, including knowledge about the Khoi, is acquired.

In the early 2000s, Bert van Stekelenburg launched a first effort at contextualising Grevenbroek’s letter in two papers: ‘Een intellectueel in de vroege Kaapkolonie. De nalatenschap van Jan Willem van Grevenbroeck (1644-1726)’ (2001) and ‘The Cape in Latin and Latin in the Cape in the 17th and 18th Centuries’ (2003, posthumously). Noting that Grevenbroek was a learned humanist from Leiden, Van Stekelenburg rightfully draws attention to the manifold intertextualities between the letter and ancient Roman and Greek literature, interpreting them as a form of gentleman’s literary play, inspired by Grevenbroek’s isolation on the southernmost tip of Africa. Whilst I concede to a degree of learned literary play, I argue that Grevenbroek’s letter also uses references from ancient

33 Van Oordt (1886, reprinted 1932) omits the Latin passages on initiation ceremonies (circumcision), urinating, and passing air.
34 Van Stekelenburg (2001; 2003) calls him ‘Van Grevenbroeck’. I use the form Grevenbroek used most commonly by himself. As secretary of the Council of Policy at the Cape, he signed off all its minutes and correspondence (Western Cape Archives and Records Services, C1887-1904). He also left an impressive book collection with ex libris (NLSA, Dessian Collection). He used variants of his name, in Latin, ‘Graevenbroeck[i][i][us]’, and Dutch, Van Graevenbroeck, De Grevenbroek.
literature to reposition the Khoi in a move that I consider to be part of a major European epistemological shift that defines the transition from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance, when ‘the world was no longer accessible only through learned books in Latin, [but] could be known directly.’ 36 In his book *New Worlds, Ancient Texts. The Power of Tradition and the Shock of Discovery* (1992), Anthony Grafton coins the term ‘Revolution of Knowledge’ to refer to this transition from a world that was imagined on the basis of ‘the bounds of the [European] library’ to one that was coloured in also in accordance with empirical observation, newly regarded as a trusted source of knowledge.37 He writes that ‘between 1550 and 1650 Western thinkers ceased to exist that they could find all important truths in ancient books’ and describes the ensuing European epistemological crisis, primarily on the basis of early European texts about native Americans.38 To my knowledge, no similar effort has as yet been undertaken for European texts about African peoples. It is my contention that Grevenbroek presents a unique voice in Cape history that positions the Khoi at the heart of one of Europe’s major historical intellectual crises.

In Chapter 2, I consider the position of Grevenbroek’s letter in relation to contemporary political and religious concerns in Christian Europe about foreign people. I compare his discussion of important contemporary ethnographic criteria like religion, language, and law with contemporary writing about the Khoi, notably fellow-Dutchmen Willem ten Rhyne (1647-1700) and Olfert Dapper (1636-1689), and I discuss the place of empirical evidence in Grevenbroek’s sourcework and the structure of his letter. In Chapter 3, I focus on Grevenbroek’s engagement with ancient Greek and Roman sources to frame the Cape and the Khoi. I explore his return to ‘authentic’ classical thought, bypassing centuries of interpretations of ancient literature about foreign (African) people, and I discuss his use of the Latin word ‘barbarus’ (barbaric person) and the two instances of the word ‘Hottentot’ in his letter.

From Chapters 2 and 3 it becomes apparent that Grevenbroek does not question the ancient and Christian frameworks themselves. I maintain, therefore, that he is a child of his time, presenting an early stage in the Revolution of Knowledge. His distinctive concern with the Khoi imparts on the letter a compelling importance in South Africa’s ongoing

37 Grafton (1992, 6).
renegotiation of its past and in the context of the European history of thought. This legitimates Grevenbroek’s position at the centre of this thesis.

In Chapter 4, I compare the image that Grevenbroek paints of the Khoi in his letter with the way in which individual historical Khoi characters, and Grevenbroek himself, are portrayed in the Afrikaans novel Eilande (2002) by the South African novelist and historian Dan Sleigh (Geelbekfontein, 1938), translated as Islands (2004). Eilande portrays Grevenbroek, its narrator, as writing a history about the 50 years since the arrival of Van Riebeeck at the Cape. Focalising his account through seven historical characters in seven chapters, Grevenbroek aims to rescue voices forgotten by history, including those of himself and the Khoi. I argue that the novel renegotiates the past, and past portrayals of the past, by reframing Grevenbroek and individual Khoi characters through the lens of South Africa’s contemporary postcolonial circumstance.

Eilande has occupied a central place in South Africa’s continued literary (re)imagination of its past, and Sleigh ranks among the most notable contemporary writers of historical fiction in Afrikaans about the Cape under Dutch administration (1652-1795). The novel has been met with wide acclaim in South Africa and abroad. In reviews, H.P. van Coller calls Eilande ‘one of the best historical novels in Afrikaans’ and Francois Smith compares Sleigh to Tolstoi, whilst André P. Brink ranks his time working on the English translation (Islands (2004)) among ‘the most enriching and pleasant experiences of my life’. In their literary history Skrywers in die strydperk. Krachtlijnen in de Zuid-Afrikaanse letterkunde (2005), Eep Francken and Luc Renders describe Eilande as ‘the surprise of the new century in Afrikaans literature’ for the intricate picture it paints of the early Cape that appeals to a broad South African audience. The Dutch translation of the novel, Stemmen uit zee (2004), was ranked number 98 of 100 bestselling novels in The Netherlands in 2004, and the American edition Islands (2004) was listed by The Seattle Times as one of the ten best books of 2005 and by Booklist. An American Library Association Publication as one of the top ten debut novels of 2005.

---

40 Francken and Renders (2005, 120): ‘[Eilande is] de verrassing van de nieuwe eeuw in de Afrikaanse letteren’.
41 CPNB Top 100 2004 cited by Terblanche (2017).
In my reading of *Eilande*, Grevenbroek’s concern with the Khoi is not portrayed as driven by ancient or Christian frameworks, like in the historical letter. Using Spivak’s seminal article ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ (1988) on the representation of ‘the Other’, I argue that, in the novel, Grevenbroek is instead concerned with the unequal degree to which various voices have been preserved in the historical archive, and the difficulty, if not impossibility, of allowing unpreserved voices to speak without speaking for them. I contend, then, that the novel’s use of Grevenbroek as its narrator does not set out to confirm what Spivak has called ‘the epistemic violence of imperialism’, but allows *Eilande* to highlight how the Dutch administration disadvantaged the Cape’s native inhabitants in a variety of ways, and how its policies led to a biased image of the Khoi being passed down in the VOC archives.42

Using Homi Bhabha’s theory about colonial mimicry in ‘Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse’ (1984) and Monika Fludernik’s theory about stereotyping elaborated in ‘Cross-Mirrorings of Alterity’ (1999), I argue that *Eilande* shows the colonial divide between settler and colonised to ultimately be untenable. According to Bhabha, a colonised person is only allowed to ‘mimic’ select elements of coloniser culture to remain identifiable as colonised. I explore how in the novel a process called ‘Andersmaak’ (remaking) portrays two prominent historical Khoi characters, Autshumao (Herrie) and Krotoa (Eva), as being moved by the colonial circumstance to ‘appropriate’ particular aspects of the Dutch coloniser’s identity in an attempt to improve settler-native relations and to integrate into settler society, respectively. Yet, as ‘Andersmaak’ cannot resolve the colonial divide, the unsustainability of a colonial society is exposed in what Bhabha has called ‘the ambivalence of colonial discourse’.43

The pre-Van Riebeeck travelogues and Grevenbroek’s voice as it appears in both his historical letter and in *Eilande* underline that the Khoi were/are spoken about and thus framed from a European perspective. Highlighting this process of framing and its changing underpinnings adds to our understanding of European intellectual history, and is particularly salient in the context of South Africa’s continued renegotiation of its past after the end of apartheid.

---