Re-reading as a methodology: the case of Boer women’s testimonies

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ABSTRACT
Re-reading as a methodology is often invoked in literary and historical work, but seldom specifically delineated. The substantive focus herein concerns Boer women’s testimonies of the 1899–1902 South African War. In particular testimonies of the British military scorched earth policy of forced removals and concentration camps. The methodology of re-reading such texts against each other is explored so as to ‘re-read the record’ of the Mafeking concentration camp, using a set of unpublished testimonies. Re-reading reveals tensions and disjunctures in these testimonies, and highlights the pervasiveness of established, rehearsed narrative structures which characterize in effect all women’s testimonies of the concentration camps of the South African War. The processes of re-reading are examined as a methodology which interrogates a particular text’s context of production, and, crucially, the context of reading and the ways in which this shapes readerly responses to the text.

KEYWORDS: Boer women, re-reading, South African War, testimonies

Introduction
In this article I discuss and use a particular methodology, one which is crucial, indeed fundamental, to working on historical materials of all kinds, whether ‘primary’ manuscript sources or ‘secondary’ publications. This is re-reading. Re-reading as a methodology is often invoked in literary and historical work, but what it entails more precisely is rarely spelled out. My substantive focus is Boer women’s testimonies of the 1899–1902 South African War, particularly testimonies of the British military scorched-earth policy of forced removals and concentration camps. These testimonies did not primarily concern their personal experiences and interpretations, but were orchestrated by women cultural entrepreneurs working through post-war women’s nationalist parties, congresses and other structures, as a key part of the Afrikaner proto-nationalist project (see Dampier, 2005a, 2005b; Stanley and Dampier, 2005, 2006,
2007). Women were the primary agitators behind much proto-nationalism post-war in South Africa until the late 1930s, with the majority of these testimonies published explicitly within this context – for instance, some testimonies were solicited, orchestrated and distributed through the SAVF (South African Women's Federation) and the ACVV (Afrikaans Christian Women’s Society), and others were published by Nationale Pers, the National Party publishing house (see Neethling, 1917, 1938; Le Cluys, 1920; Hobhouse, 1927; Raal, 2000 [1938]; Rabie-Van der Merwe, 1940).

In researching Boer women’s testimonies, I used re-reading as a methodological approach that combines detailed archival research with close documentary analysis, influenced by feminist literary theory and practice, which has employed the strategy of re-reading ‘against the grain’ to identify ‘patriarchy as the source of women’s textual as well as material oppression’, and also to interrogate gender differences and hierarchies and ‘the language through which [they are] constructed and symbolized’ (Mills and Pearce, 1996: 2, 4). These ideas about re-reading ‘against the grain’ have shown how ‘conflict between the reader and author/text can expose the underlying premises of the work’ (Moi, 1985: 82, 24–25, original emphasis). While re-reading as a methodology shares discourse analysis’ concern with ‘the construction of accounts’ (Potter and Wetherell, 2004: 350), re-reading is particularly focused on the contexts of both writing and reading texts. Re-reading in my own research has brought into focus, among other things, the construction for political purposes of a racialized and dichotomized moral landscape in Boer women’s testimonies (see Dampier, 2005b; Stanley and Dampier, 2005).

In what follows, I explore this methodology of re-reading texts against each other in order to ‘re-read the record’ of the Mafeking concentration camp using a set of unpublished women’s testimonies. These testimonies offer some challenges to ‘the facts’ as presented in published accounts of the camps, but at the same time replicate some of the narrative structures of the proto-nationalist-originating published testimonies referred to earlier. The methodology of re-reading texts against each other provides a way of revealing such tensions and disjunctures, as well as highlighting the pervasiveness of established, rehearsed narrative structures which characterize in effect all women’s testimonies of the concentration camps of the South African War, published and unpublished.

**Women’s testimonies and Mafeking Camp**

As a result of their solicited, politicized and highly edited nature, Boer women’s published testimonies are marked by strong similarities in narrative structure and content. They are consequently a striking example of Tonkin’s (1990) ‘rehearsed narratives’, in that they re/tell specific incidents in a generalized and to a large extent formulaic way, to invoke and claim the mistreatment of Boer women. Tonkin argues that set forms like this emerge because ‘successful
tellings are imitated... interactively, audiences and tellers develop conventions which cue "a horizon of expectation" (Tonkin, 1992: 97). Boer women's camp testimonies, at first retold orally and then later produced and published in written versions, similarly imitate the 'successful tellings' of others, thereby fulfilling this 'horizon of expectation'. These published testimonies formulaically repeat the most powerful elements of 'the camp story', framing these in ways recognizable to a 'knowing audience', and importantly including the Boer/Afrikaner women's proto-nationalist organizations that proliferated post-war. They multiply repeat a small number of interrelated themes, resulting in a strong overall similarity. These include, but are not limited to, the presence of 'kaffir [African, pejoratively] hordes' who herd Boer women and children into camps, the camp hospitals as places of incarceration and even murder, the camp authorities as relentlessly harsh and unsympathetic, and the camps as by definition places of starvation.

These repetitions resulted from the testimonies' politicized production within a strongly nationalist context. That is, the testimonies do not primarily concern these women's individual experiences, but instead offer highly stylized accounts in which the same basic plot, themes and even sentences recur. It was only those testimonies and stories that served nationalist purposes that were 'heard' in the public context of the upsurge and then dominance of the National Party. Testimonies by black people, Boer men, and politically neutral or non-nationalist women, simply do not exist. There is this almost total absence of other voices because accounts that disagreed with the proto-nationalist political project were excluded from the solicited and published record. Crucially, government-sponsored nationalist histories of the concentration camps made extensive use of the women's testimonies as entirely factual information, with any contrary point of view 'forgotten' or otherwise written out of recorded history. By the 1930s, 'the history' of the camps was entirely a nationalist view of these events, depicted as deliberate genocidal cruelty, with Boer people motivated solely by 'vrede en volk' [freedom and nation], and encouraging patriotic support for the emergent Boer/Afrikaner nation.

Considering the wartime significance of Mafeking town, as well as the dramatic history of the camp itself, there are relatively few published testimonies concerning it. The published Mafeking testimonies that do exist offer little insight into the experiences of the writers, have strong similarities with testimonies written about quite different camps, and fail to offer detailed depictions of Mafeking camp itself and the consequential changes occurring there over time.

It was with some sense of anticipation, then, when my archival work led me to a set of 30 unpublished individual testimonies concerning Mafeking camp. These testimonies, ranging in length from just a few pages to three whole exercise books, were collected in 1929 by Hendrik Willem Huyser, who had been in the camp as a young boy. Huyser wrote to women living in the Mafeking district, requesting written accounts of camp life with a view to future publication,
which was never realized. This, I thought, was possibly an opportunity to find the dissenting voices so absent from the published canon. That is, these testimonies had not been published and so I thought would be ‘unmarked’ by the proto-nationalist selection and editing processes that had homogenized the published accounts. This new project involved me in re-reading the record, by reading these unpublished testimonies against the published testimonies and ‘the history’ of Mafeking and other camps that they had so strongly informed.

Re-reading: the Mafeking record and the Huyser testimonies

Several striking features of the unpublished testimonies distinguishing them from the published accounts were revealed by re-reading. First, the focus in the unpublished Huyser testimonies is mainly on the camp itself and women’s experiences there. This contrasts with the published testimonies, in which considerably more space and emphasis is given to the farm-burnings and journeys than to details of camp life. Second, a number of the Huyser testimonies were written by women who were only functionally literate. Written in unpractised handwriting with many spelling and grammar mistakes and little punctuation, such testimonies read more like the spoken word. A 23-page testimony by Johanna Basson, for example, contains not even one punctuation mark. Also, the majority of the Huyser testimonies are written in an early, largely spoken, form of Afrikaans called taal, in great contrast to the published testimonies, where women’s writings were translated from the original into either Dutch, Afrikaans or English for publication in a polished grammatically correct form.

Comparisons between the unpublished originals, where these exist, and the published versions clearly show how the translating and editing process ‘titled up’ these writings (see Dampier, 2005b; Stanley and Dampier, 2006). Semi-literate, untidy, personal testimonies were transformed into fluent, polished accounts in which the impersonal and the political were central. These originals indicate that most authors were rural, poor, uneducated, semi-literate women who in the late 1920s were still using Taal, a hybrid language that the 1910s Second Language Movement had actively sought to replace with Afrikaans, a standardized and respectable language for the volk. Consequently, in quoting from the Mafeking testimonies, I have produced translations which as far as possible preserve what Susan Bassnett (2002: 32) calls the ‘expressive identity’ of the originals, their grammatical and expressive idiosyncrasies, because these best convey an impression of the authors and their social context.

A third difference between the Huyser testimonies and the published testimonies concerns explanations for the sickness and deaths in the camps. In the published testimonies, this is almost universally blamed on the careless or even deliberately malevolent British authorities, mainly the camp superintendents and doctors, who are said to starve Boer women and children, poison food rations, place fish-hooks in tins of meat, and kill patients in the camp hospitals. In contrast,
overall the unpublished Huyser testimonies show that, even in the late 1920s, there were still many Boer women who did not hold these views. Maria Jacoba Ferguson, a young woman of 19 when in the camp, writes: 'we suffered with sickness because we were a very big women's camp we had arrived from all directions and so the sicknesses were everywhere' (Ferguson in A951). In the case of Mafeking, it was the arrival in August 1901 of people from the Taungs and Lichtenburg districts, who brought with them measles and pneumonia, which led to a catastrophic rise in the death rate in September and October that year. This is specifically noted by Magrita Johanna Swart, who explains:

That midday when we got to our tents a group of people were there in an empty corner of the camp. Lichtenburgers they said... The people came in with wagons, carts and horses and everything. The children said they had surrendered. Quickly reports spread that those people's children had whooping cough and measles. It was not long before it was spread over the whole camp, because people couldn't keep the children inside. (Swart in A951)

These alternative explanations, which largely accord with the British camp records, are striking and underscore the amount of orchestration that went into the published collections.

Fourth, while the published testimonies present the camps as uniformly 'bad', with little depiction of change over time or differences between the camp officials, one of the most prominent themes in the Huyser testimonies concerns the highly favourable views of camp superintendent Henry Kemble-Cook. Kemble-Cook was appointed in late November 1901 as replacement for R.L. McCowat, dismissed on the recommendation of a Ladies Commission of Inquiry. Although seemingly unaware of the Commission's role in McCowat's dismissal, many Mafeking testimony writers emphasize the difference the new superintendent made:

Furthermore the first commandant we had, was Makouhet [sic] he was a hard man he also had no sympathising heart for a woman. But later we got a different commandant he was Cook, he was very good to us, and was also very sorry for us all, and personally he also had respect for the dead, he also quickly allowed the people to get fat meat and also even fat tinned meat... (Snyman in A951)

After Commandant Cook came there then everything was organized it was then provided... we didn't have it too badly because he [Cook] did what he could... Hospitals and schools and one united church were put up there for us ... and so I can say we did not lack for anything from tent to food or hospital or schools or church. (Ferguson in A951)

The commandant of the women Makouhet [sic], he was a Boer hater... Then we got another Commandant Cook, this was a gentleman, he immediately made improvements removed the bully beef from the camp; and took care of good slaughter stock and also very fat tinned meat ... and also he was a man who had respect for the dead, when the corpse wagon went past him, then he stood still with his hat in his hand... (Becker in A951)
Then there came an English commandant Coock [sic]. He was a good man. He gave us enough food and good tinned meat. Then doctors also came there, and from then on the sicknesses began to get less. And then peace came and the commandant called the women together and he said it’s peace. Then all the women cheered him for the good news and his good treatment. (Botha in A951)

The grammatical idiosyncrasies and conversational style here show the writers were not highly literate. Such signs of illiteracy are, however, largely ‘tidied away’ in the published collections, where the solicited nature of the testimonies is hidden and editorial interventions construct them as polished statements.

Fifth, there are repeated references to Mr Cook as ‘a good man’, ‘a gentleman’, someone who improved conditions and ‘showed proper respect’. This contradicts the almost universal depiction in the published testimonies of the camp authorities as at best indifferent, at worst murderous, for the Huyser testimonies readily acknowledge that some officials were ‘good’, others ‘bad’, with Kemble-Cook exemplifying the ‘good’. There are also comments about changes over time in the Huyser testimonies, rather than the static depiction of ‘the camps’ that dominates the published ones. In their depiction of individual, personal feelings rather than politicized statements, the unpublished Huyser testimonies are much closer to the camp letters written at the time of the war, which inscribe the specific and particular concerning both events and people (see Dampier, 2005b).

This can be contrasted with recent and earlier nationalist-inspired histories. Thus, in his recent discussion of Mafeking camp, Raath (2002) implies that McCowat was superintendent throughout and makes no mention of Kemble-Cook, also seeing the circumstances throughout as ‘terrible hygiene conditions’ alongside starvation and mistreatment (Raath, 2002: 230). Otto’s much earlier work provides a detailed account of the sanitation problems and insists these were the fault of McCowat rather than the diseases introduced by incoming Boer Inhabitants (Otto, 1954: 115). And like Raath, Otto makes no reference to the change in superintendents or the dramatic drop in mortality by late 1901. In addition to comments about Kemble-Cook, Mrs Botha’s account above is interesting for its comment on the Peace. Most published testimonies depict Peace as a tragic moment, which left assembled Boer women weeping, bitterly disappointed, while Mrs Botha writes when the superintendent announced the peace, ‘all the women cheered him for the good news and his good treatment’.

By reading the Huyser testimonies against the published testimonies and also the official nationalist-inspired histories of the camp, a more nuanced picture emerges. The deaths were known to result from terrible epidemics and not starvation. While some officials were inept, the efforts of others to improve things were recognized. Many women were not Republicans or nationalists and welcomed the Peace. In these respects, most of the Huyser testimonies deviate from the published women’s accounts and also contradict ‘the facts’ in the official government histories.
Re-reading the different (kinds of) texts against each other brings into sight these differences and disjunctions, but also highlights the success of proto-nationalist women’s organizations and cultural entrepreneurs in constructing what a ‘woman’s testimony’ in a public sense could be, so that, by the late 1920s when the Huyser testimonies were written, this took a well-established and effectively canonical form. Thus, while the content of the Huyser testimonies contrasts with the published testimonies, they are just as formulaic in their structure, as a close reading of the earlier extracts indicates. They contain the same emphases, themes and turns of phrase, and a small range of stories are used across them; for instance, nearly all comment on the meat ration and the good work of Kemble-Cook. The similarities in the narrative structure of the Huyser testimonies indicate the influence of more general strategies from the oral tradition of story-telling on their construction: as Vieta Skultans (1998: 130) comments, ‘The moment people talk about the past they remember it in the way stories are told; they are unable to ignore the conventions of story-telling’.

What I am emphasizing, then, contra my initial response, is that the unpublished Huyser Mafeking testimonies are not free from selective, mediated and rehearsed elements. My re-reading indicates that Tonkin’s comment that stories are always structured ‘according to known conventions’ (Tonkin, 1990: 34) applies to these wartime testimonies as a sub-genre, whether published or not. To privilege the Huyser testimonies because unpublished, and in this specific sense ‘untold’, would require ignoring well-known issues concerning the referentiality claims of all life writing, whatever the context of its production. However, re-reading the Mafeking testimonies against each other, against other women’s testimonies, and against the official nationalist histories, involves an analytical stance that rightly interrogates the competing versions of the past they all represent. Testimonies are ‘neither open to proof nor self-evident. We come to understand them only through interpretation, paying careful attention to the contexts that shape their creation and the world views that inform them’ (Personal Narratives Group, 1989: 261). Without an analytical re-reading of the kind sketched out here, testimonial writings can be (and sometimes are) treated as in a sense sacred, ignoring not only the circumstances of their production but also the discernible gaps, silences and inconsistencies in them as texts.11 Given South Africa’s past, the rise of nationalism and the institution of apartheid, a past in which many of these women played a notable part, failing to re-read in the sense outlined here would betray the post-1994 project of ‘writing a wider past’ (Cuthbertson et al., 2002).

Conclusion: re-reading

What does ‘re-reading’ as a methodology entail and wherein lies its usefulness in relation to the Huyser testimonies in particular? As noted earlier, re-reading as a methodology is often invoked but what it entails is seldom made explicit.
Re-reading, in part informed by post-structuralism, emphasizes multiple meanings and also the multiple re/readings that arise from different reading contexts, scepticism about the truth claims of much 'primary' or 'empirical' research, and a critical revisionist approach to existing texts - a 'rereading of an already written universe' (Travers, 1996). One method that this critical approach has engendered is discourse analysis, and although the competing interpretations of discourse analysis make it difficult to precisely map its relationship with re-reading, some strands of it stress the importance of context, that '[C]ontextual information gives the researcher a much fuller understanding of the detailed and delicate organization of accounts' (Potter and Wetherell, 2004: 355). Other strands, however, focus in very technical ways on the construction of accounts, while re-reading as articulated here is less concerned with technical deconstructions of how language operates in a text, and more with the patterns across different kinds of texts and the processes whereby certain accounts gain currency over time.

Re-reading texts from 'an already written universe' usually forms part of, or directly follows, a period of dramatic political change. Thus, for example, feminist re-readings of canonical texts have formed a key part of feminist politics since the 1970s. Implicit therefore in re-reading as a methodology is the interrogation of a particular text's context of production, and, crucially, of the context of reading and the ways in which this shapes readerly responses to the text. Re-reading challenges apparent truisms by examining the context in which these were produced, from a time when the tenets of that context have been undermined. Succinctly, re-reading requires that we 'reassess the ways in which we make assumptions' (Madsen, 1994: 1).

In 1994, South Africa’s first free democratic elections were held, providing a watershed ‘moment’ in the demolition of apartheid, and my re-reading of women’s testimonies is importantly shaped by what came after. Since 1994, there have been widespread efforts to make sense of South Africa’s racial past by individuals, the academic community, and more publicly by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (1998). This provides the broad context for my re-reading of Boer women’s testimonies, a re-reading inevitably shaped by the wider impulse to understand and historicize South Africa’s racial past. It is in this context of revisionism and general re-reading of the past that my re-reading of the politicized, proto-nationalist aspects of Boer women’s testimonies has come into focus.

With regard to Boer women’s testimonies in general and the Huyser testimonies in particular, the re-reading sketched out earlier takes account of the context in which these testimonies were produced. The Maieking accounts were solicited by Huyser with a view to publication, in a context where the parameters of what constituted a ‘woman’s testimony’ had already been firmly established by the published testimonies produced as part of the development of proto-nationalism. This is key to making sense of them as texts. My re-reading also acknowledges the post-1994 context and the wider project of
critically interrogating past writings about South Africa, particularly those which played an important role in the development of Afrikaner proto-nationalism. As a methodological tool, re-reading insists that all texts, whether 'primary' or 'secondary', published or unpublished, should be subject to ongoing re-interpretation and re-evaluation in light of changing reading contexts. Thus, while my initial response to the Huyser testimonies was to consider them ‘untainted’ by the political and cultural processes that gave rise to the published testimonies, re-reading the different texts against each other challenged these assumptions, and also highlighted the selective, mediated and rehearsed elements of the Huyser testimonies, as well as the significant ways they diverge from the published canon.

NOTES
1. This article was first presented at the ‘Neglected Narratives and Untold Stories’ conference organized by the Scottish and Northern Narratives Network, University of Edinburgh, October 2006.
2. See Madsen (1994); Bullivant (1997); Hermes (2005); and the Re-Reading the Canon series published by Pennsylvania State University Press.
3. Deaths in the South African War concentration camps were caused by disease, and these camps cannot in any way be equated with Nazi concentration camps, which deliberately sought to exterminate inmates.
4. Such themes recur across Holbrook (1927); Neethling (1938); Postma (1939); Raai (2000 [1938]); and Rebye-Van der Merwe (1940). On the racial order in women’s testimonies, see Stanley (2002).
5. Boer forces famously besieged the town of Mafeking during the first stage of the war, and a Boer ‘women’s lager’ in Mafeking predates the formation of the camp itself. Mafeking was also one of two camps at which the Ladies Commission of Inquiry, appointed by the British government to investigate the camps in 1901, recommended the dismissal of the camp superintendent.
6. Mrs Christina Otto’s testimony of her wartime experiences, including as an inhabitant of Mafeking camp, focuses mainly on the journey to camp. Mrs Otto ascribes the cause of death in the camps to hunger, with the implication being that this was caused by deliberate starvation (Neethling, 1917, 1938). Elizabeth Hermina Meyer’s testimony comments too on poor rations in the camp, although it takes account of change over time, commenting on the improvements that followed the appointment of new camp superintendent Mr Kemble-Cook (Postma, 1925, 1939). Five short personal reminiscences appeared in Kampkinders [Camp Children], an edited collection of recollections by individuals who had been children in the camps (Van Schoor, 1982).
7. The word ‘taal’ literally means ‘language’, although at this time it also referred to the spoken, informal, hybridized form of Dutch that later developed into Afrikaans, and it is in this sense I have used the word. Largely spoken rather than written, taal was not a standardized language, and was eventually replaced by Afrikaans. On this process and its significance, see Hofmeyr (1987).
8. The writers of the Huyser testimonies belonged to a very different social order from the majority of women testimony writers whose accounts were published. The latter were mainly elite women whose relative affluence meant their children did not die in large numbers as did those of the poorer bywoner [tenant farmer] women who made up the majority of the camp populations.
9. DBC 132: Meresbank Death Register; DBC 158: Mafeking Register of Residents, 1900–1902.
10. See footnote 8.
11. See for example Anne Emelie’s sanitizing introduction to the 2000 English edition of Sarah Raal’s *Met Die Boere in die Veld*, which glosses the strongly nationalist and racist tone of the book (Raal, 2000).

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