

Alongside One Another: Myth-Making and Risk in Narrativizing Enslavement at the Cape of Good Hope

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Content note: This essay discusses rape and sexual assault.

Introduction

I focus on the narrativization of two women's lives: Krotoa, an indigenous Goringhaicona woman who was born and had lived in the Cape all her life; and Ansla van Bengalen, an enslaved woman who had living memory of her home, culture, and the Indian Ocean's middle passage. Krotoa and van Bengalen were among 'the first' women to experience the Cape of Good Hope under the influence of the Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie (VOC) in the same period of the seventeenth century, and over the course of their lifetimes, became embroiled in the affairs of early VOC society. The audacious thrust of this intellectual pursuit is to explore the generative possibilities of Krotoa and van Bengalen's imagined shared space; their witnessing of and participation in the rapidly changing circumstances of the self-contained, precarious environment of the early VOC settlement. The primary motivation of this study is to consider how alternative methodologies that take seriously the realm of the speculative and the imaginative can offer insight into the lives of historical figures silenced by the confines of the archival record during a critical period in South African history.

In exploring a shared period in the lives of Krotoa and van Bengalen I deploy a speculative historical approach, largely informed by Saidiya Hartman's critical fabulation, and additionally by the work of Yvette Abrahams who has written extensively on the life of Krotoa, most notably in this instance in her essay 'Was Eva Raped? An Exercise in Speculative History'.¹ Foundational to this approach is a Black feminist commitment to 'take care' of the historical raced, gendered figure rendered 'fragile' in the fragmentary archival record,² cognizant, too, that this methodological ap-

1 Abrahams 1996.

2 Gordon 2008, 6.

proach is, by its very nature, beset by risk and possible failure in the impossibility of accessing the past.

The historical scene for this exploration is the Fort de Goede Hoop, the primary seat of the VOC settlement in the Cape of Good Hope. The Fort was located disruptively in the middle of a long-established grazing route; a positioning that posed a direct and existential affront to the Khoekhoe.³ Both Krotoa and van Bengalen would have inhabited the Fort during roughly the same period, between 1657 and into the 1660s. Built in present-day Cape Town in 1652 under VOC Commander Jan van Riebeeck, the construction of the Fort has been claimed as a false 'beginning' of South African colonial history. In white nationalist narratives of the country, this so-called 'start' of European engagement at the Cape of Good Hope, a contested region of colonial conquest since the sixteenth century, is an active site of myth-making. The re-appraisal of this scene through the imagined lens of two notable women is an attempt to contend with their inaccessible interiorities: their decision-making and thought-processing through the major historical events that took place around them. It is worth noting that the context for this setting is unrecoverable, too, as the Fort itself was demolished in 1674 and replaced in function by the Castle of Good Hope, which still stands today.

I frame this discussion with a conception of the Fort as a *de facto household*; a place in which free and unfree people lived and worked in the process of establishing the European settlement. I am invested in how these conditions of 'enforced proximity'⁴ within slave-owning households produced the 'relationships that ... profoundly shaped South African ... society'.⁵ As they are among the first people to live out these dynamics, I am curious about Krotoa and van Bengalen, in their distinct roles and social statuses, as witnesses *and* participants in the changing landscape of this new society. What was the impact of these quickly shifting circumstances on the women's psychologies?

To these ends, I return to the lost space of the Fort de Goede Hoop to explore the ethics of storytelling from the era of enslavement; a history that is poorly understood and frequently overlooked in South Africa.⁶ Despite its contested significance in South Africa's origin story, 1652 is nonetheless notable as the advent of a set of interpersonal, domestic, and early racialized dynamics produced by the introduction

3 Worden, Van Heyningen, and Bickford-Smith 1998, 21.

4 Macharia 2019, 1.

5 Shell 1994, xxvi.

6 For reasons I am committed to uncovering, enslavement which existed in South Africa in some shape from 1654–1838 is largely ignored within the narrative of the country's history, eclipsed by British colonialism in the nineteenth century (Shell 1994, xxiv) and the more recent period of apartheid in the twentieth century.

of slavery by the VOC. As posited by Mason,⁷ Shell⁸ and others, the slave-owning household became a fundamental unit in the social organization of the VOC (and later, British) settler community, and a well-established site of gendered and sexualized violence. In discussing historical instances of these abuses, I draw direct correlations to South Africa's contemporary gendered and sexualized violence crisis, as South African feminist scholars have done before me.⁹

Saidiya Hartman's conception of critical fabulation best describes my approach to Krotoa's and van Bengalen's stories.¹⁰ Critical fabulation entails the re-examination of the historical data available and re-assessing the hierarchies of the production of this knowledge from the perspective of the present, drawing together sources and ideas to 'loop the strands' left open by absence, silence, non-reportage.¹¹ However, 'to loop the strands' should not, as Hartman warns, be an attempt to find resolution.¹² As praxis, critical fabulation reveals the logics and motivating forces of storytelling, and is attentive to the potential of failure because it acknowledges both the project's inherent risk and its generativity.¹³ The work of speculation and the employment of the imaginative is subject to the projections and desires of the author; the possibility of enacting further violence is thus ever present. Not all reclaiming or speculative work is inherently caring, nor sensitive to matters of power. In light of this, critical fabulation is an important self-reflexive approach that examines the subjective impulses through which all history is mediated. I employ the ethos of critical fabulation as a guiding framework in this study as I navigate the arena of speculation within the historical milieu.

Krotoa, in particular, has been the subject of numerous historiographic, fictional, and semi-fictional narratives. In their time at the Fort both Krotoa and van Bengalen were young girls. Because Krotoa lived in service to van Riebeeck and family at various junctures in his ten-year tenure at the Cape, her connection to van Riebeeck is an area of recurring fascination in the public imagination. In popular

7 Mason 2003.

8 Shell 1994. Here I would like to note that I do not reference Robert Shell in this context uncritically. In his landmark study of slavery in South Africa, *Children of Bondage*, Shell asserts that the domestic, slave-owning household is a neglected scene in understanding the dynamics of interpersonal relations, power, and hierarchy during South Africa's early colonial period (Shell 1994, xxix). This salient insight is complicated by Patricia van der Spuy's incisive critique of Shell's analysis of gender and labour in her journal article "What, Then, Was the Sexual Outlet for Black Males?" A Feminist Critique of Quantitative Representations of Women Slaves at the Cape of Good Hope in the Eighteenth Century' (van der Spuy 1996).

9 Baderoon 2015b; Cqola 2015.

10 Hartman 2008.

11 Hartman 2008, 12.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

conceptions of South African history, Krotoa is generally understood as an important figure in indigenous history and a go-between figure between the indigenous Khoekhoe and the VOC delegation, owing to her adept skill with languages. As a central participant in a deeply fraught political conflict, Krotoa's story is frequently characterized as tragic. She has simplistically been framed as a person 'between' cultures; unable to cope with the shifting social circumstances of her life.¹⁴ ¹⁵ Nevertheless, Krotoa has been claimed by various groups as a 'foremother' or 'rainbow Mother' of South African society.¹⁶ This mediation of her story has meant that Krotoa has been subjected to seemingly unending scrutiny by her contemporaries, historians, detractors, and admirers – even in death.

In contrast, van Bengalen's story is not widely known amongst the South African public, although she, too, is considered a foremother of South African society.¹⁷ However, Ansla appears frequently in anecdotal fashion within published histories on the early VOC Cape as an exceptional figure of the period; as a landowner and entrepreneur whose children would marry into Cape European society.¹⁸ Stitching these pieces of her life together, in combination with archival research, I created a walking tour, *Following Ansla van Bengalen* (2016), a speculative history in which I explored her unstable relationships to power, cognizant that van Bengalen's story, and her family's ascending social mobility in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, runs parallel to the early years of the VOC settlement at the Cape.

Developing *Following Ansla van Bengalen* (2016) was an important way for me to explore the conflicting questions about her life in proximity to VOC society in a quasi *in situ* fashion. Walking through the historic centre of Cape Town, from Church Square to the VOC-era Company's Garden, I was able to engage with the existing public traces made by the seventeenth century settlement whilst introducing van Bengalen's story to new audiences. By situating histories of enslavement and the lives of enslaved people in direct relation to sites such as the Company's Garden – a well-used public space that, to my knowledge, has no significant commemoration of enslaved people within it – I also purposefully positioned van Bengalen's narrative in direct relation to living bodies in space. In seeking out this unobtainable proximity to the past, through shared contextual clues I began to imagine Krotoa and van Bengalen as two living people working and surviving within earshot of one another.

14 Abrahams 1996, 3.

15 This is the primary narrative of the full-length South African feature film *Krotoa* (2017), directed by Roberta Durant. One of the taglines for the film reads: 'Caught between two cultures about to collide'.

16 Samuelson, 2007.

17 Gqola 2010b, 126.

18 Böeseken 1977; Shell 1994; Du Preez 2008; Schoeman 2009; Malan 2012; Newton-King 2012; Ward 2012.

Still, it is important to note that I do not situate van Bengalen and Krotoa together to draw direct points of comparison between them. Their concurrent situating is an opportunity to explore the many concurrent social and legal statuses of women from different backgrounds of the period; to parse through ideas around their parallel experiences and public statuses of exceptionalism (particularly within the tropes of South African exceptionalism), and to reveal the possibility of other modes of relational orientation beyond the interest or scope of the colonial diarist, such as van Riebeeck.

As I became aware of van Bengalen's proximity to Krotoa, van Bengalen became real and the shape of her life came into sharper focus; the stakes of *their* living were made all the more tangible. Van Bengalen was no longer a singularly anecdotal figure, but rather something of a fully formed woman living alongside – or at least in near proximity to – another marginalized woman noted in the historiographic and archival record. Van Bengalen's challenges, while significantly different from Krotoa's, could be contextualized within a more complex system of political domination.

Exposing my personal sentiments, as the researcher I commit the error of projection. Hartman asks why we tell stories, and to what ends: 'For whom – for us or for them?'¹⁹ Thus, operating within the role of the narrator I contend with the ethics of this storytelling; the shaping and contorting of these fragments of truth until they resemble the 'accepted judgements' of history writing, as Abrahams states.²⁰ Working with the historiographic record, I am confronted by the convictions and judgements of their authors; small and significant leaps of conjecture that have the capacity to be both caring and careless. In reflecting upon this critical juncture in South African history, I draw correlations and distinctions between myth-making as revisionist historical propaganda and the work of speculation, fiction, and artistic interpretation as a feminist tool for the recuperation – however incomplete – of lost histories, unrecorded experiences.

Gleaning from the record

So let us return to Ansla and Krotoa's timeline, and what I would argue may have been a particularly crucial period of their lives:

Their paths could have first crossed in February of 1657, when van Bengalen arrived at the Cape on the ship *Amersfoort*, captained by Pieter Kemp, following her capture off the coast of Bengal.²¹ Slavery at the Cape was not yet sanctioned by the VOC, but a number of officials obtained enslaved people for their personal use and

19 Hartman 2008, 3.

20 Abrahams 1996, 4.

21 Böeseken 1977, 9.

in the conventions of this practice, van Bengalen was sold by Pieter Kemp to Jan van Riebeeck.²²

By this time, some five years into van Riebeeck's role as Commander at the Cape, Krotoa had had extensive engagement with the VOC, although she was likely only fifteen or sixteen years old. According to V.C. Malherbe, in the book titled *Krotoa, called 'Eva'*²³, Krotoa began working for the van Riebeecks as a young girl, possibly at around the age of ten. Jan van Riebeeck's wife, a French Huguenot woman named Maria de la Queillerie, had recently given birth and Krotoa was brought into the household to help care for the new baby as a diplomatic arrangement between the VOC and the Khoekhoe. This account, however, is challenged by Abrahams who suggests that Krotoa may have been kidnapped in 1652 in a skirmish on the Salt River, and remained at the Fort until 1653 to be rescued by her clan following the murder of a VOC employee by the Khoekhoe, the first recorded murder by the Khoekhoe that century.²⁴

The Fort itself was an unusual and singular structure of its kind on the Cape landscape – a lone symbol of van Riebeeck's vision of colonial strength. The VOC's presence was thus a threatened one, and many of the decisions the VOC officials made were a response to anxieties about their unstable position. Further, the Fort building itself was vulnerable to the harsh Cape elements, and was in constant need of repair.²⁵ The enslaved, van Riebeeck contended, were needed to grow the settlement.²⁶ The VOC's Heeren XVII refused his numerous requests for slaves until 1658, and prohibited the enslavement of the Khoekhoe, who refused to work for the VOC and were needed to maintain access to the area's resources.

Van Bengalen formed part of a very small group of enslaved people held at the Fort until a large group of around 174 enslaved people arrived on the *Amersfoort* in 1658. Their presence in the Cape was clandestine, as the *Amersfoort* pirated a slave ship *en route* from Angola to Brazil. The 174 people who arrived were part of an original group of 250, and the majority of the survivors were either young children or ill, which meant they could not be put to work immediately. Further, 'the best' enslaved people were ordered to be sent to Batavia, leaving 125 remaining people.²⁷ Shortly after the arrival of the Angolan enslaved people, a number of them deserted the settlement. Accused of collusion in the freeing of the enslaved, the Dutch kidnapped Autshumao, Krotoa's uncle (and initially the primary interlocutor between the VOC and Khoekhoe), who would be held hostage at the Fort for over a year.

22 Böeseken 1977, 125.

23 Malherbe 1990.

24 Abrahams 1996, 13–14.

25 Worden, Van Heyningen, and Bickford-Smith 1998, 19.

26 Böeseken 1977, 5.

27 Böeseken 1977, 11.

In this period, Krotoa had since returned to 'work' at the Fort as a diplomatic envoy and was involved in high-stakes negotiations directly with van Riebeeck and others concerning the VOC's growing settlement and permanence in the valley.²⁸ She is noted as speaking Dutch well by van Riebeeck in 1657,²⁹ and is described by Malherbe as a 'cultural broker' during the hostage crisis working across vastly divergent epistemic paradigms.³⁰

While Krotoa is recorded in reported speech, van Bengalen's record 'goes dark'. Van Bengalen was formally enslaved and had no real legal standing. Krotoa was still technically free, but this status was contingent on the success of her negotiations with the VOC. Her continued engagement with them meant that she was increasingly vulnerable to the nature of the VOC's power dynamics. That Krotoa had close and extended contact with the van Riebeeck family and others at the Fort since childhood likely compounded these factors. All the while, van Bengalen and the other 'household' enslaved people were maintaining the interior Dutch life of the fort in direct service to van Riebeeck and other VOC officials and employees. Although silent in the record, van Bengalen was presumably privy to intricacies of these cataclysmic social changes surrounding the settlement whilst adhering to the expectations of an enslaved woman in the Fort.

I imagine Krotoa's frequent and noted presence in the Fort; that she was known to everyone who resided there owing to her important role in political life in and around the settlement. Rather cinematically, I imagine that van Bengalen may have worked wordlessly in the background during heated negotiations for Autshumao's release, ignored by van Riebeeck in life, just as she was in his log books. It is tempting to imagine that van Bengalen and Krotoa exchanged words or knowing glances as they passed one another in a doorway, or in the courtyard. As Krotoa publicly bartered her knowledge, perhaps van Bengalen was gathering information of her own, plotting her next movements; the ideal course of action under the circumstances. The number of enslaved people, their living conditions and their roles may have been of great importance to Krotoa and the Khoekhoe; proof of the horror that could befall them should things go badly.

The arrival of the 174 Angolan enslaved, as we know now, escalated the VOC–Khoekhoe conflict,³¹ and following the VOC's approval, a steady stream of slave ships would soon arrive. Robert Shell estimates that between 1658 and 1808 some sixty thousand enslaved people would be brought to the Cape, forever

28 Abrahams 1996; Malherbe 1990.

29 Van Riebeeck in Malherbe 1990, 14.

30 Malherbe 1990, 1.

31 Malherbe 1990, 16; Abrahams 1996, 54.

changing the interpersonal dynamics of the settlement and, indeed, what would become South Africa.³²

Futures in a changing world

I wonder how van Bengalen and Krotoa personally negotiated their shared knowledge of others in bondage who ran away, while they both remained so entangled in the affairs of the VOC. These existential, life-altering events in rapid succession produced shifting points of re-orientation. By caring for the van Riebeeck children and at the same time being in proximity to the young captured enslaved children from Angola, they undoubtedly had first hand experiences of the discrepancies in the value of life. Did their pregnancies and the birth of their children in this environment produce more acute negotiation with living and survival? What plans and decisions would need to be made to ensure a life made liveable?

Van Bengalen herself would have three children born into and freed from slavery and four children inducted into European society as a result of her marriage to Dutchman Arnoldus Willemsz Basson in 1669.³³ The conflicting accounts of her seven children's parentage both obscure the troubling possibilities of how such children may have been conceived and diminish van Bengalen's personal calculations in navigating her situation. Krotoa would also marry a European associated with the VOC, a Danish surgeon named Pieter van Meerhof in 1664, noted as the first Christian marriage at the Cape of Good Hope between an Indigenous person and a European.³⁴ According to Malherbe, Krotoa had three children during her marriage to van Meerhof, two born prior to their marriage, and one child afterwards,³⁵ although accounts on their parentage differs. When Yvette Abrahams asks whether Eva was raped – note that she does not specify by whom – she speaks to the vulnerability of Krotoa in the Fort, but equally, the recognized use of rape as a colonial tool for subjugation and control. Rape, as theorized by Pumla Dineo Gqola,³⁶ Gabeba Baderoon and others,³⁷ is described as being bound up with the practice of colonialism; a mechanism that exerts and enacts domination upon those rendered most vulnerable. Regarding the particularities of slave ancestry in South Africa, Zoe Wicomb has it that the knowledge of sexual violence under these conditions – and the chil-

32 Shell 1994.

33 Robertson, n. d.

34 Malherbe 1990, 48.

35 Malherbe 1990, 44.

36 Gqola 2010a, 2015.

37 Baderoon 2015b, 2015a.

dren produced by systems of enslavement – reproduces and maintains generational shame in its descendants.³⁸

I also raise the subject of rape and sexual violence in this context in relation to the limited recognition of family and kinship formations under the Cape's system of enslavement. VOC policy actively disrupted biological family formations in favour of what Stoler has called the creation of 'white prestige'.³⁹ As an inherited status, slavery was maintained through the maternal line.⁴⁰ By means of sexual violence or otherwise, sexual relations between enslaved women and free men – primarily Europeans – produced the creation of 'shadow families' as described by Hortense Spillers.⁴¹ These families, racialized as 'Other', as not human, sustained the primary, 'legitimate' slave-owning family through their labour and produced the primary family's wealth. The shadow families were (and are) disavowed despite shared surnames/family names that denote a cohesive family unit.

Noting this, and the complexities of the free/unfree dichotomy, historians such as Anna Boeseken have noted the sustained relationships van Bengalen maintained in her life as a free woman.⁴² Following her manumission in 1666 and her departure from the Fort, archival records show her attendance at numerous baptisms of free and unfree individuals. Notably, Anna de Koningh, the most famous of her daughters, would go on to marry Olaf Bergh, and inherit the estate Groot Constantia. Consequently, she would also 'inherit' a great many enslaved people who resided on the property.⁴³

As it pertains to Krotoa's life, Abrahams asks us to trouble what has frequently been described as a life lived 'between' cultures.⁴⁴ In the literature, much is made of Krotoa's donning and casting off of European and Khoekhoe attire as symbolic of a perceived cultural tension.⁴⁵ Her eventual reliance on alcohol, and the removal of her children from her care later in life is morally framed as a sign of her poor state of mind and social alienation from both groups. I, like Abrahams, would argue that these instead reveal to us something far more complex: a response to the catastrophe of her environment.

I remain curious about Krotoa and van Bengalen's decisions about their allegiances; their capacities to have hope for better lives for their children – at great personal cost – and their difficult, seemingly contradictory positioning in proximity to colonial power. In this vein, I problematize questions of 'agency' and 'resis-

38 Wicomb 2018.

39 Stoler 2010, 54.

40 Shell 1994, 33.

41 Spillers 2017.

42 Böeseken 1977, 23.

43 *Groot Constantia* n. d.

44 Abrahams 1996, 3.

45 Malherbe 1990, 8.

tance' to make space for what Alexander Weheliye has described as: 'miniscule movements, glimmers of hope, scraps of food, the interrupted dreams of freedom found in those spaces deemed devoid of full human life ...'.⁴⁶ Hartman tells us that in 'trying to represent what we cannot' we further expose the individuals of history to risk, to harm.⁴⁷ And worse, Hartman cautions, if we attempt to devise some fable from these fragmented, historical narratives we belabour the dead and their legacies to our own ends. It is this extractive attitude of something to be gained that turns historical figures into national symbols, that over-determines their life stories and forecloses meaning. In contexts such as ethnographic museums, how might these strategies operate when faced with the individuals documented in photographic collections, for example, that, in their acquisition, were denied personhood and remain unnamed and unidentified? And in South Africa, where histories of enslavement are either not accommodated in the national narrative or mythologized to political ends, I wonder, too, what it would mean to make peace with incommensurability: with undefined, conflicting narratives of lives lost.

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46 Weheliye 2014, 12.

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