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Epistemic Injustice against Khoi-Coloured Women from the Cape: Connected Encounters with the Matriarchal Lineages of Krotoa

By Darlene Miller

Abstract

Epistemic injustice towards Indigenous women is a global reality. In South Africa (SA) and beyond, Black pain is a recognized experience. “Coloured” pain is less familiar terrain since “Coloured” identity is accepted by some South Africans but rejected by others. Racial identities, however, often manifest as a material reality in society, shaping the life possibilities and potentialities of people. “Coloured” women have experienced limited upward mobility in post-Apartheid SA, and experiences of non-belonging accompany “Coloured” consciousness, collectively and individually. Claims attached to Khoi-Coloured heritage are growing more assertive in the current body politic and concentrated in provinces like the Western Cape in SA. Hidden by African patriarchal claims, the voices and politics of women with Khoi lineage are once again hidden in post-Apartheid SA. Many different stigmas are attached to such women, stigmas that are insufficiently explored and deconstructed in scholarly work. How much of this Khoi-Coloured condition entails a peculiar experience of pain and deprivation? How do we access Khoi (and San) lineage given a fragmented and absent archival political history, and do personal autoethnographies provide a way into a deeper understanding of these socio-cultural identities? Drawing on the experience of a historical figure, Krotoa, this paper argues that the “Coloured” African Matriarch is a decolonial African universal in the making.

Keywords: Connected encounters, Auto-ethnography, Matriarchal lineages, Krotoa, Khoi-coloured identity, Cultural wounding, South Africa

Introduction

There I made traditional offerings of obi (kola nut) and oti (gin or any clear alcohol) and said prayers for the easing of my writer’s block, and the courage and inspiration to write from a voice that was both true to myself, and true to the story that I was charged with telling (Castor, 2024, p. 4).

I write this autoethnographic piece with all the passion and rage that a “Coloured” girl can muster. I write with the power of a Khoi-Coloured “girl” who perhaps has “made it,” for the ones

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2 Since it is common for others to infantilize Coloured women as “girls,” I am reclaiming the word in this essay.
who didn’t make it, in order to disrupt the notion of making it. I dedicate this piece of writing to the women who “made it” in all sorts of different ways—who made food as feeding and nurturing mothers, who made clothes as seamstresses, and who made money through informal trading on the pavements and roadsides of African cities and towns. This idea of making it is a prevailing African imaginary in which cosmopolitan Africans are expected to get closer to the attainment of celebrity-style success, with the corresponding markers of successful citizenship—being the chair of a board, having your own company, living in a beautiful mansion, and driving a “kick-arse” car. In the manner of “conspicuous consumption” (Veblen, 1899), this is how we are invited and included into (South) African citizenship. Not attaining these markers is to be deemed to have failed. If you did not make it, then you are a less valued citizen. A community that stands on the sidelines of the making-it culture is the Coloured community of SA. Coloured communities have been known for gangsterism, substance abuse, and a host of socio-economic problems that bedevil many of these communities, especially in the Cape, one of SA’s major cities yet marked by extreme levels of inequality. Within these Coloured communities are the Indigenous Khoi-Coloured women of the Cape, a marginalized segment of SA’s citizenry that carries the burdens of the community on their shoulders (Salo, 2018), with little awareness of their Indigenous heritage.

Epistemic injustice towards Indigenous women is a global reality. In SA and beyond, “Black pain” is a recognized concept. “Coloured pain” is less familiar. Coloured identity is a highly contested space, both in SA and globally. As there is no racial purity, the term “Coloured” is therefore applied to people who are sometimes termed “biracial,” with both European and Indigenous African lineage. This term, given to people of mixed-race descent in SA, is understood by such critics as an Apartheid-era identity-imposition that divided Black South Africans into different racial categories. Racial identities, however, often manifest as a material reality in society, shaping the life possibilities and potentialities of people. Coloured women have experienced limited upward mobility in post-Apartheid SA, and experiences of non-belonging accompany Coloured consciousness, collectively and individually.

Claims attached to Khoi heritage are growing more assertive in the current body politic and are concentrated in provinces like the Western Cape in South Africa. Many of these reclamation initiatives are patriarchal with men leaders who are advancing claims to land and political inclusion. The patriarchal impulses underlying these claims have an instrumental and pragmatic character, focusing on aspects of redistribution. Once again hidden by these patriarchal claims are the voices and politics of women who have Khoi lineage. Many different stigmas are attached to such women, stigmas that are insufficiently explored and deconstructed. How much of this Coloured condition entails a peculiar experience of pain and deprivation? How do we access Khoi and San lineage with a fragmented and absent archival political history? Do personal autoethnographies provide a way into a deeper understanding of these socio-cultural identities? As women of Khoi and San descent, we need to begin by claiming space, by countering our invisibility, but not on the same terms as the many separatist and instrumental claims of the patriarchs.

My essay builds on the work of Fox (2016) and her advocacy around feminist scholar-activism and decolonization, particularly her reflections on emotions, listening, and learning (Fox, 2023). This essay is an exercise in deep listening, both to my own life and world and the lives and worlds of other women, in particular Khoi-Coloured women from the Cape. This essay aims to familiarize a wider readership with knowledge of an enigmatic historic figure called Krotoa, to understand lost lineages and what these lineages have to teach us, especially those of us who walk in the shadow of a mixed-race/Coloured descendance. This essay is for all these Khoi-Coloured
women who did not make it, for those who are threatened with not making it, while depression and frustration and the pain of poor mastery over their bodies and their passions beat their doors down, leaving them howling in the wind. It is for them that I write.

This essay recounts a personal journey that endeavors to bring together these fragments of a broken past, in which the loss of lineage is reflected and refracted through the “absences in the archives” (Zaaiman, 2019). The introduction references the broken lives of other related Khoi-Coloured women and the prevailing imaginaries of “making it” in SA, Africa, and globally. The second part raises the problem of absent archives and reviews literature that deals with absent archives. “Insider” positionalities of researchers who are writing about their own lineage, rather than being external anthropologists and researchers, is also considered (Narayan, 1993). The third section describes non-material encounters with Krotoa, the 17th-century woman sometimes called the first matriarch of the Cape. Four encounters in different places and spaces recount the spiritual connection established through my own historical imaginaries, and entail the forms of “sacred relationality” cited by Castor (2024) in her seminal piece. In the fourth section, the essay argues that the epistemic silencing of Khoi voices has inflicted further cultural wounding on Coloured South Africans. The consequent loss of lineage and fragmented legacies also has consequences for families, citizenship, and nation-building, including fragmented citizenship and debilitating stereotypes of Coloured people in SA. The conclusion is that Krotoa’s “herstorical” presence presents us with one of the matriarchal lineages through which we can reconnect with our lost Indigenous heritage.

This article thus builds on the conception of the “ritual archive” through an autoethnographic case study of an Indigenous Cape Coloured woman. I interweave my own “herstory” or autoethnography with a spiritual encounter with Krotoa, a past historical Khoi figure who is a lesser-known Indigenous African woman. Memory in this account is enacted through the spiritual experiences that occur through the body of the author/autoethnographer, both accidentally and through ritual. The body becomes the conduit for the “ritual archive” (Falola & Wariboko, 2020) and the “anarchive” (Zaaiman, 2019). Alternative archival sources to the main archives of written documents have been utilized to reconstruct this history, including that of the ritual archive. The choice of Krotoa as the point of herstorical intersection evokes her as a source of insight for the troubled condition of Coloured women in the narratives and construction of South African identity.

The objective in this article is to build the research methodologies and epistemic technologies for understanding and excavating the intimate herstories of invisibilized Indigenous Khoi women, easing and healing the torture that resides in these troubled and complex women excluded in SA’s national polity. The incomplete nation-building project in SA has excluded the Khoi and their Coloured descendants from the reconstruction and development of the South African nation. Narratives of extinction have fed the myth that the Khoi were obliterated, yet their descendants remain. Recent academic texts are endeavoring to demonstrate the relationship between Coloureds and Khoisan ancestry (Richards, 2017).

**Reaching into a Vacant Past: Absent and Insider Archives**

Prompted into an investigation of my own personal past, I began with a visit to the archive offices in Roland Street, Cape Town. After some days of fruitless searching, I was advised to go to the NG Kerk (Reformed Dutch Church) archives in Wellington in the Western Cape province of SA. Pouring through microfilm at these archives, I observed missing pages in the microfilms. While continuing with this fruitless search, I was struck by the rows of books on the library shelves
that chronicled the histories of individual white families. Sufficient formal records were available to fill the pages of multiple volumes for individual families. The failure to produce the birth records of my predecessors was disconcerting. At the Wellington archives, the sympathetic librarians explained that Coloureds, more often than not, were unable to locate the written birth or death records of their ancestors. They believed that records were deliberately removed sometimes because of potential inheritance claims or the perceived embarrassment associated with offsprings that white families would rather keep secret. This new injustice—the epistemic omissions of our lineage—added another layer of indignity to a lifetime of humiliations that life under Apartheid had bestowed to me.

The history of the Indigenous native peoples of SA—the Khoi and the San—has recently received more attention in the political and academic landscape of the country. Part of the challenge of reconstructing the history of the Coloured groups and their descendants is finding the archival sources of knowledge about this lesser-known past. When conducting research on the women of “Proudly Manenberg” (Human Sciences RCA, 2012), I was struck by their assertion that they were not dragged from under the bed; that they too had a lineage and a past. It would seem strange to have to assert that you have a past, but this is not unusual for those designated Coloured in SA who have very little knowledge of their past lineage. Part of this poor knowledge of past lineage is attributable to a conscious act of disavowal of Coloured identity. As part of Apartheid racial classifications, the term was resisted politically in favor of a united Black collective identity, forged in the heat of the struggle against Apartheid. With this disavowal of Coloured identity came a loss of knowledge of personal and collective past histories and the particular history of those designated Coloured.

The absence of formal, written archives for dispossessed peoples is a common phenomenon globally that limits historical records. More significantly, however, is that the absence of records produces another trauma for those who are dispossessed: the absence reminds the postcolonial subject that their existence historically was of little or no relevance. Whatever services their dispossessed ancestors provided in the Colony, this was deemed insufficient to warrant systematic historical records of slaves, free laborers, domestic helpers, caregivers, water carriers, or translators. In one instance is the narrative of extinction: your ancestors did not survive, even though you exist as one of their progenies. In another is the evisceration of your past: when your ancestors did exist, their records were so limited as to be almost irrelevant. There are multiple sides to this trauma of erasure, producing what historians have called a “melancholia” (Zaaiman, 2019, p. 122), an awareness of an absence but an incapacity to define what this absence is. Zaaiman turns to the absences in space in order to make sense of the unseen archives, what she terms the “anarchive” (2019, p. 122).

Abrahams (1996) wrestles with the problem of absent archives when researching the historical figure of Krotoa. Abrahams turns to the concept of “speculative history” in order “to speak about the unspeakable” (p. 4). There is no other evidentiary data that she can draw on to support her claims about Krotoa-Eva and the Khoisan. Abrahams therefore embarks on an imaginative exercise in order to work her way “around the text” and find a “plausible” truth (p. 4). Because these histories are written by outsiders about outsiders, conventional history is not an appropriate method. Prevailing archives and the formal records that make up these archives are inadequate for an understanding of dispossessed peoples, their lived experiences, their subjectivities and the circumstances of their lives. Reclaiming this history requires that we imagine how Krotoa herself would have understood her place and her experiences. In the absence of a record of her voice, the speculative historian then imagines how Krotoa would have made sense...
of her life. This method has to depart from the white heterosexual gaze that dominates the stories of the past. Like Zaaaiman (2019), Abrahams points to the imaginative aspect of post-colonial research given that colonial subjects have no agency in the formal records.

Bam (2021) relies on both conventional and indigenous methods of “deep listening” (p. 70) to expound a history of the Rondevlei/Hardevlei area of the Cape based on interviews with 29 respondents who had knowledge of plants and rituals passed down over the generations. Wrestling with the dilemma of the absent archives, Bam points us in the direction of the matrilineal ritual archives:

How can we begin to reimagine these pasts in the absence of written texts in the extractive and often violent colonial archive? Are these new methods of research valid and what contributions could they make to decolonising what we know of our pasts and how we know, with a view to creating a herstoriography framework? (Bam, 2021, p. 41)

Innovative research methodologies are needed to access these decolonial archives. She refers to these as “indigenous ecologies of knowledge” (Bam, 2021, p. 69) in the Cape. Ancestral ways of knowing require “inner, deep listening and quiet, still awareness that listens to the spring deep within us, to become whole again” (ibid, p. 70). In another pivotal contribution, Vollenhoven’s (2016) Kabbo references the stories that are stored in the body:

We carry our letters, our stories in our bodies/ Our stories talk, they quiver, they tap/ Our letters make our bodies move/ Our stories make our people silent/ […] We feel a sensation/ I hear it whisper soft like my breath/ In tune with my heart I follow the !gwe/ Like a story in a book/ The !gwe touches my ribs. (p. 43)

Vollenhoven asserts the necessity of both the physical and non-physical in recapturing our stories.

All these new archivists are insiders to the story: they themselves are descended from the dispossessed peoples of the Khoi and San who were not eviscerated but whose stories live on in their descendants. My contribution to these “insider archives”, as I would like to call them, traces the lineage of Krotoa-Eva and the Khoi as these lineages continue in those known since the late 1800s as Coloured. In a departure from conventional citation praxis, I draw inspiration from Castor (2024) by citing the non-material or spiritual sources that guided the writing of this article. This Black feminist praxis is part of a decolonial turn to the non-secular or non-material sources of knowledge. As Castor contends:

If citations serve to recognize and map all the voices that we are in conversation with then I posit that we should include those voices of “other-than-human” powers that inform our knowledge production as part of a Black feminist praxis of the sacred. And in doing so, we build a more complete epistemic map of our relations. (Castor, 2024, p. 6)

**Historical Imaginaries: Connected Encounters with Krotoa**

Speaking with Krotoa across time helps me make sense of the world of middle-class, learned African woman and the vulnerability and strength of African women who are gifted in different ways but who may be punished by both their own and other societies for stepping outside of the assigned social spaces of the dispossessed. The epistemic injustice against those designated Coloured in SA, and the narrative of extinction that declares these descendants invisible, frame the
life chances of these descendants who have made a limited contribution to Black leadership in SA. Only a few Coloureds have “made it” and broken through these cement (not glass) ceilings. Through a Womanist\(^3\) lens, I reach a stronger, better version of myself. And this little Khoi woman, her memory, her agency in my pen, reaches me across the sands of time.

I received a visionary message from Krotoa in 2021. She said to me: “They will ask you, why scratch at the old wounds? Why can’t you let the past be? Tell them, things are as they are, because the past is a constant presence in our present. But it is no present” (L. Mncayi, 18 April 2021). This message came from my \textit{sangoma}\(^4\) when I was visiting his home one evening on a friendly call. It was an unexpected message and spoke to my doubts about writing about Krotoa, a historical figure and African Khoi woman from the mid-17th century for whom I did not have the highest regard. The end of her life as a woman who suffered from alcoholism and accused of promiscuity and careless motherhood suggested a tragic and pained woman. As a black South African and Indigenous woman classified as Coloured in SA, my life has had sufficient challenges linked to my identity. I did not feel the need or desire to pick up the pieces of this broken woman’s life and try to understand its significance. But, inexorably, I was being pushed towards her story, and my curiosity about her was growing. Her life seemed to tell an enigmatic tale while my own requests to family and friends about the need to delve into our lineage was met with skepticism.

And the message received above captured the gist of my and others’ skepticism: “Why scratch at the old wounds?” This questioning had created a reticence in me to write about Krotoa, and then the disarming message above came. Even if I would be criticized for going back to a painful past, when we are exhorted constantly in SA and globally as Black people to leave our pasts behind and “move on,” the instruction was that I should not do so. Despite these criticisms, the “sacred citation” (Castor, 2024) that is presented as a message from the ancestors above was for me an encouragement to proceed with this autoethnographic research about my Coloured identity. The past is ever-present in our current realities, said the ancestral message. But, the message continued, the past is present not as a gift: it is a wounded past, but it does not define our present, and it need not limit our present. The past is not the sum of who we are. Who we are is a product of our agency. We select our identities, carve them onto the ones already bequeathed to us by society, and make of these identities a fresh future for ourselves and those who follow in our wake. But to comprehend our full stories, we need to face up to the past within our present so that we may attain full self-awareness. This is the auto-ethnographic essence of this article: an endeavor to face up to the full reality of my past and lineage, instead of constantly escaping and running away from its too painful presence behind a veil of social activism and a performative dance.

In the lineages of freedom that we have constructed in our political and historical narratives in SA, the story of Robben Island is central. The legacies of Nelson Mandela, Kgalema Motlanthe and Jacob Zuma as male prisoners are told as part of our lineages of freedom in SA. In 2024 in our country, we have a president, Cyril Ramaphosa, who helped negotiate our way out of Apartheid at the landmark Codesa negotiations in 1992. But there is a lesser-known negotiator in SA—Krotoa, a woman whose people and lineage have been forgotten in the national project of reconstruction and development. Krotoa was a small woman who traveled between two worlds of the “Hottentot” and the “Hollander,” as we were called at the time. She lost herself (or got lost in translation) and ultimately succumbed tragically, a broken alcoholic when she died. Yet she played a formative

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\(^3\) I refer to Alice Walker’s (1983) definition of a “Womanist” as Black feminists or women of color.

\(^4\) The term \textit{sangoma} refers to an Indigenous or traditional African healer in South Africa who uses herbs and plants to heal people and also communicates with ancestors.
role in the encounter with colonial settlers in the southern part of Africa before the colonies of the South African Republic were established.

Krotoa’s story is the lesser known one. She lived and inhabited Robben Island as a domestic, translator, trade emissary, lover, mother, and wife in the 17th century. Her role in negotiations between the Dutch East India Company and the viceroy at the time, Jan Van Riebeeck, is known to very few people. And yet her role was instrumental in the crucial juncture of the 1650s, when Dutch settlers penetrated the Cape and inhabited and controlled ever-larger parts of both the Cape waterfront around the tip of the African continent and its interior. Writing on Krotoa and finding intersections with my own Khoi lineage and Coloured background has not been easy and entailed various halting steps towards this essay.

Because of Apartheid’s heinous classification system, many Indigenous groups in the Cape are repulsed by any identification with Coloured identity. In the process of disavowing Coloured identity, however, we also dispensed with lineage and legacy. Enhanced “epistemic justice” (Schepen & Haenen, as cited in Yitah & Lauer, 2019) can be the potential outcome of legacy claims by dispossessed peoples such as the Khoi and San who sit uncomfortably in the nation-building project. The epistemic visibility of such dispossessed peoples is a matter of social justice, despite the opportunistic intentions that some may have in this regard. Fragmented citizenship (Cowan, 2015) is a potential outcome of marginalized and disappearing legacies and estranged lineages.

Encounters of memory that emanate from our body are what I call the “connected encounter,” an experience or perception that helps you to reconnect, as a dispossessed citizen, with your Indigenous past. My first meeting with Krotoa was in the seas of Mauritius. As part of the reconstruction with my past, I learned to know both her and myself better, discovering a research methodology that resides and unfolds through the cells of one’s body, sometimes trapped by traumatic experiences.

This is a “sacred citation” (Castor, 2024), received as a message after the burning of the traditional mphepho (sage) herb to honor our ancestors. As part of the reconnection with my past, I imagined Krotoa on Robben Island, and the story went like this:

The Pain of Krotoa

Dejectedly, she walks on the scrubby sands of Robben Island, a home that has become inhospitable for her. What would she have said as she faced yet another unwanted pregnancy? These are the words I dreamt that she would have said:

Here I am, the no-longer-darling, older, more beautiful because of the pain I have suffered. What I know is that I cannot carry this child anymore: they have to come out into the world and die, because life is a slow death. I have raided the kitchen for a sharp and thin skillet, and here I will now find a place on this island to still-birth this child in my womb.

I walk through the green leaves (port jacobsons) and the thorns on the island
And I find a place in the sand where I can restlessly sit
Because I love this child. I wanted to give this child life, but the white man devours my soul
He promises me things that he cannot give—my own house, a peaceful place for my children and I
So now I just want to get out of living. This child must go, back home. Here I will kill him.
Now I stab that sharp thing in my warm vagina, the same warm vagina that the white men lusted after so much
I hate this vagina. It is because of this that I am invisible to them, the warmth that lies underneath
I am so barren, I have nothing more to give life
How is it that people can devour you that you cannot feel yourself anymore,
Where you just walk like someone that is a living dead person? My heart bleeds with the pain that my people have given me
And my own people—they call me traitor, sell-out, I think I am what I am not
And they talk about me, give me rude stairs. Stand in groups and laugh about this that I am experiencing now
“See, Krotoa, we told you. The white man is not your friend, and there you went and married a white man
You want to be a mad woman. Now look how things look for you.”
But I am Krotoa, first tribe woman of the Cape, and I stand here and make my own choices.
(And this baby, no-one will ever hurt this baby
Because here now, in this sand, as I sit and bleed, so he will go straight to God
And they get a lovely reception. Here on the island it is dry and barren: my little baby will be safe in his hands.
(She cries, she screams, she asks God why he is so cruel with her; her voice, it floats off into the air, and nobody hears her pain.
It is She, the Pain of Krotoa. (Darlene, May 27, 2021)

So I met Krotoa for the first time in this little soliloquy, imagined her Robben Island existence outside of the colonial and modern buildings of the prisons for the men, trapped on those sparse patches of soil where she would have buried the umbilical cords of miscarried or aborted babies. With a lost existence and an increasingly inattentive husband, careless liaisons could have been a probable outcome. The ultimate punishment for a woman who chooses to react to her pain was, as it so often is, the removal of her children. It was not a pleasant meeting.

The First Connected Encounter
This above encounter took me back to an experience I had had in Mauritius, and in retrospect I was aware that the two encounters were connected. The Mauritius Encounter took me by surprise when I was on vacation there, some years prior to the second encounter narrated above. The time of the encounters was thus not linear and teleological but a tapestry woven back and forth. In Mauritius there is an area that belongs to the folklore of the Indigenous Mauritians; it is a mountainous hill from which the slaves are said to have jumped to their death into the sea when life on the sugar plantations of Mauritius became too hard for them. The memory of the slaves is enshrined just across the road, in four large stones commemorating the slaves. After visiting this memorial site, I went across the road to swim in the beach. Floating in the beautiful waters of Mauritius, I lazily slid into the ancestral posture of my own choice that Ravi, my past yoga teacher and one of my healers, advises her students to use when praising our ancestors. I took the South Asian ancestral pose in the Mauritian seawaters and remained there for some minutes.

When I emerged from the water, my mood had shifted suddenly from holiday lightness to sadness, misery, and depression. I was disturbed at this mood transformation and wondered whether waters held memories. Only a university-trained thinker could wonder about such a thing.
Of course the waters have memory, particularly our “ancestral waters” (Cock, 2018), and they transmitted some of their memories and sadness to me. Reading months later about Krotoa’s children in Mauritius, I delved into the circumstances of their emigration and began to understand the close connection she would have had with the island through her children. This connection, and my perception of memory in the waters, was a curious connection, and I began to follow this line of what seemed to be Krotoa-connected experiences.

The Third Connected Encounter

My next connected encounter with Krotoa was a theater production based on Sylvia Vollenhoven’s play Krotoa which chronicles her personal demise on Robben Island. The play depicts key details of her life: the awkward and self-negating choices that Krotoa found herself making as a woman in a biracial marriage, the first of its kind in the Cape; her apparent intelligence and language competence in her role as Dutch-Khoi translator; her reputation as promiscuous causing her to be banished to the deserted Robben Island and separated off from spaces she had called home; and her affection for alcohol, because there was so much numbing to be done, the pain of alienation and loneliness to kill.

I became aware that these challenges of belonging happened while Pieter, her Danish husband, traveled to Mauritius and Madagascar and stayed away for longer and longer periods (Matthee, 2000). She was geographically trapped on a tiny island, trapped in the limited physical and social spaces allowed for womanhood, trapped in alienating cultures that would have made her appear not fitting and unfit. How this woman must have suffered. How she must have scrutinized her life and allowed words to swirl around in her head, torturing her to a point where some colonial administrator judged her as an unfit mother and placed her children in the care of a deacon and his wife. Krotoa’s experience of displacement, caught between two divergent worlds of Dutch settlers and indigenous Khoi groups, would have pushed her to the brink of a debilitating unhappiness and a failure of belonging. I reflect now on my meeting with this “fallen” matriarch, Krotoa, as a vital element for the work of reconnection and retracing Khoi-Coloured lineage.

The Fourth Connected Encounter

Each of us meets our ancestral matriarchs in different ways. I first saw the Eastern Cape cave aperture to the sea in my imagination. I followed this call to one of my ancestral homes in the Eastern Cape area of Keiskammahoek/Kattrivier in 2019. But the experience was a deaf one. I heard nothing that was out of the ordinary. They seemed to have no special significance for me. It was in doing a healing session with Ravi that the wound in my womb was pointed out to me. Something of a present and past memory lay deep in my womb, causing me to emit a howl that Ravi could only describe as ancient when I let the howl out in a sound bowl session with her.

My immediate past and troubled relationship with my mother was the first level of memory that was pulled out—how I wanted her memory nowhere near me, as far away as she could go. Her various limitations and failings as a woman and mother had caused me to turn my back on her at a very young age. Pain in my womb came from my own time; two abortions lined this womb’s present. The first was a pregnancy caused by sexual carelessness and the capacity for youthful love. The second was the choice to join the trade union rather than be a mother. My own pain and the pain of my mother fused into a toxic plasma, trapping my identity deep within it. After the womb-healing session with Ravi, I came home with a somewhat inexplicable desire to know Krotoa. I began researching her on the Internet and discovered that her much abandoned (and
probably much-loved) children left SA at some point and went to Mauritius. And then the Mauritius event I had experienced some time earlier began to take on new meaning for me.

Cultural Wounding and Lineage

As Miller and associates assert, “apart from the extreme atrocities of apartheid such as murder and torture, apartheid left indelible marks on the psyches of most South Africans because it was not only physically violent, but also ‘a constant, psychically persistent, pervasive and invasive presence in the minds of black South Africans’ (Gagiano, 2012)” (Miller et al., 2019, p. 220). Many South Africans carry Apartheid trauma that is then transmitted from one generation to the next. Apartheid has resulted in “disenfranchised grief, silence, socialization in institutional racism and shame” (Hoosain, 2013, p. v). The transmission of such trauma across generations has not been interrupted, and the necessary support has not been provided (Hoosain, 2013, p. vi). We live in spaces of woundedness in which the “making it” ethos dominates while the spirit of collective resistance has lost its counter-hegemonic strength. As some communities, particularly dispossessed communities, are marginalized from the means to make it, cultural stereotypes feed a range of debilitating narratives, some of which have historical roots.

Stereotypes are powerful governance mechanisms. They enter the minds of citizens and shape narratives for government and society. These narratives have powerful impacts on policy, choices, and approaches to the way a country is governed. They influence who are considered privileged insiders and who are marginalized as outsiders who are less important and less valued. But the most debilitating aspect of a stereotype is the way it enters the body of the stereotyped. It becomes a way of knowing the self—for instance as flirty, frivolous, or not serious, when in fact a layered cultural experience is being invested with prejudice and normative disapproval. That feeling of not fitting, of somehow being wrong, evokes the Fanonian mask (Fanon, 1952), where the mode of the Khoi-Coloured “girl” becomes a performative, minstrel’s dance behind which so many disappointments, feelings of rejection, and feelings of being on the margins originate. The interior life then grows in a cancerous way, rather than in an open and healthy way. This presentation of Black girl interiority does not support stereotypes of Black damaged women. Instead, the alternative disposition of a mosaic identity is counterposed here as a liberating alternative for those who have been subjected to a particular kind of Black girl stigma—that of the Khoi-Coloured girl.

Being part of academia has always felt something like what I imagine Krotoa’s experience as a translator for the Dutch to have been: translating between two worlds, one being that of your disadvantaged and Indigenous Khoi-Coloured community and the other that of the well-spoken, well-written British-styled academy in SA. Straddling these two worlds need not create confusion. Cultural assimilation into the academy is a ready option if you are willing to adopt some stylized inflections into your English pronunciation, upgrade your African dress so you are boho chic, and most of all, be well-behaved in the master and madam’s “house” of the academy. But what if your heart hankers back to those mixed communities you came from—the spaces of colour, of jest and quick, outrageous wits, the troubles in mind that lead you to the feeling of the blues? Your quick mind absorbs these stray feelings, drawing them deep within and away from this new world that you have entered. And so your experience of Black girl interiority grows, a life lived in parallel streams, where your concerns for the plight of your peoples cannot find much room to grow. Instead, the academic space exhorts you further and further away from the messiness of your peoples’ lives and suffering, reserving your concerns for some lonely journal article. Coloured-
Black girl interiority is layered not in a tasty lasagne-type way; rather, it is layer upon layer of scars and bitter lacing.

Loss of lineage becomes a problem of actual and perceived displacement. Reconnecting with past lineage is difficult in the context of dispossession. Lineage helps citizens in different ways: to understand the politics of life, to be a strategic thinker and a composed leader, and to calculate how you can position yourself in relation to your family, your kin, your cabal/group (if you have such), and your fellow thinkers. Your efficacy as a citizen, and your capacity to be an active citizen, is enhanced through awareness and knowledge of lineage. This “calculus of lineage” (my term) affords you the opportunity to leverage maximally for you and the members of your chosen, or designated, group. Conversely, your sense of marginalization and an inactive or disaffected citizenship arising from such perceptions or exclusions diminishes the potential for inclusive citizenship. “Narratives of extinction” (Robbins, 2000) claim that some groups like the Khoi and San in SA have been decimated through colonial genocide. These claims are narratives to the extent that they discount the continued existence of the descendants of these groups—Mandela and Tutu being two recent examples of Khoi descendants.

The theoretical consequence of the narratives of extinction is to produce “epistemic silencing” (Hutton & Cappellini, 2022, p. 1) where little is known about these groups and their evolution into contemporary society. Where epistemic silences persist, epistemic injustice and “discriminatory epistemic injustice” (Fricker, 2017) are produced by these absences in our national memory and psyche, resulting in contested policy outcomes like the recent Employment Equity Act Amendment in SA. Through negating epistemic silences and providing a historical case study of less visible citizens, this essay contributes to decoloniality and epistemic justice for dispossessed groups in South Africa.

Conclusion

When we reach back into the past, we find a young woman, niece of Khoi royalty, a woman called Krotoa, and an enigmatic and evocative piece of our matriarchal past opens up for us. The sands of Robben Island are the sands where Krotoa would have walked, prayed, and sang when she relocated there with her Danish husband and when she was banished there from the Cape for “unacceptable” behavior. Part of her life would have been spent roaming on those sands, taking her to the point of anger, grief, insanity. The connected encounters I have experienced are the bodily texts that we need to read in order to recover and reconnect with these matriarchal lineages, and this entails a radical decolonial rupture with secular rationalism, an embrace of both the material and non-material that is an integral part of Africa’s epistemic legacies.

The incomplete nation-building project in SA has excluded the Khoi, San, and their Coloured descendants from the reconstruction and development of the South African nation. Excavating the intimate herstories of invisibilized Indigenous women, easing and healing the torture that resides in these troubled, complex, and excluded women in SA’s national polity, remains an imperative for marginalized members of the academy and for a country that aims to include all its citizens. While “making it” is often the preserve of the elite, we need to understand how we, the Indigenous and excluded, are the makers of our country and our continent:

People have always understood intuitively that mind and body are not separable. Modernity has brought with it an unfortunate dissociation, a split between what we know with our whole being and what our thinking mind accepts as truth. Of these two kinds of knowledge the latter, narrower, kind most often wins out, to our loss. (Mate, 2003, p. xi)
In conclusion, we draw together bits of charms, pipes and tobacco into our skin bags that we have gleaned from our bodies and the bodies of those who have gone before. Our research collections and our connected encounters aid us with the imperative of Indigenous “re-connection” (Miller & Pointer, 2019). Armed with these Indigenous research tools, we can take our fragmented and broken past and curate a montage of each beautiful body, ours and the bodies of other Coloured women, an act of profound decolonial resistance which sees us rise into the full power of our African agency. Rather than just being the “keeper of the kumm/story” (Vollenhoven, 2016), I have realized that, in many ways, the story is telling me/us. Indigenous research methodologies can teach us how to access our inner archives, placing knowledge of the self in universities at the disposal of Indigenous African women. This knowledge of the self is at the same time intimately connected to a higher purpose rather than just the narcissistic self.

As matriarchal leaders, we need to make it in a different way, to chart a way forward that breaks with our African patriarchal norms and the blind alleys that this has led us into. These are the invisible women whom our academic texts and nation-building choices have marginalized behind various gendered stereotypes and ignorance of our past. We need to retrieve our lineages and our past, and sometimes memory in the water is the seamless way into such re-connection.

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