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Writing the Company: From VOC *Daghregister* to Sleigh's *Eilande*

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Abstract

This piece explores recent literary re-creations of the early Dutch East India Company (VOC) years at the Cape of Good Hope, concentrating on Dan Sleigh's *Eilande* (2002, trans. André Brink, 2005) to examine how an archivist turned novelist uses the textual 'islands' provided by official documentation to create a huge prose work that is remarkable for placing the seventeenth-century settlement in its properly global colonial context. Surely this region's most exhaustive rendering of the genre known problematically as 'the historical novel', it ranges from Germany and Holland via St Helena and the Cape to Madagascar, Mauritius and Batavia. And if for Brink 'the lacunae in the archives are most usefully filled through magical realism, metaphor and fantasy', (Coetzee and Nuttall, *Negotiating the Past*, 3), I suggest that Sleigh's work forms an opposite pole, offering an example of a much slower, lonelier genesis and a more cautious recovery of historical specificity. I hope to discern the possibilities and constraints of these very different fictional modes as they engage a vast, trans-continental archive. 'Writing the Company', then, refers not only to contemporary literary re-presentations of the VOC period, but also to the massive project of trans-oceanic correspondence through which this early 'multinational' constituted itself: a mass of journals, company reports and judicial records that constitute a vast textual exchange not only with the *Heeren XVII* (Lords Seventeen) in Amsterdam and the Council of India in Batavia, but also between the *buitenposte* (outposts) of the VOC at the Cape, and the forgotten *posvolk* who inhabited them.

Key words: the archive; historical novel; magical realism; Khoikhoi/Khoi-San; VOC/Dutch East India Company; Cape Colony; South African literature (post-apartheid); environmental history; spatial history; microhistory

At the beginning of Dan Sleigh's *Eilande* (2002), an enormous prose work written in the early 1980s, published two decades later and translated into English in 2004 by André Brink, we are shown a man 'covered in blood, robbed, humiliated' walking from the dunes toward the ocean: 'Behind them in the smoking rubble were their dead, ahead of

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them was the sea'.[1] This is Autshumao, the Chief Harry or Herrie who will come to exert an almost obsessional fascination in the *Daghregister* (Journal) of the early Dutch station at the Cape as interpreter and go-between, a broker of cattle and culture. Yet in these opening pages he is only dimly concerned with the different mariners that come and go along the shores of the bay, giving him and his small band clothes, bread and sometimes tobacco in return for the safekeeping of letters. Instead his mind is consumed with his loss of cattle and of status, his relegation to the level of Goringhaicona, the *Watermen* or *Strandlopers* (Beachwalkers) who must subsist on 'meagre food gathered from icy rock pools' or even 'a seal on the beach, dead for days, covered with sand lice and deeply corroded by crabs and gulls' (9). He looks inland to see the 'the smoke of his enemy's transition fires, heavy and reeking with cream and fat' (4).

It is an opening *in medias res* which deftly conveys a sense of life processes, seasons and timescales entirely other to the literature of European exploration: the point of departure for Autshumao's narrative is not, perhaps, where a more conventional historical novel (or a postcolonial exercise in 'writing back' to the colonial metropole) might place it. Around 1631, he was (like Coree before him, the first named Khoi individual to enter the historical record at the Cape) abducted by English mariners, but in this case taken not to London but east to Bantam, on the west coast of Java.[2] On that voyage, Autshumao 'contracted the seamen's diseases, learned their language, and became Chief Harry':

> In the Orient he'd seen, when sometimes the ship had been moored to a quay in a river mouth, how dark men with gowns and long hair would stretch their necks like gannets on a rock to talk up to the ship. Their air was dusty since early morning, their seawater tepid, the food strongly spiced, the stars alien . . . Dun-coloured cattle with drooping ears would wander among the people, mainly dried cows and heifers, disconsolate animals without a bull, and lean oxen pulling carts. And there'd be beggars stretching their hands towards him . . . So poverty existed on both sides of the big sea; he was not alone . . . Behind each quay lay a town, behind each town a green jungle like a wall, behind the jungle there would sometimes be mountain peaks, and behind the mountains thunder. He stopped looking at it. What was there to see? (6)

Unlike other novelists working with the textual remains of early colonial history (his translator, for one), Sleigh seems here to resist the temptation to elaborate within what from today's vantage point seems to be the richness of such material, the space for exotic imaginings that it affords. The scenic descriptions of the Orient are barely recognisable as such, framed not by the laden expectations of Europe but rather the harsh economy and distinctive ecology of the Cape. There is no attempt at orientation or a chronological record of progress, only bilious, meaningless sensations, as well as the alien cattle and destitution that Autshumao cannot help but notice as an erstwhile 'captain' embroiled in the disintegrative processes of Khoi society. Eventually the prose dissolves into a waking dream entirely abstracted from his monotonous surroundings; his body pressed against the gunwale so that the sailors do not step on him, he recedes into a sea-sick reverie of his dwelling place and his sister's child, Krotöa:

1. Dan Sleigh, *Islands* [*Eilande*, 2002], trans. André Brink (London: Vintage, 2005), 3. Page numbers in brackets refer to this edition, unless stated otherwise.
2. See Richard Elphick's *Khoikhoi and the Founding of White South Africa* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977) for the standard historical account of Autshumao, Coree, the *strandlopers* and the 'post office' on the shores of Table Bay between 1627 and 1652.

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> When he opened his eyes he could see red paint on English oak; when he closed them, there was his niece, and behind her a pale yellow mat of thin reeds in the curve of a *harubis* house. In his long dream, going on for days and nights, he could smell dry reeds, and cold ashes among the stones, and cow dung. (7)

In its balance between the international traffic of the growing colonial networks and personal strategies for survival within them, Autshumao's voyage to the Orient is a kind of overture to the larger work. Throughout *Islands* one senses an enormous effort of narrative self-restraint: an attempt to remain within a particular mental horizon and a specific geography, even as its characters are enveloped by the vast, impersonal forces set in train by the arrival of 'the Company' – the *Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie* (VOC): perhaps the world's first true 'multinational', and (in the verdict of a millennial edition of *The Economist*) one matched only by the companies of Henry Ford and Bill Gates for its influence on the planet.[3]

In seeking to explore various literary re-creations of the VOC period at the Cape, the essay to follow responds to what might broadly be called the historical turn of post-apartheid writing, in which field Sleigh's work emerges as a major and (I will argue) unique text. *Islands* is surely the most comprehensive, archivally textured instance of 'the historical novel' set at the Cape of Good Hope, although that label seems inadequate when considering how this (and the other recent treatments of early Dutch settlement and Cape slavery read here) possess an in-built questioning of what the writing of the past from the present entails: a past that is not dead, that is (as Faulkner put it) not even past.

In the last decades, as the demand for a literature of witness to contemporary events has receded, a range of South African writers have been drawn to more distant colonial archives. In a well-known address of 1988, 'The Novel Today', J.M. Coetzee argued polemically, and brilliantly, against his chosen form being seen as a lesser form of discourse to be checked against the 'answer script' of history (as if by a censorious schoolmistress): against the idea of the novel as mere 'supplement' to the history-text.[4] From today's vantage, though, this antagonistic binary seems inadequate in accounting for the efflorescence of both the narrative-driven, 'literary' non-fiction, as well as the historically oriented novel-writing, that has characterised literary production in South Africa since the 1990s.[5]

It seems that, rather than being simply rivals, many instances of acclaimed fiction and non-fiction from South Africa have for a long time been in an unusually intense, intimate and even *constitutive* dialogue with each other. Coetzee's own debut *Dusklands* (1974); Karel Schoeman's *Verkenning* (1996); Zoë Wicomb's *David's Story* (2000); Shaun Johnson's

3. *The Economist*, December 1999. Cited in Hermann Giliomee, *The Afrikaners: Biography of a People* (London: Hurst & Co, 2003), 3.
4. J.M. Coetzee, 'The Novel Today', *Upstream* (Summer 1988), 2–5.
5. For a fuller discussion of this, see Hedley Twidle, 'In a Country Where You Couldn't Make this Shit Up? Literary Non-fiction in South Africa', with responses by Stephen Clingman, Rob Nixon, Jon Hyslop, and others. *Safundi*, Special Issue: Beyond Rivalry: Fact | Fiction, Literature | History, 13, 1–2 (2012), 5–28. I suggest here that the problem with citing 'The Novel Today' (and the reason, perhaps, that Coetzee never allowed it to be reprinted), is that it tends to reinforce precisely the binary that is seen as so limiting at the outset: 'Because its metaphors are so extreme, we are left with an afterimage of this antagonistic opposition – "the novel" versus "history" – that overshadows the wider import of the address: that when history has been demythologised and revealed as a text among other texts, there exists a whole spectrum of different narratives and writings competing for legitimacy and primacy' (13).

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The Native Commissioner (2006)[6] – all are novels built out of a fraught dialogue with documentary sources, colonial archives and debates surrounding South African historiography in the last decades. The compulsive cross-stitching of literary and historical modes that I see as characterising contemporary South African writing can be traced in within individual *oeuvres*: Ivan Vladislavić's engagement with Johannesburg (inspired in part by the work of Tim Couzens) produces both *The Restless Supermarket* (2001) and *Portrait with Keys* (2006)[7] – winners of the Sunday Times Fiction Prize and the Alan Paton Literary Award (for non-fiction) respectively. And if Sleigh is (as we shall see) an historian who became a novelist, Schoeman represents the perhaps still more complex case of a novelist who became an historian. His prolific and wide-ranging work in this regard (and as a one-time curator of Special Collections at the National Library of South Africa) has done much to bring portions of the colonial archive into the public domain. (Indeed, an article of similar length could be devoted to his work alone.)

If one narrows focus to the VOC period and slavery at the Cape, the prolific late-career work of André Brink has undertaken a sustained (indeed unstoppable) translation of 'history' into 'story'. Works like *An Instant in the Wind* (1977)*, A Chain of Voices* (1982), *On the Contrary* (1993), *Imaginings of Sand* (1995) and *The Rights of Desire* (2006)[8] all embody a series of crossings, blurrings and muddyings of the fiction/non-fiction divide: careful historical scholarship passes into flamboyant novelistic form; archival detail into magical-realist arabesques; local research into international literary currency. Fictionally translated in Brink's *Imaginings of Sand,* Autshumao's niece Krotöa (or Eva, to use her Dutch name) has attracted considerable (perhaps too much) attention from contemporary novelists, poets, and playwrights, including Karen Press (*Bird Heart Stoning the Sea*, 1990), Trudie Bloem (*Krotoä-Eva*, 1999) and Dalene Matthee (*Pieternella van die Kaap*, 2000).

More recently, Yvette Christiaansë's *Unconfessed* (2006) and Rayda Jacobs's *The Slave Book* (2007) represent different literary responses to the rich historiography on Cape slavery by the likes of Armstrong (1979), Ross (1983), Worden (1985) and Shell (1994).[9] As with lesser known works like Therese Benadé's *Kites of Good Fortune* (2004) and Russell Brownlee's *Garden of the Plagues* (2005), these are all texts where the animating energies of postcolonial writing intersect with the democratic impulse (and cultural turn) of social history as it engages the VOC archive in the twenty-first century. Both are projects intent

6. Zoë Wicomb, *David's Story* [2000] (New York: The Feminist Press, 2001). J. M. Coetzee, *Dusklands* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1974). Karel Schoeman, *Verkenningi* (Cape Town: Human and Rousseau, 1996). Shaun Johnson, *The Native Commissioner* (Johannesburg: Penguin, 2006).
7. *The Restless Supermarket* (Cape Town: David Philip, 2001). *Portrait with Keys* (Roggebaai: Umuzi, 2006).
8. André Brink, *An Instant in the Wind* [1976] (London: Minerva, 1991); *A Chain of Voices* [1982] (London: Minerva, 1995); *On the Contrary* [1993] (London: Vintage, 2000); *Imaginings of Sand* [1995] (London: Vintage, 2000); and *The Rights of Desire* (London: Secker & Warburg, 2000).
9. In 'Gender and Violence in Cape Slave Narratives and Post-Narratives', Jessica Murray considers excerpts from Worden and Groenewald's collection of VOC court records *Trials of Slavery* (2005) alongside Christiaansë's *Unconfessed*, arguing for a reading strategy that is 'literary' in the sense of being able to tease out information from gaps and silences in the archive, and quoting an interview in which the novelist mediates on how she engaged the double invisibility of female slave: 'So there I was, rattling my chains in the colonial archive, and I began to learn to look sideways [. . .] and everywhere I went, I found silence. So I began to pay attention to the silence, because I thought that the silence in some ways stencilled out the conditions in which [slave women] lived': *South African Historical Journal*, 62, 3 (2010), 447. In 'Representing Cape Slavery: Literature, Law and History', David Johnson traces literary depictions of

on representing hitherto obscure and fragmentary lives preserved in the official record, reading against the archival grain and 'interpreting evidence produced for a very different purpose'.[10] Both attempt to recover the untold histories of the early colony and hone the narrative forms that can do them some measure of justice. (Although like other metaphors for this process of imaginative recuperation – metaphors of 'giving voice to' or 're-membering' – the notion of *doing justice* must be a contentious and inadequate one, implying a sense of fullness and closure that should properly be resisted.)

In fact, there is something of an irony that Coetzee's address was delivered at the University of Cape Town, given that several historians, curators and archaeologists associated with it have shown themselves ready to experiment with explicitly narrative, character-driven, non-specialist and 'creative' modes of engaging the archive. In *Rogues, Rebels and Runaways* (1999),[11] Nigel Penn makes a case for 'microhistory' in the telling (with an often raconteur-like relish) of eighteenth-century lives at the Cape, while his *The Forgotten Frontier* (2005)[12] takes an epigraph from the literary theorist Paul Ricoeur ('Time becomes human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode'). It also draws on Coetzee's *Dusklands* as a paratext in evoking 'The advance of the colonial frontier, 1700–1740', as do the more speculative (not to say bizarre) sections of Carmel Schrire's *Digging Through Darkness* (1995)[13], a personal account of an archaeological excavation at Oudepost I, a VOC enclave at Saldanha Bay.

In a subtle, almost literary-critical approach to the *Daghregister* of the early Dutch station, Adrien Delmas also finds himself quoting Coetzee, in this case the Magistrate of *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), a novel which, for all its deliberately cultivated placelessness, carries strong suggestions of Coetzee's own immersion in the colonial archives of southern Africa:

> The new men of Empire are the ones who believe in fresh starts, new chapters, clean pages; I struggle on with the old story, hoping that before it is finished it will reveal to me why I thought it was worth the trouble.[14]

slavery at the Cape from 19th-century colonial romances to late 20th-century works by V.M. Fitzroy (*When the Slave Bell Tolled,* 1970) and Jacobs. See *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 46, 5 (2010), 504–516. Most of the texts considered, however, are set in the decades prior to (or immediately following) the abolition of slavery in 1834, whereas my account (while making a similar argument about the uses and abuses of the past) focuses more on the first 50 years of VOC rule.

10. Nigel Worden, 'Introduction', *Cape Town: Between East and West. Social Identities in a Dutch Colonial Town* (Johannesburg: Jacana, 2012), xii.
11. Nigel Penn, *Rogues, Rebels and Runaways: Eighteenth-Century Cape Characters* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1999).
12. Nigel Penn, *The Forgotten Frontier: Colonist and Khoisan on the Cape's Northern Frontier in the 18th Century* (Athens: Ohio University Press; Cape Town: Double Storey Books, 2005).
13. Carmel Schrire, *Digging through Darkness: Chronicles of an Archaeologist* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia and Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1995).
14. Adrien Delmas, 'The Role of Writing in the First Steps of the Colony: A Short Enquiry in the Journal of Jan van Riebeeck, 1652–1662', in Nigel Worden, ed., *Contingent Lives: Social Identity and Material Culture in the VOC World* (Cape Town: Royal Netherlands Embassy, 2007), 500–511. For Coetzee's account of his chance discovery of a cache of southern African ethnographic and philological material while a PhD student in Austin, see the 1984 autobiographical fragment, 'Remembering Texas', in David Attwell, ed., *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 52.

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To add a final example: the kinds of research projects and archivally dense approaches to the VOC period that have yielded the recent volume *Cape Town: Between East and West* (2012) provide a depiction of the eighteenth-century port settlement that is almost novelistic in its social texture and the number of character portraits it provides.[15]

Indeed, a personal sense that instances of 'straight' historical reconstruction can often read as somehow more densely novelistic than the novels they give rise to (Jeff Peires' account of the Xhosa cattle-killing, *The Dead Will Arise* (1990) set against Zakes Mda's *The Heart of Redness* (2001), to give one example) is in part the provocation for my enquiry. How then, can one hear message of Coetzee's address – that there is no 'answer-script' against which to check the literary work, only a spectrum of different modes of writing competing for influence – without abandoning the idea of positing *some* limit to the literary imagination? Or at least (to adapt Michel Foucault on the archive) to derive *the law of what can or cannot be said* in any given mode of writing.[16]

Taking a discursive, sometimes impressionistic and necessarily partial approach to this vast historical and archival terrain, my account is (if I may issue an early disclaimer) certainly not the work of a professional historian. Rather it is part of a project which asks what it might mean to write a literary history of Cape Town; or rather, what it might mean to read a history of the city through its literature. It hopes to make an argument based on three main contentions.

First is that any given 'historical novel' (or a more fractured, postcolonial, postmodern variant thereof) must itself be historicised. The literary aspect of history which has been explored by the likes of Hayden White must be balanced by a material history of literature. That is to say, the post-apartheid turn toward the early colony should itself be placed in context if one is to consider how and to what effect the cultural preoccupations of 1990s South Africa impinged on the work of imaginative recuperation underway in the last decades. The 'discourse of the Cape' in this sense provides a wide range of a case studies when tracking how certain writerly strategies interact with specific caches of source material – in many instances producing an all too easily 'usable past', at other moments more able to acknowledge a resistance offered by historical materials to the designs of the present.

Here I find myself in broad agreement with Johnson when he suggests that, far from transcending 'the prosaic discourses of history and law', many recent literary re-imaginings of the colonial Cape project to a disconcerting degree 'the anxieties and concerns of their contingent political present(s) onto the past'.[17] However, I hope to show that Sleigh's work represents an important exception to this tendency, and that this is in large measure where its value lies. It is able to resist, to an unusual extent, the kinds of 'reverse engineering' of

15. At the launch of the volume in Cape Town, the editor remarked that over 1000 proper names are listed in the index. The Book Lounge, 22 March 2012.
16. 'The archive is first the law of what can be said, the system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events. But the archive is also that which determines that all these things said do not accumulate endlessly in an amorphous mass…' Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* [1969] (Abingdon: Routledge, 2002), 145.
17. Johnson, 'Representing Cape Slavery', 504.

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history produced by nationalist historiography, but also by the kind of well-meaning (yet often reductive) forms of national allegory that are often so strong a feature of writing in a newly postcolonial state.[18] If national allegory tends to read an already sanctioned narrative back into historically distant worlds (so subjecting them to the enormous condescension of posterity, if not outright historical distortion), microhistory, while also concerned with the relation between the individual and the larger social body, may to some degree reverse the terms of this equation. National allegory assumes a teleology and cohesive social body (or 'imagined community') that is then superimposed onto past lives; in microhistorical (or 'new historicist') modes, the life of the individual is used to refract and tentatively 'read' a larger social world, the contours and complex dynamics of which have not been (and cannot be) fully described.

As such, I would want to place the term microhistory in opposition to national allegory, and to suggest that (like much recent scholarship on the VOC), *Islands* is able to combine the strengths of the former – a reduced scale of observation, 'thick description', resonant detail, a self-reflexivity about the process of writing history – with a deep structural understanding of the 'transmarine and transcontinental' world of the Company.[19] It is an understanding which (at least in the case of Sleigh) surely owes much to the Annales School, especially the approach of Fernand Braudel, with its emphasis on the *longue durée* and the influence on slow-moving, underlying environmental factors like geography, space and climate on human events.[20] Indeed, the final sections here suggest that *Islands*, when read in tandem with Sleigh's little-known scholarly monograph on the VOC outposts, *Die Buiteposte* (1993), offers a powerful demonstration of how environmental and social history can be braided together in understanding the colonial settlement that evolved on the site of present-day Cape Town.

Finally, and related to the above: it seems necessary to resist the idea of a progression where increasingly self-aware novelistic or literary techniques from the 1960s to the present are automatically judged more adept and sophisticated mediators of earlier Cape texts, or valued simply because they are closer to the event horizon (and jargons) of contemporary cultural critique. There is a tendency (among literary scholars at least) to congratulate or valorise contemporary texts which explicitly flag their postmodern and experimental credentials (through strategies of indeterminacy, decentring, metafictionality and so on). Yet of course, there are many different ways of setting in motion the insights of poststructuralism as they encounter the textuality of history: some profound and productive, others glib and predictable. So too, there are ways of being postmodern without employing the attendant catchphrases or narrative clichés – and of so conducting

18. This claim was made most influentially (and controversially) by the Marxist critic Frederic Jameson. See his 'Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism', *Social Text*, 15 (1986), 65–88.
19. Worden, 'Introduction', *Cape Town: Between East and West*, xi.
20. Braudel's seagoing metaphors of currents, tides, waves and ripples to convey different temporalities and scales of history also resonate when considering the insistent presence of what might be called an oceanic imaginary in Sleigh's work, and in contemporary cultural studies that engage the Indian Ocean world more generally. See for example Isabel Hofmeyr's foreword, 'Writing at Sea', in Adrien Delmas and Nigel Penn, eds, *Written Culture in a Colonial Context: Africa and the Americas* (Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press, 2011), viii–xv; and also (from a more literary perspective), the work of Meg Samuelson, e.g. 'Sea-Changes, Dark Tides and Littoral States: Oceans and Coastlines in the Post-apartheid Literary Imagination', *Alternation* (Special Issue: Coastlines and Littoral Zones, forthcoming).

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an enquiry into the production and limits of historical knowledge in ways that may be more rigorous and far-reaching as a result.

In resisting the temptations of teleology at the level of both historiography *and* literary history, the kind of pastness which I hope to able explore through the weave of these varied texts is then, as Achille Mbembe writes in his meditations on the postcolony, not a simple sequence 'in which each moment effaces, annuls, and replaces those that preceded it'. Instead it is 'an *interlocking* of presents, pasts, and futures that retain their depths of other presents, pasts, and futures, each age bearing, altering, and maintaining the previous ones'.[21]

To ground the discussion somewhat: one can perhaps get a more concrete sense of what this might mean on a stroll through Cape Town's city centre; not in the designated cultural precincts and 'heritage squares', but among the workaday urban fabric. Today, a postal stone from April 1635 can be found in the underground concourse of the Golden Acre Mall in central Cape Town. It sits neglected in a glass display case next to a contemporary postbox/*briewebus*, between African Creations Hair Salon ('Excellent Styles', 'Dark and Lovely') and the back end of Woolworths. The slate-grey stone used to anchor documents by and for passing VOC fleets was discovered during excavations for the shopping centre in 1974. The words 'Amsterdam' and 'Batavia' are clearly legible. Not far away, also underground, there is another irruption of the early colonial past into the present. Between KFC and Mr Price, one can see the remains of a water reservoir built in 1663 under Zacharias Wagenaer, the second Commander of the Dutch garrison. It is an awkward, asymmetrical ruin, encased in glass; large but dimly lit, and easily missed. But still, a reminder that Cape Town is where it is because of the Fresh River, channelled down from Table Mountain to the 'roadstead' where the jetty once stood (purely in terms of a natural, sheltered harbour, Saldanha Bay up the west coast would have been a better choice).

Rather than restored Cape Dutch gables or designated slave memorials fitted out with slick coffee shops, these crumbling walls, excavated at the height of apartheid's architectural triumphalism, seem apt reminders for how the colonial past remains stubbornly, unexpectedly embedded in Cape Town's urban imaginary.[22] From the curio stalls of Greenmarket Square via Golden Acre's corporate franchises to the *buchu* sellers on the Parade, one passes through spaces, structures – and structures of feeling – that are by turns pre-colonial, colonial, apartheid-era, modernist, postmodern, postcolonial, post-apartheid, South African, pan-African and homogenously globalised – all in the course of a short walk.

The travelling archive

As an urban settlement Cape Town is unusual in having almost its entire official history documented; and, in the case of the period of VOC rule, exhaustively so. A mass of journals,

21. Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, trans. A.M. Berrett, J. Roitman, and M. Last (London and California: University of California Press, 2001), 16.

22. For an account of the 'forced removal' and suspect memorialisation of the Prestwich Street dead in Greenpoint, see the work of Nick Shepherd, in particular 'Archaeology Dreaming: Post-apartheid Urban Imaginaries and the Bones of the Prestwich Street Dead', *Journal of Social Anthropology*, 7, 3 (2007), 4–28. The subsequent installation of a café named Truth Coffee Cult at the Prestwich Memorial Centre (complete with skull and crossbones logo) places the site almost beyond parody.

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company reports and judicial records constitute a vast three-way correspondence not only with the *Heeren XVII* (Lords Seventeen) in Amsterdam and the Council of India in Batavia, but also between the *buitenposte* (outposts) of the VOC at the Cape, and the forgotten *posvolk* who inhabited them. My title 'Writing the Company', then, refers not only to contemporary literary recreations of the VOC period, but also to this massive project of trans-oceanic correspondence through which this early 'multinational' constituted itself: a writing *to* the Company brought out more strongly in the Afrikaans omission of the preposition (*skryf die Kompanjie*). At the time such texts were, as Carli Coetzee writes, the preserve of a closed, elite readership in which Company secrets were closely guarded: 'the intended audience of writing at the early Cape often (even typically) excluded those living at the Cape'.[23]

Yet as a result, reading them today with an eye for literary potential, one sees the ambitions and failings of the Dutch outpost (and its double dealings with the Cape Khoi polities) revealed in flagrantly commercial language, with a frankness entirely different from later versions of colonialism as a civilising mission. For at least the first decade of its existence, the Cape station remained merely a geopolitical node on the way to somewhere more interesting and more profitable, barely able to provision itself, let alone passing ships. 'What highly coloured representations have not been . . . made of the advantages of the Cape', Amsterdam complained in the 1662, 'Aye! That we could feed India with your produce; and how ill it turns out at last; when you cannot nearly maintain yourselves; we are by no means well pleased'.[24]

The density of the archival detail, particularly in the first ten years of the Dutch station, gives this colonial encounter, as Delmas puts it, an unusual 'legibility', but one that should not be taken for historical singularity.[25] VOC *daghregisters* were after all also being written in Amboina, Banda, Ternate, Malacca, Ceylon and Batavia at the same time:

> The *Journal of van Riebeeck*, just like its subject-matter, the Cape, was completely set neither in Africa, nor in Asia, nor in Europe. If everything, or almost everything that is said in it happened in the narrow space of the young Colony, between the sea and Table Mountain, the *JVR*, as a material document, allows us to better understand the situation of a colony located between three continents, while its main task was that of keeping them together. (509)

Whereas various South African nationalist narratives, he goes on, have tended to see this portmanteau text as the beginning of history, 'we might be tempted to consider it merely as the history of a beginning, among so many others already in existence' (510).

23. Carli Coetzee, 'In the Archive: Records of Dutch Settlement and the Contemporary Novel', in Derek Attridge and David Attwell, eds, *The Cambridge History of South African Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 139. See also Adrien Delmas, 'From Travelling to History: An Outline of the VOC Writing System during the 17th Century', in Delmas and Penn, eds, *Written Culture in a Colonial Context*, 95–122.
24. Collected in Donald Moodie, *The Record, or a Series of Official Papers Relative to the Condition and Treatment of the Native Tribes of South Africa, Compiled, Translated and Edited by Donald Moodie.* [1838–41] (Cape Town and Amsterdam: AA Balkema, 1960), 259.
25. Adrien Delmas, 'The Role of Writing in the First Steps of the Colony'. The first ten years of the Cape station, Delmas writes, are singularly well-documented and 'legible', more so than the period following: 'Few 17th century decades can boast such an abundance of detail about themselves' (501).

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Stored first in the Castle, then the High Court (site of the former Slave Lodge) and after that the Parliamentary Library, the mass of documentation produced by the years of VOC rule is now housed in what used to be Roeland Street jail. It is an irony relished by former inmate Albie Sachs: 'The building where I was archived has become part of a national archive'.[26] But in a sense their symbolic journey through a changing city has only just begun: since the turn of the millennium, a complex series of international partnerships have been in the process of transcribing selected archives records of the VOC, creating a database that forms part of UNESCO's Memory of the World collection. Through coordinated efforts at repositories in Cape Town, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Tamil Nadu and The Hague, some four kilometres of shelved material are to be preserved in digital archive, searchable via the internet and safe from both fire and tropical humidity. Already it forms, according to the project website, perhaps the most extensive source on early modern 'World History' in existence.[27]

In Cape Town, the first stage involved digitising all of the 'Resolutions of the Council of Policy', the proceedings of the prime governing body at the Cape, dating from late 1651, when the first meeting was held aboard the vessel *Drommedaris*, to 1795, when a bankrupt administration (rechristened *Vergaan Onder Corruptie*) could offer little resistance to the British fleet.[28] Six million words of crabbed seventeenth-century chancery hand and eighteenth-century italic script, written in bleeding brown ink on both sides of folio sheets, have been meticulously deciphered and converted into an 'international platform-independent *eXtensible Mark-up Language* format', with online glossaries to provide assistance with archaic Dutch expressions.

Alternate spellings, unfamiliar abbreviations, words either linked or dismembered into unfamiliar particles – all these provide great challenges to the modern researcher, concede the online editors, but at least one has 'a neutral copy of the original text' where the normalisation of words and the fleshing out of shortened notations will always produce a version that is manifestly a personal interpretation.[29] From a purely linguistic point of view, the Resolutions are an immensely valuable source: one can chart the entry into Cape Dutch of loan words from the Khoi language families (*abba, gogga, karos*), from south-east

26. 'Justice of the Peace: A Life in Writing', *Guardian Review* (26 August 2006), 11.
27. The website introduction to the 'Towards a New Age of Partnership' (TANAP) project claims: 'This unique collection of records has been glorified in the colonial past and despised in nationalist awakenings, but as modern historians unravel its secrets layer by layer, they become more and more convinced that it is the most complete and extensive source on early modern World History anywhere: the Archives of the Dutch East India Company (VOC), 1602–1796. 'Introduction to the Resolutions of the Council of Policy of Cape of Good Hope', www.tanap.net, accessed January 2012. The original TANAP project to transcribe the VOC 'Resolusies' ended in 2003; subsequently the linked TEPC initiative (Transcription of Estate Papers at the Cape of Good Hope, funded by the Dutch government), involved scholars from the University of Cape Town and the University of the Western Cape transcribing portions of the records of the Orphan Chamber, as well as household inventories, and selected Court of Justice Volumes relating to prisoners from the East Indies ('bandietenrollen'). See www.capetranscripts.co.za/project.htm, accessed January 2012.
28. Ms Resolusies 1651–1743 had already been edited and published between the 1950s and 80s – first by Anna Böeseken, then by G.C. de Wet – and could therefore be scanned in; Ms Resolusies 1744–1795 were newly transcribed.
29. TANAP, http://www.tanap.net/content/activities/documents/resolutions_Cape_of_Good_Hope/introduction_english/11.htm, accessed 24 January 2013.

Asia (*baklei*, *piesang*, *blatjang*), and from ship's slang (*kombuis, kombers*) as well as the complex genealogy of place names. In an entry of 1710, one learns of the eight day's journey to *Rivier zonder Eijnde*, the town whose petrol attendants now vie for custom on the N2 just beyond the escarpment. The name is a translation of the Khoi *Kannakamkanna*, so called because the river's source was difficult to locate among the many headwaters and tributaries.

As an expert in palaeography and the eighteenth-century Cape, Dan Sleigh worked for several years as an editor in the transcriptions service at Roeland Street; prior to this, his doctoral work at the University of Stellenbosch resulted in a monumental but still rather neglected scholarly monograph on the VOC.[30] When published in 1993, *Die Buiteposte van die VOC onder Kaapse Bestuur, 1652–1795* (The Outposts of the VOC under Cape Control, 1652–1795) was hailed on the dust jacket as 'the greatest research endeavour in South African historiography'.[31] Yet it has perhaps never received the scholarly attention it deserved – no doubt because this encyclopaedic and sprawling *magnum opus* has never found a commercial publisher or been translated into English.

In the foreword, Sleigh explains his approach of viewing the Company from its periphery, from the manned outposts which spread throughout the Cape as it became clear that the planned refreshment station could not function within the geographic and economic limits of Table Valley. In the volumes of incoming letters at the Cape Archives, sandwiched between the lengthy, official epistles from Holland, Batavia and Ceylon, there are shorter ones, sometimes roughly scrawled notes of only a few sentences on small scraps of paper, usually passed over by historians.[32] These are the correspondence from the outlying stations, dealing with parochial, everyday concerns, and it is these that Sleigh used to evoke the lives and the local concerns of the *posvolk* in extraordinarily rich detail.

Each *buitepos* receives its own treatment, from the lookout post on *Leeuwencop,* with its *vlaggelui* (flag men) and *zeewagters* (sea watchers), to the timber stations of *Paradijs* and *Houtbaai*; from the redoubts and cattle gates of the first frontier along the Liesbeeck, to the second line of defence stretching from *buitepos t'Nieuwland* to *buitepos Hottentots-Holland.* By the late eighteenth century, the network reached from False Bay to the West Coast, including both *Robben* and *Dassen Eijland*, extending to the Boland, the Overberg and as far the outposts *Outeniqualand* and *Plettenbergs Baaij* in the increasingly desperate search for timber. The work culminates with what are virtually separate monographs on *Rio de Lagoa* (present-day Maputo) and Dutch Mauritius, dependencies of the Cape which were both written off by the Company as failed, costly experiments, then packed up and abandoned.

As a lifelong historian of the VOC, familiar with its written records in forms ranging from handwritten notes to international databases, why, one wonders, did Sleigh choose to write a novel? What was it that could not be expressed within his scholarly works, and why did he undertake the task of stringing so many disparate documents together to form a new

30. Personal interview with the author, Pinelands, Cape Town, 10 March 2007. This is also the reason, he adds, why he did not translate *Eilande* himself.

31. D.J. Kotze, quoted on the dust jacket. Dan Sleigh, *Die Buiteposte: VOC-Buiteposte onder Kaapse Bestuur 1652–1795* (Pretoria: Haum, 1993).

32. James C. Armstrong, 'Review Article: *Die Buiteposte*', *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 32, 2/3 (1999), 580–583.

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kind of writing?[33] It is a question to which he has a ready answer as an interviewee: it pays better. But the story of its genesis, the scope of its narrative and its difference from other fictions out of the archive reveal a more complex reasoning, where the strictly material (and microhistorical) approach of *Die Buiteposte* inevitably leads back to the daily rhythms and textures – the 'everydayness' – of life at the Cape, and where (I hope to suggest) the ruthless, post-human economy of the Company will interact with that of narrative itself.

Most obviously and most powerfully, the structure of *Islands* is able to convey the enormous geographical spread of the VOC and the globalised, mercantile economy which it heralded. As the author notes, his work is better described as a collection of seven novellas – 'sewe kort verhale . . . sewe sukkelaars' ('seven short stories . . . seven strugglers') – enabling it to ingest and juxtapose far-flung lives which are picked up where they enter the archival record and dropped when they disappear from it. Each introduces an entirely new topography into the work, and a new source of narrative energy. And yet each lived trajectory remains disturbingly opaque, un-analysed until the same historical personage resurfaces, translated into an entirely different context, viewed from a great narrative distance.

In the second part, the story of the struggling, early settlement is taken up through Peter Havgard, also known as Pieter Meerhof, the Company surgeon who married Krotöa-Eva, gave his name to Meerhof's Kasteel as one of the colony's first explorers and was killed while on a slaving mission to Madagascar in 1667. Here 'Chief Harry' is a distant, shadowy figure, out of favour with the Khoi bands who have united under Doman, the third 'Captain' to be abducted and taken to Batavia in 1657. The focus shifts to Autshumao's niece, the 'woman between' who gave birth to the first mixed-race children at the Dutch station, and has been the subject of so many literary recuperations in recent years.[34] In the opening paragraphs, Van Riebeeck describes to his protégé Meerhof her skill at picking up languages – not just Dutch but also fragments of Malay, English and the Portuguese which was spoken at the Cape well into the nineteenth century – and the effect she has on the garrison when she crosses the courtyard in her sarong and *badjoe*: 'The East, it's pure East' (57). In the careful attention to developing forms of language, dress and food preparation, in the annual rhythm of outgoing and return fleets, the prime division of slaves and sailors into *orang baru* (those newly entered into the Company's service) and *orang lama* (those with experience of the East), we are given a portrait of the *Cabo* as a fulcrum of historical forces at work in the seventeenth century, not simply a matter of kraal and castle, but, in the words of Robert Ross, 'a synthesis in the dialectic of continents'.[35]

33. The Vintage edition states that *Islands* is Sleigh's first novel, but see J.C. Kannemeyer for an account of the whole series of shorter works (mainly for children and teenagers) which he has published in Afrikaans, running in parallel to his work as a professional historian and including treatments of figures like Estienne Barbier and Adam Tas. *Die Afrikaanse Literatuur 1652–2004* (Kaapstad & Pretoria: Human & Rousseau: 2005), 415.

34. The biographical sketch by social historian V.C. Malherbe, *Krotöa, called 'Eva': A Woman Between* (University of Cape Town: Centre for African Studies, Communications Series 19, 1990), has been a source book for several literary versions. The phrase 'a woman between' refers to the savage obituary for Krotöa in the colony's *Daghregister*: 'this brutal aboriginal, always still hovering between'. See H.C.V. Leibrandt, *Précis of the Archives of the Cape of Good Hope: Journal 1671–74 & 1676* (Cape Town: WA Richards & Sons, 1902), 208.

35. Robert Ross, 'Cape Town (1750–1850): Synthesis in the Dialectic of Continents', in Ross and Gerard J. Telkamp, eds, *Colonial Cities: Essays on Urbanism in a Colonial Context* (The Hague: Leiden University Press, 1984), 105–121.

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After this the narrative shifts disconcertingly to 'the limitless ocean north-east of Mauritius', where the sailor Bart Borms floats after a hurricane that decimated the return fleet from Batavia in 1662. Directed more by the vagaries of ocean currents and commercial flows rather than his own conscious decision, he will make a life first as a cultivator on Mauritius and later as a *Saldanhavaarder* (Saldanha farer) also becoming a step-father to Meerhof and Krotöa's daughter Pieternella, the curiously absent individual around whom these diverse narratives pivot. The next novella begins with a German soldier fleeing a fatherland of 'burnt ruins, desecrated churches, felled trees, beached dykes, contaminated wells' as deep structure of the work begins to convey a sense of colonisation, increasingly advanced by economic historians, as an index of Europe's domestic weakness rather than its strength.

As in Brink's highly coloured version of the life of Estienne Barbier, *On the Contrary* (1993), 'the whole country was streaming down to the sea'.[36] Yet while Brink's playful, experimental work is billed by its highly unreliable narrator as 'Being the life of a famous rebel, soldier, traveller, explorer, reader, builder, scribe, Latinist, lover and liar', the career of Sleigh's soldier is less adventurous. As the incoming correspondence from the *buiteposte* confirms, Hans Michiel Callenbach never reached the East but was instead transferred between various lonely postings at the Cape: *Keert-de-Koe*, the cattle gate built at the site of an old Khoi cairn where the road to the interior crossed the Salt River; *Robben Eijland*, where he witnesses the banished Eva's decline into alcohol abuse and venereal disease; *'t Huis de Rust* at Saldanha Bay, where French fleets try to gain a purchase on the Cape, and where the long, stark beaches and shallow waters remind him of the coastline of northern Europe.

The sense of new, emerging relations between different parts of the globe and the perplexing superimposition of them enabled by the literary work continues with the narrative of Pieter Deneyn, a notoriously harsh judicial officer who penned the first love poems of the Cape, occasional verses to ladies which can be read in the archives (one of which employs a trope which will recur throughout 'white writing' of the Cape: the experience of seeing the Southern Cross for the first time). In abstract legal terms he considers the dissonance between the directive from Amsterdam to remain on good terms with the indigenous population and the irreversible, uncontrollable process of dispossession that granting land to the free burghers has set in train. Following this, the narrative is taken up through the free burgher and cooper Daniel Zaaijman, who marries Pieternella and begins to raise a family on Mauritius – the island in a different climactic zone which the VOC hoped could help feed the Cape, and vice versa – only to witness its wholesale abandonment by the Dutch in 1710. Buildings are fired, stock slaughtered and dogs set loose on the island to kill off the remaining fauna: it is a slow and methodical dismantling of human structures which suggests an analogy, subtly developing throughout the text, between the operations of a Company outpost, the workings of the human mind and the written artefact itself.

The reasons for this ghostly, scholarly presence become apparent when, in the final section, we shift to a farm outside Stellenbosch in the early eighteenth century and encounter a larger narrative intelligence. Here Johannes Guilielmus de Grevenbroek, once Secretary of the Council of Policy under the Van der Stel governors, now an old man wrapped in his tattered academic gown for warmth, 'struggles on with the old story' (to use

36. Sleigh, *Islands*, 289, 306.

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the words of Coetzee's Magistrate), attempting to finish a manuscript on the first 50 years of the station: 'He felt the need to write as strongly as thousands of his contemporaries felt the urge to reach the golden East, but after more than five months on more than two hundred foolscap pages, he had still not progressed beyond the years of settlement' (690). A graduate of the University of Leiden, a botanist and author of a 1695 Latin essay on the Cape remarkable for its departure from the usual ethnographic prejudices,[37] De Grevenbroek (1644–1725) has been judged 'one of the most remarkable and intellectually curious men in the Cape colony of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries';[38] indeed he has been called perhaps the first intellectual at the Cape.[39]

In an intriguing, almost new historicist treatment of a resonant, displaced fragment, Groenewald explores how the German philosopher G.W. Leibniz came to have in his possession an interlinear translation of the Lord's Prayer in Cape Khoi, published after his death in the miscellany *Collectanea Etymologica* (1717). He reconstructs – at times speculatively – a chain of transmission and translation stretching from the Khoi Captain Dorha (Claas to the Dutch) via Grevenbroek to the polymath (and VOC Director) Nicolaas Witsen, and then finally his correspondent Leibniz. Its journey evokes the complex networks of colonial exchange and knowledge production in eighteenth-century Europe, leading Groenewald to conclude that 'if the Republic of Letters had a representative at the Cape in the 1690s, that person was Jan Willem van Grevenbroek' (37). Bookish, solitary, sharply critical of corrupt VOC practices, nursing a variety of unspecified grievances but still unusually responsive to the ecological niches and fertility of '[t]his remote corner into which I have been thrust',[40] he emerges as a compelling figure in Karel Schoeman's *Cape Lives of the Eighteenth Century* (2011). Like Groenewald, Schoeman speculates that accounts of the Cape by the likes of Peter Kolb (1719) and François Valentijn (1724–1726) carry unmistakeable traces of a lost text by Grevenbroek, possibly a *magnum opus* with far more detail about Cape Khoi languages than his 1695 tract, and one which he worked on for the last 30 years of his life.[41]

37. Johannes Guilielmus de Grevenbroek, 'An Elegant and Accurate Account of the African Race living round the Cape of Good Hope, commonly called Hottentots'. Only translated into English in the twentieth century by B. Farrington, this can be found in I. Schapera, ed., *The Early Cape Hottentots, described in the writings of Olfert Dapper (1668), Willem ten Rhyne (1686) and Johannes Guilielmus de Grevenbroek (1695)* (Cape Town: Van Riebeeck Society, 1933), where it forms a marked contrast to the companion. Indeed, Grevenbroek's Latinised, often pastoral depictions of the indigenous inhabitants of the Cape would appear to unsettle J.M. Coetzee's verdict (in *White Writing*, 1988) that the trope of an Edenic new world and the 'noble savage' never found any purchase at the Cape Colony.
38. Gerald Groenewald, 'To Leibniz, from Dorha: A Khoi Prayer in the Republic of Letters', *Itinerario*, 38 (2004), 36.
39. A.V. Van Stekelenburg, 'Een intellectueel in de vroege Kaapkolonie. De nalatenschap van Jan Willem van Grevenbroek (1644–1726)', *Tydskrif vir Nederlands en Afrikaans*, 8 (2001), 3–34. Hermann Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, 4.
40. Johannes Guilielmus de Grevenbroek, 'An Elegant and Accurate Account', 297.
41. Karel Schoeman, *Cape Lives of the Eighteenth Century* (Pretoria: Protea Book House, 2011). As a former curator of Special Collections, Schoeman is able to inform us that although Grevenbroek's papers (which must have been voluminous) have been lost, 91 of his books (out of the 380 recorded in a probate inventory and auction roll of 1728) have survived in the Dessinian Collection of the National Library in Cape Town (a bequest of 1761 from the VOC employee Joachim Nicolass von Dessin, which formed the nucleus of the library when it was formed in 1818). For a fuller discussion of Grevenbroek's library, see Van Stekelenburg, 'Een intellectueel in de vroege Kaapkolonie'.

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Carrying with him these dynamics of local and global knowledge – and of both archival abundance and irreparable loss – in *Islands*, Grevenbroek becomes in a sense the frame narrator who has reconstructed the previous lives, and a surrogate for the contemporary author who in turn transcribed VOC minutes, missives and affidavits into a digital archive. He considers the versions of the Cape offered by his few contemporaries, yet is searching for a way of writing that is both less detached than the descriptions of 'Reverend Valentyn' in Holland and the 'young man Kolbe' now back in his *lieber heimat* Franconia; less stridently local than the *Dagregister* of Adam Tas (with whom Grevenbroek probably collaborated in the denunciation of W.A. van der Stel). And so even though the prose surface of *Islands* is not disrupted by the usual markers of authorial self-consciousness, its epilogue refracts back through the whole a complex meditation on the practice of writing the past. His nearness as archivist *in situ* will ensure that *Islands* is no exercise in naïve realism; his distance in time will remove it from the well-meant but often sentimental uses to which the records of the Cape have been put in the last decades.

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'. . . like excluding history itself'

Reading Sleigh's work in tandem with other novels set in the years of the VOC, one is struck by how its genesis and long gestation form an intriguing reversal of the usual process by which a historical novel comes about. Broadly speaking, one surmises that a writer 'does their research' (or uses that of others) as a way of supplementing an urge to plot or characterise, as a means of fleshing out a compelling historical individual or providing adequate context for an 'image' (in Ezra Pound's sense) that has engaged the writerly imagination.[42] Brink describes how Hermann Giliomee brought to his attention the failed slave revolt of 1825 in the Koue Bokkeveld, and the 2000 pages of legal testimony in the archives which triggered *A Chain of Voices*. On the first page Brink reproduces the grisly sentence passed on the slaves, an epigraph used in turn by an influential journalist of South Africa's transition, Allister Sparks, in *The Mind of South Africa* (1990), in which he summarises (and 'translates' into the domain of trade publication and 'current affairs') the work of historians like Armstrong, Ross and Worden who demolished the myth (much favoured by the historical novelist Sarah Gertrude Millin, and her correspondent Jan Smuts) of a 'mild' South African version of slavery:[43]

> the heads of Galant and Abel to be struck off from their bodies and thereupon stuck upon iron spikes affixed to separate poles to be erected in the most conspicuous places in the Bokkeveld, there to remain until consumed by time and the birds of the air.[44]

42. Ezra Pound, 'A Retrospect' (1918): 'An "Image" is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time . . . It is the presentation of such a "complex" instantaneously which gives that sense of sudden liberation; that sense of freedom from time limits and space limits . . .', reprinted in Vassiliki Kolocotroni, et al., *Modernism: An Anthology of Sources and Documents* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 374.
43. Some major texts include: James C. Armstrong's chapter in Elphick and Giliomee, eds, *The Shaping of South African Society*, 75–115; Robert Ross, *Cape of Torments* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983); Nigel Worden *Slavery in Dutch South Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Robert Shell, *Children of Bondage* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1994).
44. André Brink, *A Chain of Voices* [1982] (London: Minerva, 1995). Allister Sparks, *The Mind of South Africa* (London: Heinemann, 1990), 77.

So too Brink acknowledges the work of a Cape academic who has carefully reconstructed, amongst several other microhistories, the life of Trintjie of Madagascar, a slave who was forced into a relationship with the brewer Willem Menssink and who murdered her child by him in 1714:

> This story was researched by the indefatigable Nigel Penn and published in his scintillating study, *Rogues, Rebels and Runaways* (1999); and I still remember the little smile with which he offered me the book, saying, "You might find something in here". Which I promptly did, in *The Rights of Desire*.[45]

In contrast, Sleigh worked for many years as a researcher for the late Dalene Mathee, an author who combined a gift for bestselling narrative and forest-shrouded mysticism with meticulous historical accuracy. Moving from her familiar narrative terrain of the Outeniqua mountains, Mathee's 2000 work *Pieternella van die Kaap* was amongst the first of the wave of revisionist recuperations of Krotöa and her daughter, its composition involving trips to Mauritius and intricate genealogical research. While full of praise for the gifts of Matthee (and indeed his translator Brink), Sleigh registers an exasperation with the way that these figures have since come to dominate reception of his work – 'Dit bly by Krotöa, Krotöa, Krotöa met Sarah Baartman as afwisseling. Wanneer gaan dit, byvoorbeeld, uitbrei?' – and remarks that he wrote much of *Islands* out of all the collected, branching material which Matthee did not use.[46]

It is a detail which goes some way to explaining why it is a book where the more obvious narrative contours and correspondences are absent, why it has the 'resistant form' of having been worked around, or in the cracks and joints of a large body of primary texts, or historical raw material. The phrase is used by Michael Green in his *Novel Histories*, an enquiry into the literary possibilities of reading the past *from* the present without appropriating it *for* the present. The most valuable works, Green suggests, are those with an in-built awareness of the resistance of historical material to the forms in which it is produced, a quality which he contrasts with the 'formal domestication' common in lesser historical novels.[47] In a similar way, when discussing Zoë Wicomb's often satirical treatment of the public use of Cape history, Dorothy Driver draws attention to how a 'self-interrogating density of verbal texture' enables literary works to distance themselves from less complex and nuanced forms of writing.[48] In this encounter with 'the otherness of earlier literature', writes Gillian Beer, '[e]ngaging with the *difference* of the past in our present makes us aware of the trajectory of our arrival and of the insouciance of the past – their neglectfulness of our prized positions and our assumptions'.[49]

45. André Brink, *Persistence of Memory*, in Stephen Watson, ed., *A City Imagined* (Johannesburg: Penguin, 2005), 123.
46. 'Dan Sleigh trotseer ons panel', Interview with panel of M-Net-boekprys, 2001, http://www.oulitnet.co.za/paneelklopper/eilande.asp. Personal interview with the author, Pinelands, Cape Town, 10 March 2007.
47. Michael Green, *Novel Histories* [1997] (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 2001), 30.
48. Dorothy Driver, 'Afterword', in Zoë Wicomb, *David's Story* [2000] (New York: The Feminist Press, 2001), 271. The phrase is from Dennis Porter, '*Orientalism* and its Problems', in Francis Barker et al., eds, *The Politics of Theory* (Colchester: University of Essex, 1983), 179–193.
49. Gillian Beer, *Arguing with the Past: Essays in Narrative from Woolf to Sidney* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), 1. She goes on to cite Habermas and Gadamer: 'For what leads to understanding must be something that has already asserted itself in its own separate validity' (3).

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Again, here De Grevenbroek will prove an invaluable and self-aware intermediary between the autonomy of the past and the needs of the present. In the epilogue the retired secretary realises that his attempt to reveal the corruption of VOC officials has transformed itself into something entirely different.[50] He struggles with the problem of an ending, of how to draw together the disparate lives that have gone before, and acknowledges how he must use the figure of Pieternella as a means to this end if the narrative of the Cape is going to fall within that of his own life: 'It is a terrible tension to have an unfinished manuscript on your table for a long time . . . You're treading water'.[51] All the more so, one imagines, while steadily more topical but less credible versions of the same historical personages appear in the works of others.

As Carli Coetzee shows, versions of Krotöa-Eva within Afrikaans letters underwent a complete reversal within the twentieth century. Where once the genealogical research which linked Krotöa to the Saaymans of the Cape was suppressed and ridiculed, in the 1990s there was a considerable cultural *cachet* in locating non-white ancestry amongst certain Cape Afrikaners once classified white. Whereas early twentieth century playwrights of the Second Language Movement omitted to mention Eva's marriage and stressed her 'inevitable' lapse into alcoholism, revisionist one-woman plays evoked her as *onse ma*, a figure of motherly origin, earthy fertility and forgiveness.[52] She appears in similar guise in Brink's first post-apartheid novel, *Imaginings of Sand*, although here the mystic, healing presence of Krotöa-Eva has been transmuted to Kamma-Maria and transplanted to the very different frontier of the *trekboers*.[53]

Considering her fate in the hands of English-language writers, Stephen Gray posited a 'Hottentot Eve' as counterpart to the Adamastor of *The Lusiads*. Envisioning a 'pastoral ambassadress, temptress, mediator and, ultimately miscegenator' who 'comes to symbolise both the attractions and the intractability of inland', he finds the literary descendants of Krotöa extending in a continuum through Saartje Baartman to the demotic Kaatje Kekkelbek of Thomas Geddes Bain; from the temptress of Millin's *God's Step-Children* (1924) to the forlorn apartheid wanderer of Fugard's *Boesman and Lena* (1969), the woman by the roadside wearing 'one of those sad dresses that reduce the body to an angular gaunt

50. Presumably related to the 1712 *Contra-deductie*, a rebuttal to Van der Stel's *Korte Deductie*, and published under the names of Adam Tas and Van der Heiden. In *Cape Lives*, Schoeman assesses the possibility of Grevenbroek's involvement in his text, suggesting that only he would have been able to muster its wide and sometimes idiosyncratic range of classical references (42–43). See Peter Merrington, 'Nothing New Under the Sun: Anatomy of a Literary-Historical Polemic in Colonial Cape Town circa 1880–1910', for an account of how controversy over the Van der Stel affair came to shape the historical novels of Dorothea Fairbridge at a time of very different 'nation building'. Arguments over the Van der Stel governorship play out in the professional (and productive) rivalry between archivists H.C.V. Leibrandt and G.M. Theal, as the distant VOC era then becomes (in Merrington's reading) a series of proxies and 'usable pasts' for then contemporary debates between an English-speaking Edwardian clique and an Afrikaner nationalism in formation. In Delmas and Penn, *Written Culture in a Colonial Context*, 189–206.

51. Sleigh, *Islands*, 741.

52. Carli Coetzee, 'Krotöa Remembered: A Mother of Unity, a Mother of Sorrows?', in Coetzee and Nuttall, eds, *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1998), 112–119.

53. See Meg Samuelson for an extensive account of Krotöa-Eva as 'Translator, Traitor, "Rainbow" Mother' in the work of Brink, Sleigh and Trudie Bloem: *Remembering the Nation, Dismembering Women? Stories of the South African Transition* (Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2007), 15.

cipher of poverty'.[54] On the one hand Gray's work is an inspired exercise in comparative reading; on the other, in drawing such long-distance correspondences and sifting the texts of early travellers, it risks entrenching a colonial stereotype still further and merely reproducing the voyeuristic fascination with genitalia and steatopygous buttocks that it seeks to ironise.

The very word 'steatopygia' becomes an object of fascination in Wicomb's 2000 novel, *David's Story*, a mantra to be rolled around the mouth and playfully reclaimed from both its pretensions to scientific enquiry and overtones of postcolonial outrage. Here the figure of Krotöa is invoked in a much more unstable act of literary origin: in the opening paragraphs the narrator (employed to transcribe the story of the one-time freedom fighter David Dirkse as per his instructions) casts an ironic gaze on this all too easily usable past:

> David's story started at the Cape with Eva/Krotöa, the first Khoi woman in the Dutch castle, the only section I have left out. He eventually agreed to that but was adamant about including a piece on Saartje Baartman, the Hottentot Venus placed on display in Europe. One cannot write nowadays, he said, without a little monograph on Baartman; it would be like excluding history itself.[55]

Not only has Krotöa-Eva merged into Baartman as a single token figure – easily transferred and exchanged between texts – but the very appearance of these names has come to serve as a shorthand for the entire project of exhuming forgotten lives, and to signal the trajectory they must inevitably follow.

Yet ultimately, the unreliable amanuensis in Wicomb's novel will excise both 'the woman between', and 'the Hottentot Venus' from the novel we hold in our hands. Instead, a very different, disturbing narrative continually threatens to surface: David's adulterous affair during his exile in ANC training camps with a woman subsequently subjected to torture by the liberation movement as a possible informer. What has by now become something of a narrative cliché is exchanged for a subject that is still barely voiced as Wicomb, writing from Glasgow, attests her up-to-dateness in matters of cultural politics in an immensely ambitious and experimental novel. There is, however, a price to be paid for this mediation between local and global audiences. The international edition of *David's Story* includes a long scholarly afterword detailing the social demography of the Cape and the fate of the Griqua peoples – all the historical matter that is only obliquely referred to in the main text. In the words of Kai Easton, 'another narrator takes over and fills in the gaps, "unravels", as it were, the literary and historical intertexts for an international readership'; and despite the calibre of the research and rigour of the analysis 'we might still question the marketing of this novel – which is so wittily attentive to interpretative strategies – with an afterword that, in the end, explains it all'.[56]

Considering all the avowedly self-aware and experimental works out of the Cape archive in recent years – those which attempt to tell the past while simultaneously questioning the

54. Stephen Gray, *Southern African Literature: An Introduction* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1979), 43, 68.
55. Wicomb, *David's Story*, 1.
56. Kai Easton, 'Travelling through History, "New" South African Icons: The Narratives of Saartje Baartman and Krotöa-Eva in Zoë Wicomb's *David's Story*', *Kunapipi*, 24, 1–2 (2002: Special Edition: South Africa Post-Apartheid), 237–249.

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status of any written history – one is struck by the recurrence of this pattern: the greater the deployment of self-conscious narrators and frame-breaking techniques, the greater the degree of *hors texte* explanation required. A recent issue of the journal *Kronos* was devoted to a discussion of *Proteus*, a 2003 film based on the records of a trial conducted before the Cape Council of Justice in August 1735. Rijkaert Jacobsz (a VOC sailor from Rotterdam) and Claas Blank (a Khoi individual from the south-west Cape), already prisoners of many years on Robben Island, were accused of 'mutually perpetrated sodomy' by Panaij van Boegies, a slave banished from Batavia in 1730. Mixing direct quotations of the records in Dutch and Portuguese with Afrikaans dialogue, the visual grammar of film also included a series of deliberate anachronisms. Concrete breakwaters and steel water drums on the island; the beehive hairdos of court stenographers and uniforms of apartheid konstabels: all these, according to the directors, were intended to reference 1964, the year of Nelson Mandela's incarceration:

> The pristine past of 1735 that we sought to recreate didn't exist, couldn't exist – it would always be haunted by the present, by every image we know from our century, by Biko and Soweto, by whites-only beaches and black townships, and now by ten years of democracy when South Africa became the first country in the world to enshrine gay rights in their constitution . . . It's impossible to know what Claas and Rijkaert really experienced, impossible to know what they felt and dreamed, because we weren't there. We could only invent our version of their story, a version that's specific to our imaginations, and our lives today. Because we weren't pretending to be 'pure', the beehives and concrete breakwaters allowed us to be 'true' to our 1735 story, and most important, true to the memory of these two forgotten convicts.[57]

The more one considers this line of argument – fashionable and sophisticated as it may be – the more one suspects that it is flawed. It posits an equivalence between very different kinds of struggle, and grants itself the right to see them as continuous across time. It risks assuming that the use of self-aware, frame-breaking techniques in narrating the past *automatically* guarantees an adequate engagement with the archive; when in fact they might become a kind of lip-service which is then taken to authorise anything that follows. And surely something – a kind of historical integrity, or facticity – is lost in the very process of reading so much into events, in the strenuous attempt to yoke one of the twentieth century's most celebrated liberation struggles (not to mention gay rights) to the closed, hopeless world of this obscure trial. For all its advertised radicalism, such an approach risks replicating precisely the tone which a thinker like Michel Foucault so abhorred: 'the easy, cosy intimacy that historians have traditionally enjoyed in the relationship of the past to the present'.[58] To sympathise too readily (and on a first-name basis) with such figures is perhaps to betray them.[59]

57. Susan Newton-King, ed., 'History and Film: A Roundtable Discussion of *Proteus*', *Kronos*, 31 (November 2005), Reprinted on cover.
58. Mark Poster, *Foucault, Marxism and History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984). Cited in Green, *Novel Histories*, 28.
59. See also Nigel Worden, '"What are We?": *Proteus and the Problematising of History*', in Vivian Bickford-Smith and Richard Mendelsohn, eds, *Black and White in Colour: African History on Screen* (Cape Town: Double Storey, 2007), 82–96, for a fuller discussion.

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It is here that one approaches a dilemma presented by much of Brink's *oeuvre*, and also a sense of unease that he is regarded as such a serious presence – 'a writer of inspired violence' – on the world stage.[60] Having presented Afrikaans prose with, in Antjie Krog's words, 'a military review of modern and avant-garde techniques' over the decades, he has also mapped out the changing strategies of the novels in several essays.[61] It is a sustained and cogent meditation on the relation of story to history, but one in which an excitement at the sheer profusion of narratives emerging from the archive blends rather queasily with the violence of their content.

In an essay collected in *Reinventing a Continent* (one which goes some way to explaining why the interior monologues of nineteenth-century slaves owe much to the language of French structuralism circa 1968), Brink discusses that in consulting the trial documents for *A Chain of Voices*, he was most drawn to the 'unguarded moments' and ungrammatical turns of phrase where the original voice of the speaker seemed to sound out through the palimpsest of transcriptions. Looking back however, he acknowledges that his sense now is of the extreme unreliability of the documentation which demonstrated that 'history, even in the most traditional sense of the word, is composed not only of *texts* (written and otherwise), but strung together from *silences*. And this, it seems to me, is what primarily attracts the novelist (as it originally attracted the historiographer)'.[62] Such strings of silence are in turn linked to the violence of the colonial record, but in a way where Brink is always more than ready to expound on both; in his recent autobiography, this produces the rather lazy paradox that 'Violence is a kind of language in its own right, an articulation which is either preverbal or which begins where language stops'.[63] In his fiction, however, language stops at nothing, and the result is an often voyeuristic, almost pornographic depiction of brutality, one which emerges most gratuitously in a work titled (aptly enough) *The Other Side of Silence* (2002).

The professional historian's smile on handing narrative raw material to Brink is surely telling. Perhaps it evinces an awareness that his invaluable role as prolific author-translator-populariser co-exists with inevitable distortions inherent in the sheer ambition of his undertakings. In *On the Contrary*, the flights of fancy of the incorrigibly romantic and rebellious Estienne Barbier are created from the wilder imaginings of travellers like Kolb: his journey into an African interior is 'composed not so much of landscapes and climatological conditions as by the *texts* of numerous eighteenth-century travellers through the Cape hinterland'.[64] Yet in *Rogues, Rebels and Runaways*, Penn's account of Barbier shows that his opposition to the Company was less an African inflection of Continental liberty, equality and fraternity (or, for that matter, Parisian existentialism of the 1960s) than a desire to maraud and murder the indigenous peoples of the northern Cape without restraint. Here magical realist or fabulist techniques surely reach the limits of invention and begin to effect a distortion that cannot be accounted for by even the most dilated account of artistic licence.

60. A reviewer's phrase reproduced on several of the Vintage editions.
61. Antjie Krog, 'Tribute to André P Brink on the occasion of his seventieth birthday celebration', 5 July 2005, http://www.oulitnet.co.za/seminarroom/brink_tribute.asp, accessed 24 January 2013.
62. André Brink, *Reinventing a Continent: Writing and Politics in South Africa, 1982–1995* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1996), 240–241.
63. André Brink, *A Fork in the Road: A Memoir* (London: Harvill Secker, 2009), 15.
64. Brink, *Reinventing a Continent*, 243.

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Neither does such an objection have to be framed in moral, or moralistic, terms: as a reader one simply senses that at points the increasing density of the language can only signal its ebbing power. The silences, darknesses and absences which are liberally sprinkled through the titles of Brink's books (and the paragraphs of criticism which buttress them) can all too easily become tokens of common currency, outdated by their very attempt to remain at the cutting edge of international trends. Like the figure of Krotöa-Eva-Baartman these enter into too easy an exchange; they begin to lose their suggestive power and local force. In the verdict of a more sceptical reviewer of *A Chain of Voices*, Brink 'writes historical novels in the way other people travel'; 'an exercise in what might be called apartheid gothic', they become 'costume dramas of the present': 'He is unable to apprehend the past in any but the forms and tones and meanings of his own exceptional experience as a South African in 1982, the forms of a familiar but distorted world'.[65]

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'. . . that country remained to be described'

To read a novel like *Islands* is to leave this for a much lonelier aesthetic, and to observe a series of worlds built from first principles. As the fantastic elaborations of a European imaginary desperate for landfall are eschewed for the harsh, monochrome world of permanent settlement, the descriptive details and dabs of colour in the opening sections turn on material consumption and cargo: the fatty smoke of transition fires, the noxious gas escaping the wreck of the *Haerlem* as pepper rots in its hold; the green excrement falling on the heels of oxen as Autshumao's people drive them too quickly to the Fort in anticipation of tobacco and alcohol. Stalled on Robben Island, the narrative of Peter Havgard conveys a powerful sense of stagnation, of lives governed by the alien rhythms of the Company and its distant Directors. It intimates that perhaps the real challenge of a historical novel is to convey a radically different experience of time passing, to evade as far as possible any directed, subsequently agreed narrative: the teleology implied, for example, in the titles of two influential histories of the period, where the early colony is inevitably read in the light of later conceptions of the nation state.[66]

Reviewing Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall*, Stephen Greenblatt writes appreciatively of how it invites us to 'forgo easy irony and suspend our awareness of what is going to come to pass': 'The triumph of the historical novel, in Mantel's vision, is to reach a point of ignorance'.[67] By contrast, in a review of *Islands*, Christopher Hope works from the opposite direction, citing it as proof of his suspicion that 'much of the narrow unforgiving hatred that marked later South African lives' may be traced back to the officials of the seventeenth-century Dutch station.[68] Van Riebeeck's defensive fort and hedge of bitter almonds (also a central metaphor in Sparks's *The Mind of South Africa*) 'set the political tone for centuries to come', he states, going on to say that 'it is somehow reassuring to know that the Dutch

65. Jane Kramer, 'In the Garrison', *New York Review of Books*, 2 December 1982, 8.
66. Elphick, *Kraal and Castle: Khoikhoi and the Founding of White South Africa*; Elphick and Hermann Giliomee, eds, *The Shaping of South African Society 1652–1820* (Cape Town: Longman, 1979).
67. Stephen Greenblatt, 'How it Must Have Been', *New York Review of Books*, 5 November 2009, 24.
68. Christopher Hope, 'Harry's Dementors', *The Guardian*, 22 May 2004, http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2004/may/22/featuresreviews.guardianreview21, accessed 24 January 2013.

East India Company recruited as servants and sailors not the impeccable white paragons touted in the history books but the dregs of Dutch and German gutters'.[69]

Quite apart from its historical simplification and elision of the second, British colonial administration, this approach does no justice to the processes of narrative unfolding in the work. As Paul Carter shows in his essay on the spatial history of colonial Australia, the process of 'choosing directions, applying names, inhabiting the country' is precisely what is omitted from such assured, conventional framings of history:

> they take it for granted that the newcomers travelled and settled a land *which was already there.* Geomorphologically, this was perhaps so – although even the science of landforms evolved as a result of crossing the country – but historically that country remained to be described.[70]

If anything, the literary work's sensitivity to this gradual, spatial mapping works to undermine precisely such generalisations and the temporal markers they rely on. The disrupted, dislocated lives cut across received chronologies, while in the attention to the overlapping, evolving conceptions of dwelling which made up this collection of outposts, we are required to abandon the overworked frontier metaphor for a contact zone of unexpected intimacies and extreme precariousness.[71]

Testifying to what Mostert calls 'one of the most remarkable examples of deprivation amidst plenty that history offers', Van Riebeeck's *Daghregister* records how the Dutch station very nearly went the way of the Newgate Men.[72] As the 'seeds from the Fatherland' (*patriase saden*) are repeatedly washed out by torrential rain and the inhabitants of the fort forced to subsist on a diet of penguin, cabbage and even a dead baboon 'as large as a small calf', the gaze is turned enviously on the Khoi herds which gradually approach and then entirely encircle the fort. The strained early entries and the silences between them leave us to consider the effect of omens like snow on Table Mountain and a comet in the night sky.

In a reading of the early text of settlement more sophisticated than Hope's, yet which also cannot help working via a backdated narrative, the literary scholar Michael Chapman describes the *Daghregister* as evincing 'a mind continually ill at ease with itself as observations of the surrounding situation skew into psychologies of confession and self-justification'; it 'evokes the rudiments of a history in South Africa that would be characterised by suspicion, uncertainty, arrogance and pig-headedness'.[73] Yet just as Sir Francis Drake almost certainly never penned the famous description of 'the fairest Cape . . . in the whole circumference of the earth', so too the *Journal of Van Riebeeck* was not written by him. Nowhere in the original journal does his own handwriting appear (as it does in corrections and additions to minutes of the Council of Policy); rather we have a document sometimes dictated by him, sometimes chronicling his actions in the third person, and sometimes composed in his absence. Perhaps then it is better viewed as a

69. *Ibid.*
70. Paul Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay: An Essay in Spatial History* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987), xxi.
71. The harshness of the early station in its first decade is powerfully brought to life in Schoeman's *Kolonie aan die Kaap*, vol. 3 (Pretoria: Protea, 2010).
72. Noël Mostert, *Frontiers*: *The Epic of South Africa's Creation and the Tragedy of the Xhosa People* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1992), 123.
73. Michael Chapman, *Southern African Literatures* (London: Longman, 1996), 77.

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collective, political unconscious of the station and one whose images and obsessions are subjected to a deep pattern of rereading and reorientation in Sleigh's work.

As J.M. Coetzee showed in *White Writing*, when accounts of the Khoi move from the static categories of a proto-anthropology to the temporal record of chronicle, their much lamented idleness is suddenly replaced by a welter of activity: 'where he ought to be generating data for the categories, he is merely lying about', but 'in history the Hottentots suddenly seem all too busy, intriguing with one another, driving off cattle, begging, spying'.[74] And while Raven-Hart's *Cape of Good Hope: The First Fifty Years of Dutch Colonisation as Seen by Callers* (1971)[75] is filled with descriptions of the garbled language of the Khoi, in the *Journal of Van Riebeeck* the voice which emerges in dialogue with the Dutch is a surprisingly fully formed one, the arguments of Autshumao, Doman and other Khoi leaders offering convincing rebuttals of the Company's methods.

Concluding the terms of an uneasy peace after the first 'frontier war' along the Liesbeeck in 1659–1660, the Journal records that

> they dwelt long upon our taking every day for our own use more of the land, which had belonged to them from all ages . . . They also asked, whether, if they were to come into Holland, they would be permitted to act in a similar manner.[76]

We read that to prevent the Dutch carting away cattle dung for use as manure in their vegetable garden, the Khoi began burning it, 'causing us thereby great inconvenience'.[77] Pages of the *Daghregister* are given over to watching the wagon road, a route vital for the supply of timber, yet also, one senses, for providing some kind of conceptual axis with which to traverse the confusing geography of the Peninsula. On 10 February 1655, after weeks of one-line reports about wind direction and shipping, an entry beginning on the *wagen pad na t'bos* develops into a long, frightened recollection that ruptures the assured chronology:

> Only last night it happened that about 50 of these natives wanted to put up their huts close to the banks of the moat of our fortress, and when told in a friendly manner by our men to go a little further away, they declared boldly that this was not our land but theirs and that they would place their huts wherever they chose. If we were not disposed to permit them to do so they would attack us with the aid of a large number of people from the interior and kill us, pointing out that the ramparts were only constructed of earth and scum and could easily be surmounted by them.[78]

A hopeful footnote by the Van Riebeeck Society edition here suggests that while 'both the Cape original and the Hague copy have *schuijm* (rubble, rubbish). Probably the diarist intended to write *schuijn* (with a slope)' (292).

74. J.M. Coetzee, *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 23.
75. R. Raven-Hart, ed. and trans., *Cape of Good Hope: The First Fifty Years of Dutch Colonisation as Seen by Callers*. 2 vols (Cape Town: AA Balkema, 1971).
76. Cited Mostert, *Frontiers*, 134.
77. Cited Mostert, *Frontiers*, 130.
78. *Journal of Jan van Riebeeck, Volume I, 1651–1655*, ed. with intro. by H.B. Thom (Cape Town and Amsterdam: AA Balkema, 1952), 293.

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Beginning in the long, sporadic history of contact prior to settlement, the first section of *Islands* dramatises this acute awareness of resource use as well as the complex, internally-riven Khoi response to the European presence. The desperate, envious gaze of the early Journal – 'would it matter so much if one deprived them of some 6 or 8 thousand cattle?' – is reversed as Autshumao watches Van Riebeeck's small, growing kraal, but also the herds of the 'fat captain' Gogosoa.[79] In the second part, we look over Peter Havgard's shoulder as he reads *Daghregister*, scanning it for references to Eva. 'There was one sentence in the journal that Peter could remember clearly, word for word: *But you, Eva, you're pleading with the commander*. The word the speaker used was *soebat*. An Oriental word which meant: to curry favour'.[80] In this etymological attention to an accusation levelled by Doman, the 'synthesis in the dialectic of continents' described by Ross has become instead a corrosive hybridity. It is a reminder that what Wayne Dooling calls the '*blatjang* and *bobotie*' approach stressing the ongoing legacy of the colonial underclass at the Cape (especially as manifested in contemporary cuisine) risks forgetting the destructive aspect of this mix, and its psychic cost.[81] As Carli Coetzee writes of Krotöa, 'Better to remember her as . . . a mother of sorrows rather than of unity. Better to remember that her silence is not a sign of forgiveness'.[82]

'. . . an island which Prospero has left'

How then is the literary work able to move between the microcosm and macrocosm? How is a novel like *Islands* able to combine this resolutely materialist, resource-driven and structural understanding of the VOC world with its evocation of individual lives? One is offered a clue, perhaps, by the way in which social and environmental history come to be so intimately implicated in each other within the work. In this sense, it is notable that in 1658, the year which marked the arrival of the first slave ship at the Cape, the *Daghregister* also records for the first time the 'reckless destruction' of forests, and restricts felling to the post on the southern side of the mountain named *Paradijs*.

Any survey of a second-hand bookshop here suggests that the Cape as garden remains firmly embedded in the popular imagination (and perhaps the global imaginary), with all the attendant, overdetemined metaphors of plantation, transplantation, labour, leisure, conservation, indigeneity and exoticism – not to say, the complex and contentious cultural process by which contingent (and unjust) forms of the social are produced as 'natural'.[83] In *Islands*, however, there is very little attention give to the Company Gardens, the rectilinear strip of greenery that was by the end of the seventeenth century being shown to

79. 18 December 1652, *Journal of Van Riebeeck*, 116.
80. Sleigh, *Islands*, 100.
81. Wayne Dooling, *Slavery, Emancipation and Colonial Rule in South Africa* (Scottsville: University of Kwazulu-Natal Press, 2007).
82. Coetzee, 'Krotöa Remembered', 119. See also Mansell Upham's angry critique of the 'Krotöa industry': 'In a Kind of Custody: For Eva's Sake . . . Who Speaks for Krotwa?', *Capensis*, 4, 98 (November 1998), 6–14.
83. For a typical antiquarian-cum-botanical engagement with the colonial past (one of many) see for example Mia Karsten, *The Old Company's Garden at the Cape and its Superintendents, Involving an Historical Account of Early Cape Botany* (Cape Town: Maskew Miller, 1951). Its epigraph is taken from the parable

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passing dignitaries, and is used as the lush setting for Russell Brownlee's 2005 work *Garden of the Plagues.* As an epigraph he uses the impressions of Guy de Tachard in his 'Voyage to Siam' of 1688, who records the expansions and improvements under the tenure of Simon van der Stel: 'We were mightily surprised to find one of the loveliest and most curious gardens that I ever saw, in a country that looks to be one of the most dismal and barren places in the world'.[84] In his account, Tachard goes on to describe Van der Stel's 'improvements' in terms that prefigure so many of the natural histories of the eighteenth century. Learned comparison with European models, nomenclatures, fine discriminations and branching descriptive abundance unfold in the immediate proximity of human suffering, in this case the structure of the Slave Lodge itself:

> Its beauty does not lie in flower-beds and fountains, as in the gardens of France: these could be easily had here . . . since there is a stream of fresh water which comes down from the mountain and flows through the garden. But there are avenues there as far as the eye can see, of citron, pomegranate and orange trees, growing in the ground and protected from the wind by thick and high hedges of a sort of laurel that they call spek, which is always green and not unlike filaria.[85]

Yet as the view from the outposts shows, the colonisation of the Cape was less a case of planting, than a relentless process of deforestation. Worden *et al*. remark that 'the "Paradise" post was ironically part of the process that was rapidly destroying the landscape of the paradise of earlier European descriptions and imagination. Paradise was being pushed back across the Cape Flats'.[86] And it is here that the strictly materialist approach taken in *Die Buiteposte* shades into a distinct ecological awareness, so that the sensitivity to the natural world in *Islands* becomes immediately entangled with social hierarchies and control of the Peninsula's spaces. As we watch woodcutters burn the monogram of the VOC into the heads of heavy tree trunks with a branding iron – the Company's mark 'smoking in the greenwood' – we are shown not only the social but also the environmental cost of the colonial project, and how intricately they are associated.[87]

In the seventeenth century (Sleigh's academic work informs us) the majority of the wood felled at the Cape was carried off by the ships themselves: in 1685 the VOC fleets took 805 wagonloads away from the Cape, each of which would have required some 12 slaves to fell and pack. In 1671, free burghers were forbidden to collect firewood between the Lion's Head to Rustenburg, and so forced their slaves to Diep Rivier and beyond. In 1705, the usage by senior personnel of the Castle alone was 672 wagonloads, over half of which went to the governor, with an allowance of one wagon load per day. In 1712, the Company kitchens were demanding 'wortelhout uit de Duinen', while the slaves of burghers were

of the sower from the Gospel of Luke 8: 5–8. J.M. Coetzee surely 'writes back' to this tradition with the very different image of sowing which begins *White Writing*, drawn from Ovid's *Metamorphoses:* 'Pressing his lips to foreign soil, greeting the unfamiliar mountains and plains, Cadmus gave thanks . . . Descending from above, Pallas told him to plow and sow the earth with the serpent's teeth, which would grow into a future nation.'

84. Russell Brownlee, *Garden of the Plagues* (Cape Town: Human & Rousseau, 2005), 7.
85. Raven-Hart, *Cape of Good Hope*, vol. II, 276.
86. N. Worden, E. van Heynigen, and V. Bickford-Smith, *Cape Town: The Making of a City. An Illustrated Social History* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1998), 25.
87. Sleigh, *Islands*, 378–379.

required to ford the Salt River twice a day, in summer and winter, a situation which had their owners complaining repeatedly about loss of their property through drownings and sickness. By 1730, the stripping of the Cape Flats was virtually complete: post-holders were given the authority to shoot trespassers in the official preserves, while slaves forced into a prohibited part of the Peninsula by the burghers would be whipped and forced to work a year in chains by the Company.[88] Tracing the movement of just this single resource through early Cape colonial society shows a structure of hierarchy and command in conflict with itself, where free burghers were anything but free, and where the loose sand blown from the stripped dunes gradually changed the shape of Table Bay:

> So the Castle with its unappeasable hunger for fuel and timber was beginning to gnaw at the land. One day it would start gnawing at the Company itself; Saturn devouring its own children, the present gnawing at the future . . . Teams of axemen were sent into the old yellow-wood forest at Hout Bay to cut firewood for the lime kilns and long beams for the jetty. Every two or three days without interruption, a hooker or a flute brought the logs and fuel from Hout Bay, and laid it at the Castle's feet, as if on an altar.[89]

As we see it change the very ecology of the Peninsula, we are given an overwhelming impression of the total presence of the Company, a devouring, post-human economy of scale which uses up virtually all the lives in its service. In talks to the *leeskringe* of greater Cape Town, Sleigh describes the socio-economic organisation of VOC in terms of an inverted triangle; with the founding of the Dutch station, 'het die hele gewig van n' omgekeerde piramide met die skerp punt na onder, op die Kaap kom rus'.[90] This becomes the informing paradigm of *Islands*: the decrees of the *Heeren XVII* to do the impossible are channelled through the intricate hierarchies of the Company, coursing through everything it administers – human bodies, outposts, forests, the lives of animals – increasing in pressure and violence at every step.

To lay the blame for the colony's development (as Hope does) on 'the dregs of Dutch and German gutters' is to miss the main achievement of recent accounts of the VOC and their ongoing relevance:[91] how they evoke a moment when global capital and the mercantilism of the 'multinational' first began making its inroads on the most intricate of life processes. And once the mindlessness and structural violence inherent in the VOC has been so clearly sketched out, there is little need for lingering, voyeuristic description.

88. Sleigh, *Die Buiteposte*, 24–29.
89. Sleigh, *Islands*, 429.
90. Text of talks to Cape Town book clubs: received from Dan Sleigh, 10 March 2007. It is worth noting that Sleigh was a student of the historian P.J. van der Merwe while at Stellenbosch, an historian strongly influenced by the Annales School. In the 1930s–1940s Van der Merwe wrote a trio of books on the Cape frontier which are notable for the close attention that they pay to environmental and geographical factors: see Nigel Penn, 'Trekboers Revisited', *African Affairs*, 95 (1996), 126–130, in which he remarks that Van de Merwe's work is rather like the Cape interior itself – 'expansive, neglected and important'. In the book derived from his doctoral work, Penn in turn explores how the patterns of colonial history in the northern Cape interacted with factors like rain belts, topography and distinct ecological regions. See the 'Introduction' to Penn's *The Forgotten Frontier*, especially pages 14–24. In a moment that is suggestive for a more spatially or environmentally grounded history, the author even goes so far as to say that being guided outdoors by archaeologists 'gave me access to the most valuable primary resource of all – the land itself' (2).
91. Hope, 'Harry's Dementors', *The Guardian*, 22 May 2004.

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The sentences flatly listed in the narrative of the *Fiscaal* Deneyn are never elaborated on; rather, an observer turns away as Khoi *pandoers* beat a runaway slave to death below the Castle walls. As Penn comments of his own experiments with narration in the archive of the eighteenth century, the more one contemplates this reality, the more violent it appears to be.

> Ordinary men and women would have been fortunate to avoid becoming either a victim or a perpetrator of this violence. It is violence that links the marginal people of these pages together and it is violence that makes them our contemporaries.[92]

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In his survey of how the island of the *The Tempest* has shifted from a place to imagine an early modern utopia to a fertile ground for African and Caribbean rewritings in the twentieth century, the environmentally-minded critic Jonathan Bate suggests another horizon of possibility emerging from Shakespeare's work: the voice of Ariel, trapped in the cloven pine, 'a voice which has been oddly silenced by recent criticism's obsession with Caliban': 'In the twenty-first century, we will need to imagine an island which Prospero has left, an ecosystem which man must be content to leave alone'.[93]

The image of an abandoned island is one which De Grevenbroek returns to again and again in the epilogue to Sleigh's work. Instead of writing his planned denunciation of the Van der Stels after years of collecting and organising material copied from the Company records, he finds himself interviewing Pieter Zaaijman and the disgraced Commander Lamotius to hear about the last days of Mauritius under the Dutch flag: farmlands barely breaking the thick volcanic crust of the island, the smallpox and dysentery which spread so quickly during the dry season when everyone washed in stagnant pools, the river mouths clogged with the last ebony trees carried down from the forests. It is an image which seems somehow linked to the shutting down of this large narrative itself, a vision in which an acknowledgement of self-interested, destructive human agency co-exists with a desire to leave textual artefacts and historical personages immanent, intact within their world.

De Grevenbroek may struggle to complete his *Portrait of the Cape*, yet Sleigh has remarked that this was the figure who enabled him to finish his own dormant work, an individual who appeared out of the records, 'like a drowning body, released from the bottom of the ocean'.[94] For all its geographical spread and despite the palpable sense of narrative exhaustion which hangs over the end of the work, *Islands* does draw some kind of circle of completeness. It begins with the Khoi 'captain' who guarded, then traded, then manipulated colonial missives and messages; it ends with one of the first scribes concerned with the Cape in and of itself, experimenting with a new way of writing its history. In between, the slow and solitary accumulation of archival traces in Sleigh's work generates an unfinished dialogue between microcosm and macrocosm, extending the history that all Dutch schoolchildren could recite like a nursery rhyme (De Grevenbroek tells us), until we feel its most geographically remote and intimately personal effects:

92. Nigel Penn, *Rogues, Rebels and Runaways.*
93. Jonathan Bate, 'Caliban and Ariel Write Back', in Catherine Alexander and Stanley Wells, eds, *Shakespeare and Race* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 173, 176.
94. 'A Search for Survivors', Interview by Sean Zintl, *Mail&Guardian*, 4–10 June 2004, 6.

> The key to the Dutch economy was the Company, the key to the Company's success was control of the Eastern trade, they key to the Eastern trade was successful shipping, the key to shipping was the Cape replenishment station. Decades later he himself discovered what was still lacking in that tottering house of cards, that the key to the Cape replenishment station was its outposts. And even that knowledge was incomplete. There was still more to know: the outposts were *living people*. (695)

On the dust jacket, Brink claims that *Islands* is the Great South African novel. Certainly it seems the definitive evocation of European arrival in southern Africa, and perhaps the English version is best looked on as an unusual and powerful joint work, where Brink's role as a translator of Cape history for a global readership is combined with Sleigh's local respect for the autonomy and distance of the past. Yet the plaudit betrays an anachronism, a retrospective gaze, which the work everywhere resists; and for all the temporal and geographic expanse it traverses, the narrative treats only one of the contact zones that would eventually form modern South Africa. A more disciplined reader of the archives than his translator, Sleigh makes no such claims. He has very little to add outside his work, only going so far as to say in an afterword that for all the theories advanced about it repeating itself as tragedy or farce, 'There is no history other than the analysis and interpretation of documents; a search for survivors in endless space' (759).[95]

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95. As well as the obvious reference to Marx, Sleigh's lines also surely play on the famous saying by Lucien Febvre, co-founder of the Annales School: 'There is no history, there are only historians'.

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