

Subaltern voices? Finding the spaces between things and words

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How can historical archaeology develop an understanding of resistance? How can historical archaeologists avoid mapping and remapping the material culture of domination – the houses, ceramics, glasswares and personal possessions of people in positions of power? ‘Small things forgotten’, the mundanities that make up the assemblages from many sites, have long been celebrated as the mark of the common people. But, more often than not, the collections with which we work were left by slave owners, masters, bourgeois householders and farmers. The underclasses, often so difficult to find in the documentary record, are equally elusive in their material traces as well.

In this chapter, I argue that one way of changing the perspectives of historical archaeology, of finding what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has called ‘subaltern voices’, is to concentrate on contradiction rather than consistency – to look for those areas of confusion where sources such as built form, probate records, ceramic sets, travellers’ accounts, glasswares and the like seem to defy interpretation as consistent, mutually reinforcing strands of evidence. My contention is that these could be points of vulnerability, places where the heavy, muffling shrouds of domination come unstitched, the point of disappearance of the subaltern; the aporia, the ‘blind-spot where understanding and knowledge is blocked’.

But how can people who have been systematically denied a voice be ‘heard’ through a patchwork conglomerate of disparate sources? Here, again, recent writing in critical cultural theory is helpful. Homi Bhabha has shown how hegemonic forms of control require repetition and differentiation to be effective. But the very process of repetition introduces uncertainty and panic, while to establish difference is to emphasize contrast. The consequence is ambivalence: why does the ‘self-evident’ cultural superiority of the person with power constantly have to be repeated? For Bhabha, such ambivalence is diagnostic of a ‘third space’ between those with power and those subjected to power, an area of interaction where the ‘mirror of representation in which cultural knowledge is customarily revealed as an integrated, open, expanding code’ is destroyed. Unrepresentable in itself, the ‘third space’ sets the conditions for enunciation, ensuring ‘that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew’. In the rest of this chapter, I will expand these points through an extended example: the archaeology of colonialism at Africa’s southern tip, and the problem of the supply of women to ensure the continuity of colonial society.

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Martin Hall

I

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In this chapter, I argue that one way of changing the perspectives of historical archaeology, of finding what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1985) has called ‘subaltern voices’, is to concentrate on contradiction rather than consistency — to look for those areas of confusion where sources such as built form, probate records, ceramic sets, travellers’ accounts, glasswares and the like seem to defy interpretation as consistent, mutually reinforcing strands of evidence. My contention is that these could be points of vulnerability, places where the heavy, muffling shrouds of domination come unstitched, the point of disappearance of the subaltern; the aporia, the ‘blind-spot where understanding and knowledge is blocked’ (Young 1990: 164).

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II

The Cape of Good Hope was claimed by the Dutch East India Company in 1652. A rough fort — and later, a more substantial castle — was built and an orthogonal grid of streets laid out, the skeleton of present-day Cape Town. Five years later, the company granted land rights to the first free farmers, the beginning of a process of colonial expansion which was eventually to result in the appropriation of all of southern Africa for Europe.

Life for an ordinary soldier in the company’s colonial possessions was hard. Many employees were permanently indebted, poorly fed and housed and subject to brutal punishment. The right to farm, initially along the banks of the Liesbeeck River and later further in the interior, was desired by many. The acquisition

of a wife was the key to such freedom (Hall 1997). This was underlined by one marriage custom. After the betrothed couple visited the castle's Matrimonial Court (which formally authorized the intended union), their exit was barred by the drawn swords of the junior officers and the castle's *rondegangers*, or time keepers — the soldiers responsible for turning the hourglass and sounding the castle bell on the hour. It was customary for the couple to purchase their ransom with a large gratuity (Mandelbrote [1785] 1925: 64). Clearly, such rituals served to emphasize the significance of the rite of passage. But, in common with many colonies, women were in short supply at the Cape. In 1679, of 142 free adults, eighty-seven were men and fifty-five women. The garrison was almost entirely male, and by 1717, when the total free population had grown to about 2,000, there were considerably fewer adult women than adult men. During the eighteenth century, the ratio settled down to about three men for every two women (Guelke 1989).

One solution to this shortage was to bring orphan girls from Amsterdam (see, for example, Raidt [1726] 1973: 161). Such orphans had their possessions inventoried before their departure, and their value was paid out in cash against an order on the VOC Pay Office once they had married at the Cape. In other words, to arrive at the Cape and refuse marriage was to face immediate destitution. From the prospective husband's point of view, there was a double bonus — a wife and the possibility of a small dowry. But despite the apparent elegance of this form of compulsory indenture, in which the care of orphans was removed from civic responsibility in the Netherlands and women were provided for the new colony, it does not seem to have continued for long. Perhaps the system was too close to a white slave traffic for Dutch moral sensibilities; some relatives of the orphans prevented their export (Mandelbrote [1785] 1921: 53).

A second solution was to turn to a more manipulable source of women — slaves. In 1681 Ryklof van Goens complained that white men and slave women danced naked together in the slave lodge. Four years later, Commissioner van Rhee de commented on the number of children living in the slave barracks in the Heerengracht who had European fathers, fiftyeight at the time of his inspection, writing that 'the Company does nothing to prevent this promiscuous intercourse, since, for one thing, it tends to multiply the slave population, and does away with the necessity of importing fresh slaves'. Van Rhee de also noted that 'three or four generations of this admixture ... have produced a half-caste population — a mestizo class — but a slight shade darker than some Europeans' (Mandelbrote [1785] 1925: 125). Although the company took a moral line, dictating heavy punishments for. European men caught in such dalliance, miscegenation had the advantage of producing generations of Cape-born women whose servile and lascivious origins could be deracinated to effect a transformation to *huisvrouw*. In his now-classic study of miscegenation at the Cape, Heese (1984) has shown how numerous children were born with European fathers and mothers who were either slaves or themselves the mixed descendants of slave women and European men. Mixed marriages became a feature of life at the Cape from _ the earliest years of the settlement. The first to be recorded was in 1656, between Jan Woutersz van Middelburg and Catharina Anthonis van Bengale. Van Middelburg was appointed superintendent of Robben Island, where the couple's first child was born in the following year (*ibid.*).

Despite his moral rectitude, then, Van Rhee de set up a system which effectively turned the transformation of mixed-descent women from the slave barracks into a commercial arrangement. At the age of 22, such women could obtain manumission if they could speak passable Dutch, had embraced Reformed Christianity and could pay the company a fee of 100 guilders — the reimbursement of the cost of their upkeep (Heese 1984). The rub, of course, was the fee. Few slave women aged 22 were likely to have such money, encouraging them to accept sponsorship in return for marriage. Another option was for a European man first to establish a family with a '*houvrouw*', or kept woman, and then to legitimate his line through marriage and baptism. This form of concubinage increased in popularity through the eighteenth century. Children from such marriages were fully absorbed within colonial society, and the daughters of such parents became 'European' marriage partners (Heese 1984).

III

The solution to the shortage of women at the colonial Cape, then, was to facilitate miscegenation between European men and slave women, legitimated by manumission, marriage and deracination wherever possible. Although the Cape developed its own distinctive colonial culture, it shared with places like Batavia a trajectory towards extensive creolization as former slaves brought language, music, cooking and other cultural traits into their new family identities. Hence the popularity of eighteenth-century travel accounts; the Cape was another country, and these books were ethnographies, describing the unusual to the credulous citizens of London, Amsterdam or Paris.

But such a solution carried its own contradiction within the hierarchical structure of patriarchy. Slave women kept as concubines or converted to housewives bore children who confused the distinctions between dominant and subordinate fractions. Concubinage and intermarriage were both confirmation and compromise of racial hierarchy, resulting in a 'third space' where the 'primordial unity or fixity' of cultural symbols was in doubt, where signs could be 'appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew' (Bhabha 1994: 37). Such lack of fixity in cultural meaning can be demonstrated by reading together several mundane texts of everyday life; an account by an early eighteenth-century visitor to Cape Town, faunal assemblages and official company statements of slave diet and domestic records.

Cape Town's seventeenth-century castle was a microcosm of life in the colony, housing the governor and senior officials, the garrison, smiths, coopers, wheelwrights, carpenters, merchants and slaves. It has yielded a rich archaeology, including faunal assemblages from both the officers' kitchens and, close by, a storeroom almost certainly used to house slaves (Hall 1992, 1996).

At first sight, the faunal components of these two assemblages show a simple differentiation between high and low status diets. Common to both were the more abundant shoal fish, mutton, beef, wild and domestic fowl, black mussels and periwinkles. The frequencies of body parts in the two assemblages show the sort of differentiation that is so characteristic in faunal assemblages from plantations in the American South. The military officials enjoyed leg of lamb at their table, while slaves were given shoulder of mutton and sheep heads, which they broke open for the brains. Parallel differences are reflected in the avian fauna. The assemblage from the officers' kitchen has twice as many domestic species than the slave assemblage and, of the wild species, the slave assemblage has a higher proportion of the less palatable marine birds such as flamingos, penguins and cormorants. Immature chickens and pigeons were reserved solely for the officers, who also more frequently enjoyed the fleshy leg bones. Black mussels were about as common in the meals of both officers and slaves, but periwinkles were ten times more frequent in the diet of the underclass.

These relative values of different foods are borne out by official memoranda. For example, on 11 March 1710, the Council at the Cape ruled that each company slave was to receive 40 pounds of rice, or bread, per month and half a pound of fresh meat per day, and in addition half an aum (about 70 litres) of salted fish was to be issued to each of the fifty slaves each week: three or four fish for each adult every seven days (Leibbrandt, 1896). Prices of meat fixed by the Dutch East India Company in the eighteenth century show that pork was valued above mutton, which was in turn preferred to beef. This documentary evidence is supported by the archaeological assemblage. There was a low incidence of pig bones from both castle assemblages, and the ratio of sheep to cattle was approximately 6 to 1 in the officers' assemblage and 3 to 1 in the slave assemblage. Favoured wild game was expensive, fish was cheap and marine birds and shellfish were not worth mentioning. But there was a deeper level of complexity in the meaning of food, and in the differentiation between slave and master. This complexity is revealed in a contemporary account of the Cape.

Otto Mentzel had been born in Neustädte, lower Silesia, in 1709 and arrived at Cape Town in July 1733 at the age of 24, Son of an aristocratic Prussian family associated with the court, he had enrolled with the Dutch East India Company as a soldier, but was soon given a sinecure consistent with his standing in life, and spent the next eight years tutoring the children of prominent colonists and enjoying Cape society. He left the Cape

inadvertently when the ship to which he was delivering letters sailed from Table Bay before he could get ashore, and Mentzel found himself back in Amsterdam without any personal possessions. In the following year, Mentzel entered the Prussian civil service, retiring as Chief of Police in Silesia (Mandelbrote [1785] 1925). Mentzel only started writing about the Cape in the 1780s, some forty years after his departure, and then in reaction to other texts on southern Africa that had appeared in intervening years. This perspective — subjective intent portrayed as objective account — makes the inconsistencies in Mentzel's text particularly revealing.

Mentzel pities the arduous workload of slaves and their frequent bad treatment at the hands of their masters, yet elsewhere he provides, without comment, a detailed account of flogging, the rubbing of salt water into wounds, riveting in chains, breaking on the wheel, crucifixion and breaking on the rack (Mandelbrote [1785] 1925). In contrast, again, the reader is presented with a romantic apology for slavery: 'although the slave has worked fairly hard and suffered from heat during the day, yet he is happy and sings, and plays on his raving (ramkie) and even dances' (Mandelbrote [1787] 1944). But elsewhere Mentzel reveals his disgust at contact with slaves, their habit of chewing betel leaves and shell lime, and the smell of hair smeared with coconut oil, 'clammy and offensive to European nostrils' (Mandelbrote [1785] 1925: 131).

Mentzel's complicated consciousness of slaves finds a homology in his attitude to food. Although he tells us that 'elaborate dinner parties do not form part of the social life of the people of the Cape' because 'mutton forms the staple diet; excellent mutton, undoubtedly, and made more appetizing by being prepared in a variety of ways, but — still mutton' (Mandelbrote [1785] 1925: 101), Mentzel does enthuse about the Wedding Feast. 'It is almost incredible', he tells us, 'what an infinite variety of foods find their way on to the table at a fashionable wedding. I have myself, seen at least 50 different dishes on the table, including the vegetable dishes' (Mandelbrote [1785] 1925: 121):

There is an abundant supply of local dishes, stewed and roasted meats, boiled and fried fish, pastries and sweetmeats, prepared in a variety of ways, and also a good supply of imported smoked and corned meats.

(Mandelbrote [1785] 1925: 104)

But there is a dark side to this gay gastronomic abandon, for the 'infinite variety of foods' at the wedding feasts of the best families include, of course, the foods routinely allocated to the slaves. Again, Mentzel contradicts himself. On the one hand, he describes the 'vast quantities of fish' that are caught from small boats with dragnets at night and which are used as food for slaves (Mandelbrote [1785] 1925: 88–9). But on the other hand, he states baldly that few fish are available to relieve the tedium of mutton.

Read in conjunction with the archaeology of the castle, Mentzel's text interprets the fish assemblage, and the fish assemblage interprets Mentzel's text. For although the fare on the officers' table contains — in the common shoal fish — the fare of the slave doss-house (just as the fare of the wedding feast contains the fare of the back yard and outbuilding), differentiation is achieved by the small quantities of game fish only obtainable by line from the Indian Ocean, on the opposite side of the peninsula from Cape Town: Red Roman, Galjoen, Silver Fish and Red Steenbras which, together, make up about a fifth of the assemblage from the officers' kitchen, but which were not found at all in the grain store. Indeed, at one point in his text, Mentzel only recognizes such species:

The commonest kind of fish caught here is the so-called Rooymanins. They retain their blood red appearance even after they are boiled, and are about two feet long and proportionately heavy. ... Besides the above-named red fish and another kind known as galleon-fish there are few other fish available.

(Mandelbrote [1785] 1921: 81-2; emphasis added)

IV

The table at Mentzel's wedding feast, overloaded in its cultural meanings already, also carries the suggestion of differentiation between women. For with the description of bucolic indulgence is the dark shadow of compromise in colonial marriages; the risk of being overwhelmed by 'lascivious' slave women, and the difficulties in maintaining social hierarchies. In Mentzel's account, the stress on quantity is set against the contrast between rare 'spiced and seasoned' imported meats and abundant, 'fresh' 'local dishes'. Mentzel remembers that 'the spiced and seasoned meats are eagerly consumed, whereas the fresh foods are scarcely touched'. This, Mentzel tells his readers, is the consequence of sufficiency: 'no man can eat more than to repletion' (Mandelbrote [1785] 1925: 104).

Clearly a wedding, and the symbolic language of the wedding feast, is part of the regulation of sexuality, confirming the legitimacy of the transfer of a woman between two families, and marking the exclusion of other possible suitors and brides. Could the spiced and seasoned imported meat be a metaphor for a superior bride — a European-born wife and a marriage that would lead past the *rondegangers*' drawn swords to a status higher than that of those married to women of mixed blood? Could the local dishes — the avalanche of mutton that stifles sociability — remind the writer with a shudder of the dangers of those 'lascivious creatures', women who might well make 'helpmates' in cooking, washing, baking and milking, but who would assign their husbands to the lesser ranks of colonial society?

Another segment of the archaeological record — architecture — illuminates the ambiguities that such differentiation seems to have carried. Peter Kolb, writing before Mentzel, mapped out a straightforward progression in status. Initially, settlers had 'many Debts' and 'great Incumbrances'. Under these circumstances, they had to be content with 'cots' that provided 'no more than convenient Room and Shelter from the Weather' (Kolb [1731] 1968, Vol. 2: 48-9). But success brought the opportunity of building a better house, a process of improvement which was characteristic of the early eighteenth century at the Cape. Writing half a century later, Hendrik Swellengrebel, the son of a former governor of the Cape, drew the comparison. Lesser farmers, he commented, lived in tumble-down barns, 40 feet by 14 or 15 feet, with clay walls four feet high, and a thatched roof. These are mostly undivided; the doors are reed mats; a square hole serves as a window. The fireplace is a hole in the floor, which is usually made of clay and cowdung. There is no chimney; merely a hole in the roof to let the smoke out. (letter dated June 1783 quoted in Schutte 1982: 357)

Their owners often chose concubinage — they 'long remain unmarried; many never marry and mingle with Hottentot women'. Families huddled together promiscuously — Swellengrebel had seen 'up to three households — children included — living together in such a dwelling' (Schutte 1982: 357). In contrast 'quite respectable houses' — the notch above the lowliest cottages for Swellengrebel — were so defined by their divisions. "Good doors and windows' made clear the distinction between indoors and outdoors while internal walls — 'a large room partitioned into 2 or 3' — allowed the proper distinctions between families and generations (Schutte 1982: 357). It is difficult to explore Swellengrebel's 'tumble down' cottages further from direct evidence as there is little surviving architecture, and as yet little archaeological evidence, for this period. But the combination of documentary sources and the design of later buildings constructed in the long-established tradition of the Cape countryside bears out the documentary inferences. One such area is Verlorenvlei on the Cape west coast, where a substantial stretch of wetland has been a natural focus for settlement in this otherwise arid area. Today, small clusters of houses are scattered across the land. Walls are of packed clay, mudbrick and fired red brick, sometimes with clay mortar or stone. Buttressing, added later, may support sagging walls. Timber beams support thatch or iron roofs. From a close study of a sample of some forty such buildings, John Gribble (1989) has deduced a rule set for the houses of the Verlorenvlei as a whole, following the structuralist methods adopted by Henry Glassie in his research in Virginia. When combined with other information from the region, this 'competence' provides a valuable amplification of earlier accounts such as Mentzel's and Swellengrebel's. This, then, was the colonial vernacular -- the corollary of ordinary mutton at the table, of 'local dishes' at the wedding feast.

One way in which architectural differentiation — Kolb's 'better houses' — was achieved was through an obsession with symmetrical order in house plans and the construction of high, baroque gables at the centre of front facades and as end gables (Hall 1994). Such manor houses were first built in the third decade of the eighteenth century, and soon became the mark of the elite — an equivalent of the differentiation achieved through the preparation of different cuts of meat for officers and slaves within the castle. But again, such differentiation was not straightforward, and a close reading suggests areas of ambiguity and uncertainty.

Study of gabled buildings with traceable histories of ownership that can be firmly dated to before 1795 has revealed that almost all of these were manor houses on wheat and wine farms, and all of them depended on slave labour. The names of title holders can be connected to only eight of the 2,000 or so families that made up the colonial component of the eighteenth century Cape. There were close connections between the members of this small elite; just over 80 per cent of the male title holders were married into their own or into one of the other seven families.

Marriage and descent, of course, are critical to the movement and accumulation of wealth in an affluent class. Thus this web of conjugal and consanguinal links protected the interests of the rural, slave-holding elite of the Cape countryside by keeping economic capital circulating among a small group — a fraction of the complete colonial population. One of the distinctive features of this elite network was the role played by women. For the most part, male title holders played a nominal role in histories which had women as their central actors. Many of the estate biographies map out a 'shadow lineage' of women, standing behind the formality of male legal ownership (Hall 1994). The power that women could have within the ranks of the Cape farming elite is epitomized in the life of Sibella Pasman, and voiced in part through her will. Baptized in 1693, she was first married in 1714. In the same year her mother bought the farm Nooitgedacht, transferring the property into her son-in-law's name four years later. In 1722, after her first husband had died, Sibella married Jacobus Cloete, a member of a family with which she already had connections. Sibella was widowed for the second time in 1757 and died some time after May 1777 when, at the age of about 85, she signed a codicil to her second will.

During this last quarter of her life, Sibella Pasman clearly had great influence, exercised through patronage. She had inherited Nooitgedacht (and thus her mother's investment) and had transferred the estate to her son Hendrik Cloete in 1761; by now Hendrik was in his late thirties, had been married for eight years, and already had four children. His mother clearly continued to exercise considerable influence over the farm's affairs. Sibella's will makes it clear that she lived in the main house, and also favoured particular heirs. Lest she be forgotten, she directed that her daughter should have her gold chain, and that a grandson should get 'one pair single gold shirt buttons to wear in memory of me'.

Sibella Pasman's son, Hendrik Cloete, had built the gable at Nooitgedacht in 1774, and was later to build a gable at a second house, Groot Constantia. Eight more of Sibella Pasman's male relatives had held titles to houses when gables were built, or were to hold such titles. Three female relatives were married to men who were, or would be, title holders to estates when gables were built. In sum, Sibella Pasman had direct family connections with more than a quarter of the dated eighteenth-century gabled buildings that survive today (Hall 1994).

There is, then, a correlation between gabled houses and the eighteenth-century rural elite, as well as evidence that women played a central role in structuring the relations between members of this class. Such a correlation implies that gables were a material signification of this elite; attributable artefacts that connect the surviving remnants of a material world with the surviving remnants of a documentary corpus.

There is more to this than simple differentiation, though. Images of fertility abound on decorated gables — wheatsheafs, grapes, vines, sometimes the entwined initials of husband and wife and, spectacularly, the pediment which Hendrik Cloete had built on Groot Constantia's wine cellar in 1791, in which Ganymede — the cupbearer to the gods — is surrounded by frolicking putti (Fransen and Cook 1980). However, the ebullience of the gable and its associations of fertility and natural increase is contained by the second

definitive component in the design of the Cape country manor house — the strict symmetry of the building plan. Cape houses invariably have balanced facades, with a front door directly beneath the gable leading into a reception room. To the left and the right are equally sized rooms, and the regular layout is repeated in the back offices. The surrounding werf is usually symmetrical as well (Fitchett 1987; Brink 1992); the effect is that of approaching, and passing beneath, an emblem of excess that is contained within a strict system of regulation.

An equivalently structured verbal metaphor is to be found in the descriptions of the company's garden at the Cape. Many writers comment on the seemingly unbounded fertility of the Cape soil. Frangois Valentyn, at the Cape in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, wrote about 'astonishingly large nurseries of melons, whole rooms full', which he fantasized as being 'in the womb of this African Mother-Garden'. And Peter Kolb, revelling in the garden's female qualities, wrote that 'Nature has Little or Nothing to set her off there besides her own Charms and the Hand of the Gardener.' But these, and other, contemporary writers are at pains to point out that the garden is also strictly contained within a regular grid of paths, hedges and walls. Many of them paced it out, enumerating the grid and testing its regularity. Many of them made it clear that its walkways formed an extension of Cape Town's street grid; the male domain where respectable women could not go alone.

I have suggested that this same metaphor interprets the eighteenth-century baroque gable at the Cape. The house as a whole signifies colonial control and dominance. But the gable stands for excess that must be contained within order. There seem to have been few cases where human figures were incorporated in gable decoration, but one example further amplifies my point. Willem Berg's Canteen in Dorp Street, Cape Town had a particularly ornate gable, probably made in 1777 (Fransen 1987). Exuberantly curved mouldings enclose figures of soldiers and of mermaids. What could such decoration mean? The unknown artist who executed Berg's facade could have drawn on a wide stream of biblical and pagan iconography in coming up with a design for which the tavern's owner was prepared to pay. But such iconography was, in itself, frequently ambiguous, and the image of the mermaid carried specific connotations of magical powers, misfortune and the danger of shipwreck. Folktales retold stories of men who married mermaids after stealing some possession of their brides, only to lose their wives once the theft had been discovered. For William Berg's inebriated clientele, the sign above his door must have evoked a complex cocktail of titillation and desire, wariness and misogyny.

Material culture, then — whether fish or facade — can be implicated in both the emphasis of difference and in the ambiguities of the 'third space'. Such an approach requires a close, detailed reading of specific circumstances; work that is rewarded by a contribution to the rich discourses of the past that extends beyond the documentary evidence of the historian. Such an approach stands in contrast to the generalizations towards which positivist and structuralist archaeologies incline. For what is lost in eschewing detail are the hints of ambiguities and anxieties; the shadows and traces of 'subaltern voices'; the complexities of the 'third space' which drove those who made the archaeological record to obsessive levels of material differentiation and repetition.

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