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Shifting frameworks for understanding otherness

The Cape Khoi in pre-1652 European travelogues, an early modern Latin letter, and the South African novel Eilande (2002)

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Conclusion

If stories are retold and reimagined, the re- is of decisive importance: each new invention happens in the margin of the already-written, or against the background of the already-written. This excludes a reading of the new narrative as a fortuitous invention, as mere fiction, because it engages with the world – the world itself being conceived as a story. It inserts itself into the reader's consciousness as an invitation to a moral choice.

André Brink (1998, 22)

In 2019, the Dutch historian Bart de Graaff published *Barend Barends. Die vergete kaptein van Danielskuil*. The book tells of Barend Barends, the illegitimate son of a European colonist and a Khoi woman. Around 1770, Barends was making a living through plunder and cattle theft at the Cape colony's northernmost edges, across the Orange River, at a safe distance from the Castle's authority. After he had gathered about 200 followers, the Castle administration decided to recognise him as 'Baster'-*kaptein*, 'leader of the baster (a mixed race) people'.

De Graaff's book shows the dual status of *kaptein* Barends, outlaw and official leader at the same time. Yet, the book is also a journey into Barends' image today. During apartheid, his name was erased from the books of history and his people largely forgotten. De Graaff takes us along on his journey into 'baster' country and his search for Barends' descendants. He finds that many are proud to walk in their ancestor's footsteps and carry the name 'baster' forward. In the eyes of many South Africans, however, the 'basters'' isolated, pastoral way of life positions them outside society. As the historian Bill Nasson notes in his review of *Barend Barends*, today's '[South African] nationalistic elite looks upon South African history as a political classroom in which one is taught who to respect and who to reject'.¹ De Graaff's book and Nasson's review underline that the problem of framing is very present in today's South African society. When apartheid's racial framework was lifted, questions about how to (re)frame the past and to what (political, social) effect became a topic of public debate. The conversation on how to interpret the present in the light of the past, and the past in the light of the present, is ongoing. As Nasson aptly writes: 'The

¹ Nasson (2020): 'Die [nasionalistiese] elite beskou die Suid-Afrikaanse verlede as 'n politieke klaskamer waar almal moet leer wat verheerlik en wat veroordeel moet word'.

discovery of forgotten [baster] voices' is very relevant to 'the early 21st century in which we consciously struggle with our identity'.²

My research emerged from a concern with framing. As I explained in the Introduction, factual knowledge is given meaning by interpreting and reinterpreting it through different frames that attain only partial articulation. In the preceding chapters, I have illustrated the importance of framing for the image of the Khoi in the light of South Africa's renegotiation of its past and in the context of European intellectual history. I have outlined what the dominant colonial European and postcolonial South African frames for appreciating the Khoi looked like – what aspects of the Khoi and their way of life these frames highlighted – and what image(s) of the Khoi they created.

In Chapter 1, I studied pre-1652 European travelogues about the Khoi. If texts from the early Cape have until now only occupied a modest niche in Afrikaans, South African, and, to a lesser extent, Dutch literary history, often framed positivistically as early expressions of the historiographer's national, ideological or linguistic concerns, texts from before 1652 are largely forgotten. Indeed, Karel Schoeman pointed out in his *Patrisiërs & prinse. Die Europese samelewing en die stigting van 'n kolonie aan die Kaap* (2008) that the VOC and its Cape archives, as from 1652, long provided the starting point and dominant perspective from which to narrate Cape history. In analysing pre-1652 texts that originated from a pre-nation state environment as part of a contemporary European discourse characterised by particular expectations of the largely unknown world 'out there' and the peoples in it, I have sought to add 164 years to South African (literary) history and demarginalise the Khoi. As Schoeman also points out in his book *Kolonie aan die Kaap. Jan van Riebeeck en die vestiging van die eerste blankes, 1652-1662* (2010), the VOC was a trading company that legislated and ran the Cape from its commercial interests, but there are many non-VOC related sources and many non-VOC perspectives that warrant exploration.³ I have made clear that early Cape literature framed the Khoi according to the conventions of early modern European thought, while emphasising that discourse about the Khoi in pre-1652 European travelogues was never singular or stable but always in flux. Thus, as a legacy from classical times, observations about the Khoi's dark skin colour did not have

² Idem: 'Die ontdekking van die vergete stemme [...]. [D]ie vroeë 21ste eeu [is] die era waarin ons selfbewus worstel met identiteit'.

³ Schoeman (2010, Introduction).

derogatory connotations in the earliest Portuguese accounts but served to distinguish between various tribes in a dawning ethnographic consciousness. Readily observable characteristics dominated the earliest eyewitness descriptions of the Khoi, which became disparaging only after quarrels related to barter erupted. Christian worldviews further facilitated a categorisation of the Khoi as inferior. A popular evolutionary model was the hierarchical chain of being, which explained the African as living outside Christian man's time and space, ranking him between man and animals.

This negative framing intensified and became more fixed as interactions between Khoi and Europeans became more frequent with the permanent presence of the Dutch at the Cape after 1652. Together, Chapters 2 and 3 have shown how Grevenbroek's letter about the Khoi presents an early stage in what Grafton calls the European 'Revolution of Knowledge'. On the one hand, Grevenbroek moves away from the written word of contemporaries and reiterations of ancient and biblical knowledge about the Khoi, whilst explicitly embracing empirical observation as the basis for understanding the world. On the other hand, he is also a child of his time, using aspects of classical and contemporary Christian discourse to coherently frame his personally acquired evidence. In the end, Grevenbroek appreciates the novel as an extension to the familiar and does not yet challenge the dominant pillars of early modern European discourse about the Khoi – something that would only happen in the 18th century.

Grevenbroek's letter has a dual urgency to it. Firstly, its explicit concern with the nature and trustworthiness of knowledge about the Khoi positions the Cape natives at the heart of a major transition in European intellectual history. As editors Martin Lengwiler, Nigel Penn and Patrick Harries illustrate in *Science, Africa and Europe. Processing Information and Creating Knowledge* (2018), scholarship is opening up to approaches that not only show that European (scientific) knowledge about Africa in colonial times was 'a foil against which Europeans came to view themselves as members of enlightened and modern civilizations', but also that Africa urged Europe to 'shape, adapt and refine' their knowledge.⁴ Grafton has illustrated this for European texts about the native Americans, as has Ton Lemaire in his book *De Indiaan in ons bewustzijn. De ontmoeting van de Oude met de Nieuwe Wereld* (1986), but to my knowledge no such effort has yet been undertaken for

⁴ Lengwiler, Penn and Harries (2018, 6).

the Khoi. Secondly, by virtue of its unique voice in appreciation of the Khoi, Grevenbroek's letter has a distinct relevance in the context of South Africa's ongoing renegotiation of its past. As Paul Maylam argues in *South Africa's Racial Past. The History and Historiography of Racism, Segregation, and Apartheid* (2001), issues such as discrimination, racism, and marginalisation in modern-day South Africa can be traced back to the first European (VOC) settlement at the Cape, and even before that time. Reframing its past in the post-1994 circumstance, South Africa is still coming to terms with these issues. Grevenbroek's letter and the travel accounts explored in Chapter 1 not only confirm Maylam's thesis, but also add depth and nuance by distinguishing the different forms the European framing of the Khoi took.

In Chapter 4, I explored how the past is re-framed by Dan Sleight's historical novel *Eilande* (2002), which is narrated by Grevenbroek. Through a close-reading of *Eilande's* narrative structure and Grevenbroek's presentation of himself and individual Khoi characters, I illustrated that Grevenbroek's voice in his historical letter and his voice in *Eilande* each frame the past in the light of the respective epistemologies of their time. Grevenbroek's concern with the Khoi in the novel is driven not by the Christian or ancient frameworks that he mobilised in his historical letter. Instead, it is driven by his rejection of the moral and financial corruption of governor Simon van der Stel, who in the novel is seen to exploit the Khoi to the advancement of the settlers, and to wilfully tamper with the VOC archives, thereby altering the image of history for posterity. In my reading, the novel presents a postcolonial interpretation of the early colonisation of the Cape from the perspective of post-1994 South Africa.

Eilande's seven chapters unsilence the voices of their respective protagonists – historical persons presented as forgotten islands in the ocean of history – each of whom knew Krotoa (Eva), and her daughter Pieterella. In his historical study *Die Buiteposte. VOC-buiteposte onder Kaapse bestuur, 1652-1795* (1993), Sleight asserts that what is absent from the familiar picture of the VOC and from much modern historical pedagogy about the Cape are the individual men and women that through their hardships kept the VOC afloat and saw to the settlement's various needs.⁵ The multitude of voices in *Eilande* adds to the body of post-1994 South African literature that reflects a democratic and postcolonial turn in the

⁵ *Die Buiteposte* was originally published as Sleight's PhD thesis.

demographic variety of both its authors and protagonists. The novel questions the objectivity of a singular historical narrative and – notably through its portrayals of lawyer Deneyn and Grevenbroek – provides examples of colonial frameworks being challenged in the 17th century.

I made two central arguments about the manner in which *Eilande* reframes the past. Firstly, building on Spivak's seminal essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' (1988), I argued that Grevenbroek (and, by extension, *Eilande*) emphasises the one-sidedness of the fact that the Khoi were spoken about from a European perspective and refrains from assuming that their lost voice can simply be recovered and made to speak for itself. Acknowledging what Spivak has called 'the epistemic violence of imperialism', I maintained that *Eilande's* narrative structure replicates the unequal degree to which the voices of coloniser and colonised have been preserved in the colonial archives. Secondly, building on Homi Bhabha's theory about colonial mimicry and Monika Fludernik's observations about stereotyping, I argued that Autshumao's and Krotoa's 'Andersmaak' exposes what Bhabha calls 'the ambivalence of colonial discourse': the fact that a colonial framework is not built on any inherent ideological or cultural superiority but instead maintained through the exercise of power. Ultimately, according to Bhabha, a rigid adherence to the divide between coloniser and colonised will lead to the colonial society's demise. Along these two lines, the novel reframes the past – and the position of the Khoi in it – in a postcolonial manner that has particular urgency in present-day South Africa.

My argument that framing is of decisive importance in the formation of knowledge about the Khoi goes beyond a mere re-reading of historical sources. As outlined in Jonathan Culler's *Framing the Sign* (1988), which I cited in the Introduction, 'framing is something we do' and 'the frame is determining', even though 'the frame itself may be nothing tangible, pure articulation'.⁶ Framing can pertain to the inclusion of sources that hitherto were seen to have little or no pertinence for history, as I illustrated for pre-Van Riebeeck accounts in Chapter 1. In Chapters 2 and 3, I showed that framing can also entail the scrutiny of how knowledge comes into being, of the frame itself. Grevenbroek questioned his peers' interpretation of the age-old written word and returned to the source texts to provide what he considered a more authentic reading, which, supplemented by a revolutionary use of his

⁶ Culler (1988, ix).

own experiences with the Khoi, led him to reframe the Khoi as part of humanity. Chapter 4, finally, made clear that framing can also mean reframing the past through a historical voice (Grevenbroek) in a fictional medium (a novel). Therefore, in this thesis I have compared different textual forms from different periods, in line with Culler's idea that the study of framing through texts involves 'the study of narrative as a fundamental system of intelligibility' that is subject to change.⁷ I have bridged centuries, lands, genres, and academic disciplines to show that a diachronic study of the framing of the Khoi not only assigns them a prominent place in European intellectual history, but can aid their repositioning in modern-day South Africa.

⁷ Culler (1988, 209).