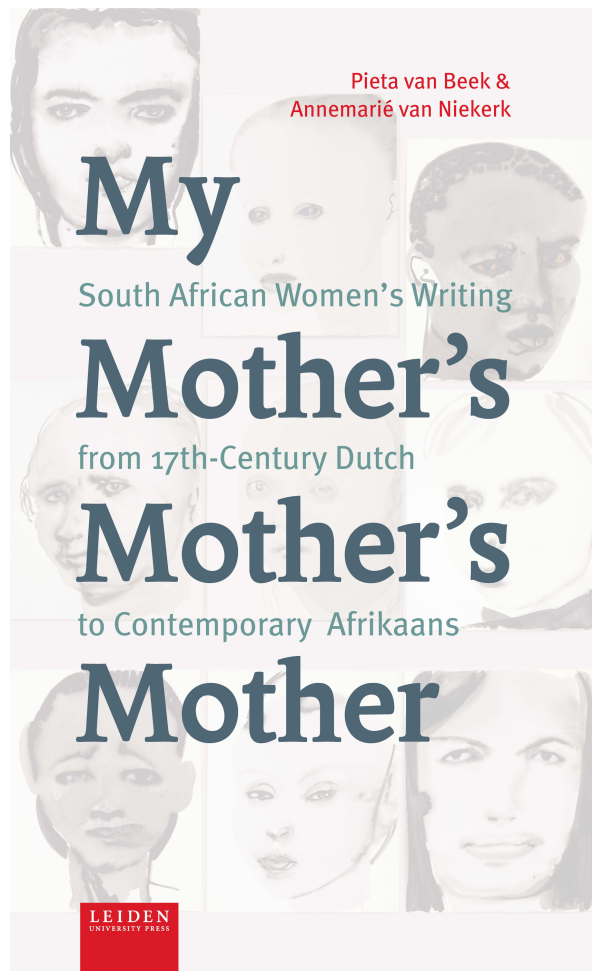


Review

**Pieta van Beek and Annemarié van Niekerk:
*My mother's mother's mother: South African women's
writing from 17th-century Dutch to contemporary
Afrikaans***

Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2019. 958 p.
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Reviewed by Callie Long



To hold the nearly one-thousand-page book *My mother's mother's mother: South African women's writing from 17th-century Dutch to contemporary Afrikaans* by Pieta van Beek and Annemarié van Niekerk, in my hands, is to sense a deep, enduring lifeblood of some seventy women - their language and their cultures - whose stories, across centuries, are represented in this volume. As someone whose mother tongue is Afrikaans, and with maternal ancestral links to the Netherlands, I cannot help but be moved by the exceptional feat that is this scholarly work that brings together a diverse series of historical and more contemporary narratives from across the ages. Comprising a collection of missives and stories that have "never before" (21) to the authors' knowledge, "been documented as extensively in a single volume" (21) - *My mother's mother's mother* reflects a wealth of deeply personal thinking and writing that dates back to 1652. The text wholly exemplifies the thoughtful women whose stories the reader encounters, and who come alive through their unique voices.

The post-structuralist philosopher Michel Foucault (1995) reminds us that discourse is always material in effect, and a reiterative process that normalizes and regulates that which it dominates. Each narrative, therefore, whether grounded in the real or the fictive, accomplishes something exceptional - it raises up voices that have fallen outside of the ambit of the so-called truth of discourse, having been systemically and discursively displaced and silenced for a good part of the nearly four hundred years covered by the text. Filled with stories of grief and resignation, but also joy and defiance, the narratives provide extraordinary insight into South Africa's disquieting and troubled history of colonization through to its modern-day democracy, achieved in 1994 when apartheid ended. The stories trace an arc that encompasses what the Canadian scholar Sara Kastner describes in relation to the late Zimbabwean author, Yvonne Vera, as a tradition of testimonial "silence-breaking [that represents] therapeutic economies of narrative" (2016, 1). As such, this substantial scholarly volume brings to light and engages with the profound legacy of the assorted and diverse narratives that serve as testimony of and a bearing witness to multiple histories of struggle, pain, and silencing and displacement, across political and social divides. *My mother's mother's mother* bears witness to the lives lived and still being lived - the voices preserved first in Dutch, and then, after a transition period as the women adjusted to new linguistic and cultural contexts, spilling forth in a panoply of Afrikaans.

For Van Beek, the text is a culmination of a passion for language, and a curiosity about the lives of the "first Dutch-speaking women" who had made the southern tip of the African continent their home, "and those who followed in their footsteps" (18). Van Niekerk's passion burns as bright as Van Beek's, kindled by her love for "women's voices in literature, and the stories behind those voices" (19). Even though we have not met in person, Van Niekerk and I have been

tangentially connected via social media for many years, and hers is a voice - through her considerate and considered social commentary and journalism - that I am familiar with and enjoy. I am therefore not surprised that *My mother's mother's mother* illuminates the alienating disparities brought to bear on the women whose voices are lifted up in the narrative - disproportionate and asymmetrical inequalities that split them into the ethnic and cultural groupings that were, and continue to be so endemic to this country with its troubled history.

Above all, *My mother's mother's mother* is an ode to the women who have made their lives within the context of the vast social and political discriminatory inequalities that systemically favoured white women (and more so those from the white middle class after 1948, when white South Africans voted into power a nationalist and supremacist government that would rule the country for 46 years), to the exclusion of women of colour. As the authors note, the text is not aimed at lifting up the writing of "generations of women and their writing" as an unbroken "string of blue beads" (a phrase borrowed from the eponymous title of the 1999 book *'n Stringetjie blou krale* by the first woman of colour to publish in Afrikaans, E.M.K. Dido), but illustrates the deep "fractures and discontinuities in the chain of voices" (Van Beek & Van Niekerk, 25-6). Dido's writing about displacement - both geographically and as a means to illuminate the different forms of silencing - is a testament to the complexity of taking a political stand, writing both in (her mother tongue) and against the "language of oppression," Afrikaans (759). The first so-called voice we encounter in the text contains the words of Eva/Krotoa (her real name), as captured and entered in the diary by Jan van Riebeeck, the colonial administrator of the Cape of Good Hope in service of the Dutch East India Company from 1652. What is remarkable about this entry is that Van Riebeeck, according to Van Beek and Van Niekerk, mostly referred to women in the collective, and if they were not white, remained nameless and anonymous. Eva/Krotoa, who is named "after the biblical Eve, the 'mother of all human beings'" and is quoted either directly or indirectly in his diary, is the exception - she is a powerful woman in her own right (124). Eva/Krotoa's words are book-ended by the work of the contemporary poet Ronelda Kamfer, whose poems, the authors note, have been described as creating "a sense of inevitable expression, as if [...] they have existed since the beginning of time" (quoting Charl-Pierre Naudé, 879-80). As with Dido's narrators, Kamfer's speaker in the poem "Kuns en culture" ('Art and culture') takes the language of the oppressor, and not without pain, lays bare how troubling the relationship to language is, and how steeped it is in so much more than signs that we understand as words. The speaker points to the panic about "'n taal" ('a language') in view of not only being ashamed to speak a language (Afrikaans), but more negatively still, as someone whose mother tongue is Afrikaans, to be excluded from "'cultural' events" that would mark and

celebrate it (Van Beek & Van Niekerk, 882-3). For the speaker, the panic and ensuing “*geraas*” (‘loud noise’) is not about language, but instead the fear-induced cleaving, by some, to the past, as would a baby clutching its “bottle” (882). In between these two narrative representations are a trove of others - some stepping “out of the shadows” in the form of the poetry by the women of the Bosman family, to those of such well-known Afrikaans writers and poets as Ingrid Jonker, Antjie Krog, and Rachele Greeff (244). The collection, however, compels me to ask what the ethical obligations are that must follow on from an engagement with the text, given that this kind of witnessing encompasses both the act of bearing witness to the imperceptible, and that of acting as an eyewitness to lives lived as the contemporary philosopher Kelly Oliver (2001) proposes. There is an unbreakable thread that weaves together both testimony - especially “from those othered by dominant cultures” (Oliver 2001, 8) - and witnessing that transcends a demand for recognition. Instead, as Oliver (2004) argues, such testimonies bear “witness to a pathos” and compassion beyond a need “to be seen,” that asks for an ethical engagement with the stories of the women in which lasting and permanent remnants of the past continue to play out (79).

To characterize the writings as stories is to also engage with the inherent liminality of a narrative that is as much about an ongoing journey through the South African historical, political, social, and cultural landscapes that stretch out over some four hundred years, as one that takes us to and across social thresholds. Van Beek and Van Niekerk, as custodians, in this instance, of the some seventy voices contained in *My mother's mother's mother*, offer the reader moments that invite reflection - to pause and then balance at that very intimate and complex intersection of language and culture, to witness how societal hierarchies can be dissolved, and even reversed to make place for the new. *My mother's mother's mother* heralds something special. The scholarly text is never about endings, but always about beginnings, each uniquely revealing a step into the future, through the past.

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About the reviewer

Carmen (Callie) Long holds a Ph.D. in Interdisciplinary Humanities (Brock University, Ontario, Canada), applying her doctoral research and her background in journalism, media development and organizational communications to her work as a professional communicator. One of her more recent publications includes the book chapter “Bearing witness to epistemic injustice: Joan Baxter’s *The mill*” (in Rob Alexander & Willa McDonald, eds., *Literary journalism and social justice* [Springer, 2022]). She co-edited, with Gillian Paterson, the book *Dignity, freedom, and grace: Christian perspectives on HIV, AIDS, and human rights* (World Council of Churches Publications, 2016).

