Southern African Contact Narratives: The Case of T’Kama Adamastor and its Reconstructive Project

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Abstract

In the very principle of its constitution, in its language, and in its finalities, narrative about Africa is always pretext for a comment about something else, some other place, some other people. More precisely, Africa is the mediation that enables the West to accede to its own subconscious and give a public account of its subjectivity (Achille Mbembe 3).

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In the very principle of its constitution, in its language, and in its finalities, narrative about Africa is always pretext for a comment about something else, some other place, some other people. More precisely, Africa is the mediation that enables the West to accede to its own subconscious and give a public account of its subjectivity (Achille Mbembe 3).

Contact narratives that elaborate early European encounters with regions and peoples later colonised are commonly formulated in terms of explanatory myths that elaborate an ‘originary’ site. Because these chosen scenes interrupt what is most often a long line of possible foundational moments, examining which scenes are chosen and how they are cast into iconographic terms can expose cultural anxieties. This essay will examine the deformative particulars that adhere to one contemporary South African painting concerned with contact narratives and colonial tropes. It will then be shown how the persistence of these deformations, specifically as they are applied to the body and its reproductive capacity, signals a reluctance, on the part of the formerly dominating culture, to relinquish command of certain enclaves of influence, in this case commemorating public art in South Africa.

A Gesture of Belonging

Three years ago a large, well researched and privately funded painting was hung on the North wall of the University of Witwatersrand Cullen Library in Johannesburg, South Africa. It was commissioned in order to complete a trilogy of paintings, all of which in one way or another were meant to ‘commemorate specific historical events’ in South Africa (Nethersole 33) by putting forward one version of the several strands of colonial mythography available to illustrate a theme that was relevant to late twentieth-century South Africa but drawn from some early contact narrative. The trilogy of paintings includes ‘Colonists 1826’ by Colin Gill (1934), ‘Vasco da Gama: Departure for the Cape’ by J.H. Amshewitz (1935), and most recently ‘T’Kama Adamastor’ by Cyril Coetzee (1999).
'Colonists 1826' (donated to the Witwatersrand University) takes up the British thread, and locates the originary emblem of colonisation more remote geographically than one might expect. The British settlers shown in Gill's painting are, in point of fact, still aboard ship. Furthermore, with the exception of one small child, they are all facing each other, rather than either of the two background land masses, one of which is presumably their destination, the headlands of the Algoa Bay.\(^1\) (See figure 4, p. 252.) Two dozen settlers and seamen populate this cropped vision of a shipboard scene, the rectilinear canvas and display space accommodating the long, horizontal axis of a sailing ship. However, in a design that was no doubt influenced in part by the perspectival problems of showing the ship, the sea, the colonists, and the land — the land has been given short shrift. The several distant land masses that are visible are relegated to the background of the composition and are favoured with the least painterly detail, but the viewer, standing outside of the frame, so to speak, conjoins the essential constituent elements, and thus apprehends the weakly inflected land and sea and the strongly inflected ship and colonists as one more or less integrated syntax — one contiguous symbolic gesture. Rather conspicuously absent from Gill's canvas, however, are several of what may be supposed to be vital components in a full treatment of any African contact narrative: the Indigenous man and woman, the botanical specimen or grand vista, and the animals of southern Africa.

Despite these rather interesting omissions, we are concerned here with two relatively minor features of Gill's painting. Firstly, the land itself is not represented with a set of unambiguous identifying markers. Secondly, the colonists are not integrated with their destination: they look only at each other, in a self regarding tableau, and while it seems likely that they are meant to be seen as approaching their destination, in fact they are frozen in transit (poised in mid sea) and so suspended between an offstage departure and an unscripted arrival.

Formulated in terms of a particularly 'ungrounded' trope,\(^2\) this originary mythic scene thus composes itself around a shipload of immigrants who are not only occupying a discontinuity (between arrival and departure), but are also caught between impossible alternatives, for both land masses in the background are forbidding. One issues glowering storm clouds; the other is clothed in an otherworldly blue sheen, but is presumably their destination, as a divine dove hovers above it. The site of the commemorated moment, one which we might expect to refer to a notion of nascent or as yet unstable national identity, is, in fact, so geographically and pictorially remote from the set of activities or appetites that we have come to associate with colonisation that we are startled to realise that the figures on the ship are related to the land mass that they intend to colonise (but to which they have literally turned their backs) only through the imagination. There has been, it is safe to say, no contact. What is being depicted, then, is not so much a design with illustrative intent — figures arrayed on the deck of a ship, engaged in various shipboard activities. What Gill is attempting is that which is
impossible to paint: the colonists thinking about what will come to be ‘South Africa’. What is being commemorated, in fact, is an act of the mind.

‘Vasco da Gama — Departure for the Cape’ by John Henry Amshewitz was hung in 1936, (two years later than Gill’s painting) but rolls back the originary scene almost four hundred years, and the viewer is met with a larger than life Vasco da Gama, the Portuguese King Manuel I, crew members, passengers and patrons — again on board ship, and again regarding one another. (See figure 5, p. 252.) These figures vibrate with splendid religious fervour and virile strength, suggesting a heroically disposed and divinely sanctioned enterprise. The date is 1497 and they are about to depart Lisbon.

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To be clear: up until 1999, in one of the largest public rooms of one of the largest university libraries in southern Africa, two prominently displayed and enormous public paintings are commemorating not the birth of a nation or even a notation of some local event of a threshold nature, but a pair of genesis moments located so far back up the birth canal, so to speak, as to render them (pictorially at least) unrecognisable as exclusively or particularly southern African. These onboard scenes could be narrating a voyage to India, South America, North America, the Philippines, the Caribbean, so stubbornly indeterminate are they with regard to both geographic and historical points of reference. If the Amshewitz painting reproduces an event that is geographically remote from South Africa, it also locates an historical moment that is only accidentally related to South Africa. Vasco da Gama, in fact, sailed many thousands of sea miles, and if there is any land mass to which he was unambiguously directed, it was India, not the Cape of Good Hope or Algoa Bay, which were, after all, stopovers for water or other provisions on that 1497-99 trip round the southern tip of Africa, to India, and back to Portugal (Axelson 17). While Luis de Camões epic poem, *The Lusiads*, linked Vasco da Gama’s sea voyage round Africa with the triumphant foundational myths of Portugal (Duffy 15), it is not entirely clear how or why this Portuguese explorer would figure so prominently in twentieth-century South African ‘genesis’ mythography, especially when Bartholomew Dias planted his *padrao* near the Boesman River mouth almost ten years earlier (Axelson 6).

Even so, Reingard Nethersole summarises the ‘pictorial lesson’ functioning in both paintings as a lesson ‘in the anxiety and uncertainty white pioneers had to undergo, and the defiant bravery they had to exhibit, in order to overcome adversity and make the country inhabitable’ (37) [emphasis added]. Although the voyagers can be read as experiencing ‘anxiety and uncertainty’, three of Nethersole’s other attributions seem unwarranted. First of all, the adversity that must be overcome remains undramatised and secondly the exhibition of defiant bravery she accords these white pioneers is unstaged — there are no opponents in either composition to stimulate bravery nor a visible force with which to complete a diagram of
adversity. Finally, and more seriously, the ‘country’ that Nethersole claims is in need of being made ‘habitable’ is either absent from the pictorial field or visually unarticulated — and we do know by now that ‘the country’ was not only ‘habitable’ but inhabited in 1826 and had been so for a good many centuries.

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If the first two paintings that form the trilogy avoid significant engagement with a body of presumably important images having to do with the actual African land mass, the actual plants and animals that had purchase there, the Indigenous Africans inhabiting the continent, and the earliest contact narratives that described these features, the third painting has come into being with most of what we might call the significant elements in place. The plant life and topography, the animals, and the Indigene are all, finally, present.

Cyril Coetzee’s painting ‘T’Kama Adamastor’ (1999), the third painting of the trilogy, seeks to remedy the obvious geographic and cultural lacunae of the previous paintings, and in doing so presents a densely populated and oversymbolised (Herwitz 74) human dram, one framed by scenes of European arrival an departure. The action of the painting seems to be grounded on a peninsula of southern Africa, as the ocean enfolds both sides of a triangle of land. There are ships with bird-like attributes approaching on the left, and other bird-like ships heading away from the land on the far right. (See figure 1, p. 249.)

‘T’Kama Adamastor’ is hung where John Fassler, an architectural designer who assisted in redesigning the interior space in the 1930s (and who left a watercolour sketch of the space), had envisioned a painting that would celebrate the triumph of mining in South Africa and complete the trilogy for which the space had been reserved. Coetzee chose instead to retreat to more remote, and conceivably safer, terrain: a moment of imagined first cultural contact. The project was put at a further distance by Coetzee’s reliance on the ironising narrative of a fictional text rather than any of the available historical texts elaborating first or early contact between ‘Indigenous southern Africans’ and ‘Europeans’. Coetzee, in fact, uses a number of narrative elements from André Brink’s 1983 novella Cape of Storms: The First Life of Adamastor in order to visualise his sixteenth-century subject from a late twentieth-century vantage point.

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The painting ‘T’Kama Adamastor’ was itself memorialised at birth: soon after the unveiling an accompanying exegesis, T’Kama Adamastor: Inventions of Africa in a South African Painting, was published. Edited by Ivan Vladislavíc, the explanatory text is a lavish, nearly two-hundred page, large format book, that combines quality colour reproductions commonly associated with the coffee table book and essays of a decidedly scholarly slant — footnotes, literary references, historical and art historical minutae — most of which provide an elaborate
rationalisation and explanation for the many narratively or historically grounded figures (human beings, animal beings, hybridised creatures, alchemical symbols, and a ship's figurehead) with which Coetzee has peopled his 'invented' peninsular world.

*T'Kama Adamastor: Inventions of Africa in a South African Painting* provides a fascinating and detailed mapping of how the images of the painting 'T'Kama Adamastor' derive their visual authority, such as they have, from a number of pertinent touchstones of four centuries of European art, from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries. In the service of this explanatory project, the editors of this book have collected a magnificent group of high-quality reproductions of old maps, Medieval and Renaissance paintings, alchemical and travelogue engravings, painting-in-progress photographs, stained glass windows, and zoological and botanical plates. Most of the reproductions (over 150) and all fourteen of the essays examine the complex Eurocentric visual vocabulary and set of conceptual grids with which European perspectives on Africa were elaborated: the allure of the kingdom of Prester John, the early division of Africa into eastern and western Ethiopia, Ptolemy’s theories, alchemy, Dürer, Brueghel, Bosch, Luis de Camões’ epic poem *The Lusiads*, to abbreviate a very long list. Finally, Coetzee’s own essay ‘Introducing the Painting’ spells out how his images are intimately connected, perhaps most intimately of all, to Brink’s novella *Cape of Storms: The First Life of Adamastor*.

The essays gathered in this memorialising text troll back and forth through the European art historical, allegorical, mapping, and travelogue roots from which many, or perhaps all, of Coetzee’s images were developed. In explaining the Eurocentric visual and conceptual models from which the painting arises, three of the commentators nonetheless produce a puzzling assertion: the artist, we are told, is painting from the ‘perspective of the original Khoi inhabitants’ (Nethersole 35), the indigenous perspective’ (Vladislavic Introduction), and ‘through the eyes of an indigenous African people’ (Crump Forward ). In this ‘sympathetic’ positioning, Coetzee is following the orientation of Brink’s novel, *Cape of Storms: The First Life of Adamastor*, in which the narrator muses, in an editorial aside, about the Adamastor myth: ‘[S]uppose there were an Adamastor … how would he look back, from the perspective of the late twentieth century, on that original experience?’ [Brink’s emphasis] (13). It is in this rhetorical question that Brink notifies the reader of his intention to inhabit the subject position of a hybrid figure assembled out of three traditions: the Indigenous (a Khoikhoi chief), the mythological (a European ‘avatar’ with the profile and name of Adamastor), and the literary/postmodern (the narrator/character who refuses historical grounding, and alludes to Rabelais, Camões, T.S. Eliot in self-conscious authorial asides). Adamastor, the Greek god who is figured as promontory, weather, and dark guard of the Cape, is a sixteenth-century elaboration that Camões developed in the *Lusiads* and has been interpreted variously as rapist, transgressor, seer and prophet,
and bumbling romancer. The figure of Adamastor is rewritten in dozens of South African poems, novels, and other fictional works.

Chief T’Kama, then, is the first-person narrator of Brink’s central drama, and though he is smitten by, and then abducts, a sixteenth-century Portuguese woman, he fails to consummate the desired sexual relationship because of a huge and unruly penis, a body part which he beastialises by referring to it as ‘Big Bird’. While this summary strips the novel of nuance, it helps to focus on some very specific tropes as we begin to turn to the main subject of this essay — a privately commissioned, commemorating art work that dominates a public space in a post-apartheid era university.

Quite mistakenly, the reader is led to believe that while the form of the various images in Coetzee’s painting derive from Eurocentric models, the orientation of the work was ‘from the perspective’ of the indigenous African. Of the commentators, only Daniel Herwitz offers a critique of the way that European symbols are employed in the painting, and he alone challenges the so-called ‘African perspective’ from which, the reader is told, the painting arises (Herwitz 81–82). I will examine just one set of visual elements emanating from the so-called ‘perspective of the indigene’. Coetzee gives the Portuguese seamen bird heads, their ships are bird-like, and their small boats are eggs which emit the explorers when they land. To give an idea of how the bird-referenced images of the painting were derived from a confusing mixture of generative forces, consider that this trope was assembled from a traveller’s account of the Tuareg’s ‘magical’ explanation of European invaders in Northern Africa, a painting by the twentieth-century fantastic realist Ernest Fuchs, a painting by Cesare da Sesto’s (after da Vinci’s sixteenth-century painting of the same name) called ‘Leda and the Swan’, Benin ivories, the ‘bird-like attributes’ of European costumes as exemplified by M. de Faria y Sousa’s engraving of da Gama, and Brink’s (fictional) descriptions of the arriving Portuguese ships (Coetzee 9–10).

If this is the kind of iconic hybridity that qualifies, in the eyes of a number of serious commentators, as an attempt to visualise the self (that is, the European) through the eyes of the other (that is, the southern African Indigene), then it is time to signal the patrons, the creators and the elaborators of this project that the project has failed in one of its presumed intents.

Other than the bird/man trope that draws from an early textual account of Northern African encounter, and the foreground figure giving the hand sign of Blake’s Adam (see figures 2 and 3) — which also means ‘presence of giraffes’ in the San hunter’s sign language (Coetzee 14) — the images, the narratives contained, and the intra-visual dynamics appear to depend exclusively on more or less unreconstructed Eurocentric contact myths, and the ‘perspective’ of the sixteenth-century Indigene, if such a thing could be excavated from four centuries of systematic erasures, is so deeply sub-textualised, so unhelpfully parodied, or,
by some critical lights, so entirely absent, that to assert such a thing becomes, itself, a kind of parody.

Thus, while both Brink’s novella and Coetzee’s painting might be termed postmodern — the novella straddles four centuries and employs a number of structural markers associated with the ‘postmodern’, most notably an unstable authorial voice(s) and a densely allusional text, and the painting is a tour de force of visual hybridity — neither usefully reconstructs the foundational myths of South Africa, especially when it comes to black male sexuality or white female vulnerability. Instead they fall back on an exhausted explanatory mode that, because it is phrased ironically, manages to have it both ways. Attempting to inhabit the subject position of the Indigene does not rescue the project from the pitfalls of irony. Although we have many examples of writers and artists productively, indeed successfully, utilising the subject position of the ‘other’, I suggest that this practice can be harmful when that which is represented unwittingly extends habits of ‘deformation’. The body itself is particularly subject to the marks of representative deformation. Thus, while the usurpation of a subject position can be seen to enjoy a promiscuous realm — at least in the theoretically unbounded register of appropriation — parody itself is not without difficulties. A strategy familiar to both textual treatments and visual productions, parody is an especially risky mode when ‘consumers’ of the art or text do not share or are not sharing the same ground assumptions, historical reference points, or, in the case of visual arts, practices of visual decoding. Parody is born of irony and the success of the ironising project is dependent upon a rather comprehensive understanding of the field from which the irony arises — further, for irony to succeed there must be a category of readers who do not ‘get it’. Irony, successful irony, thus rests on the lurking possibility that the viewer or reader will mistake the counterfeit position for the real position. Variations of insider trading, irony and parody are the only rhetorical practices in which one can have it both ways: the writer or artist is licensed to make the (usually offensive) representation while, at the same time, refusing or critiquing the representation.4

Notwithstanding the general difficulties outlined above, I wish to move on to focus on two particular aspects of the painting which might be called minor, but which raise the question of the place of the generative body and generative organs in the iconography of the formulation of ‘nation’. Both the Brink novella and the Coetzee painting have as one of their central comic tropes an Indigenous man’s unruly, beastialised, and oversized penis, which may be read as an attempt to parody white male anxiety over black male sexual capacity.5 While the size of Brink’s black phallus (that grows daily until T’Kama must wrap it twice round his waist) deters intercourse with a captured sixteenth-century Portuguese noblewoman, Coetzee’s front and centre visual pun positions an ostrich neck and head so as to comically extend the loin-clothed genitals of the Khoikhoi chief, as he lounges next to a wide-spreading African thorn tree and a nearly naked redhead
— a new world Adam and Eve in an expressly Biblical (though reordered by suggestive miscegenation) tableau. However, in Brink’s parody of colonial mythographies of black male sexuality and Coetzee’s reconstruction of a number of colonial tropes, the reader encounters a mild discomfort, typically felt when one is in the presence of a signifier that feels deformed, or deforming, and an ironising project that has not entirely escaped its base representation.

It is to Coetzee’s painting that I turn to because it is the painting of our time; it is the painting for which we are, broadly speaking, responsible, and precisely because it has set for itself the impossible task of challenging originary myths, parading colonial tropes, and in so doing presenting a collapsed, hybridised, and allegorised colonial moment, we are obliged to assess whether its intended parodies have successfully escaped their root tropes. Mythically altered colonists (bird-headed); exoticised and decontextualised animals; a nearly naked white woman: all are made to assume their symbolic postures in the ironic register — all being what they are meant to critique. Two Indigenous women appear in a mini-scene in a river or lake, the water up to their waists and their lower bodies invisible to the viewer. The sole white woman, consistent with the frictions typical of ‘black peril’ narratives, is positioned alluringly while remaining forbidden. She functions as a commodity in a cross cultural exchange between men: the desiring Khoikhoi chief and his men carrying her off in the left background of the painting, the Portuguese seamen recapturing her and returning her to the ship in the right background. A few of the mini-scenes, such as the erection of the Dias \textit{padrao} in the left background, are illustrating an event well documented by the historical record.\(^6\) However, even this compositional element furthers the conceit of the oversized phallus, the Europeans ‘raising’ the \textit{Padrao} in the background, re-enacting the white male appropriation of the ‘right’ to the phallic symbol — erecting it, as it were, and planting it in the soil of Africa.

Aside from this problem of how historical narrative is intertwined with several strands of mythic, art historical and fictional narrative, and the difficulty of decoding the strands and isolating the degree of ironising intent applicable to each strand, it is clear that that Coetzee has attempted to expand the handful of iconic figures available to visual artists for the narration of scenes of foundational myth. His success is mixed. On the one hand, by recombining visual elements from other eras, he has indeed come up with ‘new’ images with which to represent, or remember, a colonial encounter. His new images are hybrids built of disparate parts: so we can say that he remembers by dismembering.\(^7\) His explorers are bird-headed, for instance, having lost their own heads, and the crocodile smiling in the centrefold (derived from Brink’s narrative), has dismembered the chief. In the novella the crocodile bites off the offending and grotesquely enlarging penis of the afflicted Khoikhoi chief, T’Kama.

These dismembered figures, then, do inaugurate an invigorated visual vocabulary. On the other hand, Coetzee’s new configurations must certainly
remain, on most levels to most of their audience, incomprehensible. The European art historical and travelogue allusions are rarefied; the close narrative linkage with a not well known novella becomes a puzzle to the viewer who has no access to the novel or the commentary text; and finally, the ironical stance that mimics racist and sexist colonial tropes is not consistently applied, thus it is difficult to apply the right kind of refusal that irony calls upon us to make, to each of the elements. Turtles copulating in the foreground? (See figure 3, p. 251.) Well, if I have the book (Brink's or Vladislavíc's), I can pore over the text looking for an explanation. If I do not, I am left with turtles copulating in the foreground.

Since iconographic communication, or the success of iconographic communication at least, rests on the deployment of a fairly stylised set of visual symbols that are read more or less reliably by viewers, it is reasonable to ask just how far this ostensible movement away from European dominated historiography has taken the Witwatersrand students (who are the primary audience of the painting), with what methods this movement has been accomplished, and to what effect. These are, however, not questions I will be answering. Suffice to say that in this third, recently ‘unveiled’ canvas, explorers and colonists (sole subjects of the previous two works of art) have finally touched land; the Indigene has finally arrived in the architecturally-reserved space of commissioned art at Witwatersrand University, and in so doing so, has crossed a late twentieth-century frontier. If I have a number of reservations about the composition itself, and of the parodies that produce some not entirely successful visual puns (most pertinent to the following discussion, the penis of the foreground Khoikhoi, elongated by an ostrich neck), I can say that the Indigene and the white explorer/colonist have been, in 1999, finally brought into the same frame.

THE DARKROOM

The mythography of pre-colonial southern Africa enacted in Coetzee’s painting occupies space, quite obviously, in a real world. The University of Witwatersrand is an historically white institution whose student body was ninety-eight percent white from the 1930s, when the first paintings were hung, to the late 1990s, when the student body demographics underwent radical change, and is now made up of somewhere around thirty percent non-white students, though resistance to racial classifications in some circles in contemporary South Africa makes these kind of statistics questionable. If we want to see this painting, this ‘history on white linen’ as Herwitz calls it, as an attempt to maintain dominance in a kind of European-referenced national memorialising project, it is instructive to look at one further example of the ‘mechanisms’ and ‘effects’ of iconised coding in a university setting in contemporary South Africa, this one from an historically black institution (HBI),8 the University of Transkei (Unitra).

At Transkei where I worked as a volunteer visiting academic in 1999 there was a photographer on the payroll. He was hard-working, helpful, and provided a
barely visible ‘visual arts’ presence in an environment more or less bereft of projects or ongoing engagement with what might be termed ‘the arts’. There were no art classes, no art exhibits, no graphic arts programs, no acting or theatre programs, no creative writing projects, no commissioned art works, but this photographer did have a darkroom on campus.

The images he was called upon to produce were mostly rote PR fare: new buildings, committees, and honourees, but his real talent, and his real interest, was in medical and forensic photography: autopsies and operations. According to him, he made these photographs for ‘teaching purposes’. However, the hundred or so images I saw, which were snapshot-sized, were a grizzly parade with uncertain pedagogical application: the genitals of a woman who had been raped and murdered and whose mutilations rendered her anatomy unrecognisable, a big glistening liver marked with striations from the impact of an automobile crash, poisoned children whose bodies had turned bluish and bloated, a skull with a large chunk of glass embedded in it, punctured organs from failed operations, tubercular lungs, gunshot wounds.

Black bodies, or parts of black bodies, were the subject, though one could not be certain in the case of the organs. These images were, however, more or less anonymous — the patient’s, or corpse’s, ‘identity’ was obscured by the photographer moving in close, so that the head and face was out of the frame, and the viewer’s attention was directed to the specific injury or organ that was the ‘subject’ of the photograph.

On the wall of the room that enclosed his dark room, his office actually, was a large photographic print, pinned to the bulletin board. It showed the torso of a young man, whose penis was being rebuilt after a botched circumcision: the penis so infected that it required amputation. The photograph was illustrating a surgical reconstruction. An apron of sewn up incisions made three sides of a square on the landscape of the young man’s abdomen — long incisions that presumably permitted surgeons to enter the abdominal cavity, locate the bladder, and attach the yellow tube seen emerging from his pubic area. There was not yet any flesh wrapped around the tube, but there would be, the photographer assured me. Before I could say anything, he smiled and told me that ‘No, it didn’t work; it was just something to hold on to’, as if he had heard the question about sexual function many times.

This display could hardly be termed an exhibit, but nor could it really be called educational, as it was in a photography lab/office not a medical school lecture hall. Located in a space that could neither be termed private nor public, the photograph was not commemorating the birth of a nation, but it was a commemoration nevertheless: it was memorialising a residual culture of appropriation and it functioned as a potent icon of visual privilege, in which the black phallus — the phallus irremediably damaged by ‘primitive’ Indigenous custom and reconstructed by a ‘superior’ Western medical intervention — marks
the site of a complex bitterness, a bitterness that might be characterised as a rearguard defiance on the part of those who are slowly yielding power and privilege.

This particular photograph elicited strong reactions from those who saw it, reactions that ranged from the admiration of the transgressive risk of displaying the image as ‘art’, to deep distaste, borne out of horror felt at castration made visible. According to Mandla Mlotshwa, a local artist, the image magnifies the ‘helplessness that black men feel in the hands of white versions of reconstructive narratives’,12 or, said differently, magnifies the helplessness that non-white men feel in the shadow of European contact, conquest, apartheid and post-apartheid narratives of power, perhaps what Mbembe is indicating when he refers to the ‘public account of ... subjectivity’ (3) that the West feels compelled to make, and remake.

The existence of that photograph, on that wall, in that time, might also be compared to the way that ‘trophy’ photographs, by which hunters memorialise their often mutilated prey, preside over intimate family spaces: the dining room, the lounge, the vacation home. Thus, if patriarchy asserts dominance with fetish objects meant to imply power and lethal force, it does so by first practicing the iconographic definitions of mastery in private settings. The photograph under discussion, in a borderline space between public and private, and between art and science, extends the power-through-image theatrics that move towards a publicly articulated dominance (a dominance whose ultimate stage is large monumentalising art commissions).

If this anaesthetised and then amputated phallus (this unauthorised and impotent phallus, that has been robbed of its generative function but reconditioned in a diminished scale — to be an organ of excretion, an utilitarian appendage whose sole function is ‘to empty out’ — is made to serve as an iconographic gesture, what is the name of the gesture? And is it accurate to say that this gesture shares cultural space with the painting ‘T’Kama Adamastor’?

These are the deformations that Coetzee’s painting — and Brink’s novel from which it receives its central metaphors — contend with as they ‘playfully’ deconstruct two particularly troublesome Europeanised tropes which originate in early contact or colonial narratives: the impotent or paradoxically mega-potent, unruly and beastialised black phallus, and the stripped, naked, and vulnerable white woman, shipwrecked on the shores of Africa.

THE CONSOLATION OF TOPOGRAPHY

The Portuguese noblewoman Leonor de Sousa, shipwrecked in 1552 on the coast of Natal (St. John), was carried by slaves in a litter for the first several weeks, as the disorganised band of over 400 survivors struggled northeast toward Lourenco Marquez. Thus, even after a perilous ‘landing’ Leonor was still suspended above the surface of the land, still afloat, as it were. Lying in a hammock
of rugs or Oriental cloths, she swung between the shoulders of four slaves, rocking to and fro. It was as if she were still at sea. The brief sketch of her story that follows shows how her ‘generative capacity’ was erased by the anonymously authored contact narrative, and became both an individual sacrifice and a penetrative act of culture. This story, and the other harrowing and dramatic sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Portuguese shipwreck accounts available, may well be the ‘historical’ sources from which Brink built his novella and Coetzee then indirectly built his painting.

According to the account translated in G.M. Theal’s *Records of Southeastern Africa*, a number of tragic events brought Manuel de Sousa, the Captain of the *St John*, and his more hardy wife to the point of extremity. The final indignity was a series of casual betrayals that resulted in their indigenous hosts stripping Leonor, her husband, and the rest of the shipwrecked survivors. Here is the phrasing of the anonymous narrator:

[S]eeing herself stripped, [she] cast herself upon the ground and covered herself with her hair, which was very long, while she made a pit in the sand in which she buried herself to the waist, and never rose from that spot.... The men who were still in her company, when they saw Manuel de Sousa and his wife thus stripped, withdrew a little, ashamed. Then she said ‘You see to what we are reduced and that we can go no farther, but must perish here. If you should reach India or Portugal at any time, say how you left Manuel de Sousa and me with my children’. (Theal 1898, 1.146)

This dramatic sacrifice can be read semiotically, as a transmutation in which the body refuses (or is made to refuse by the textual authority of an anonymous Portuguese man) a fundamental role and emerges instead as a sign of ultra-chastity. This dramatic gesture, this self-burial, overrides the maternal instinct (her children are abandoned by her immobilising gesture), but it also renders invisible Leonor’s generative capacity (her genitals are buried, literally erased from the scene). We are invited to read the gesture as both extreme modesty or strategic protection — from rape, from the sun, from anyone seeing her lower body, even as she is textually engaged in ‘seeing herself’ and even calls upon the narrator to carry the scene of her final desperate act back to Portugal.

Just as the expiring noblewoman is transformed into the figure of a landlocked mermaid, her body enfolded in the sand, and her children dropped from the narrative, she becomes a death object that is re-invigorated in its moment of death as an active penetration. If this half body suggests a flag of conquest, planted in the sand, or a shaft, sunk for a mine, from which the riches of Africa might be extracted, or even a burial as avatar, then it can be read as an image of virility with which the topography is mastered, even by a white woman, and even in death.

If we look back to Coetzee’s painting, we see that two Indigenous women who are in water up to the waist echo a similar gesture, with a similar result: an
erasure of their procreative narrative, their reproductive and sexual capacity. This is one of the sacrifices that the European encounter demands, just as the text that records the encounter of the survivors of the *St. John* demands the erasure of Leonor’s genitals and the utter embeddedness of her sexual and generative nature in the master narrative of European exploration and conquest.

If the wreck of the *St. John* and the demise of Leonor is one of the most famous disaster narratives of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe (Duffy 25) then this was not merely a matter of the ‘event’ itself — a staging of the heroic Portuguese battling the dark continent. That a white woman had been in the shipwreck party and that she had been stripped — and possibly abandoned by the more fit seamen in a splitting up of the bands of wanderers — was quite likely one of the most important narrative elements, fuelling the wide distribution and popularity of this tale in Europe.15

In fact, Ian Glenn proposes that a later shipwreck, the *Grosvenor* (1782) on the Pondoland coast, was the beginning of South African literature, because it provided the occasion for a number of search parties into the hinterland, which in turn gave rise to a number of textual elaborations that sifted the evidence for one overriding concern: whether or not there were still un-rescued white women in the interior, in danger of becoming sexual prey to the Indigene (Glenn 1–3). If, as Glenn proposes, a national literature of South Africa issues from shipwreck narratives, a subset of the general contact narrative, and if national identity issues from a sense of a nation’s literature, as Kwame Appiah suggests (53–59), then we would do well to scrutinise with some care the mechanisms by which the textual and visual literature of contact are remade. In cases where the generative body is distorted or erased in order to give birth to a national identity, ironic treatments that reproduce the old tropes in a new surface treatment continue to suggest, among other deformations, that the individual body is rendered sterile, castrated or halved, in order to elevate the mythic assemblage that has come to known as ‘nation’.

Coetzee was not mistaken in thinking that he needed a narrative upon which to drape his impressive art historical learnedness and his significant technical skills. There are texts more deeply inflected with the multiple cultures of colonial southern Africa, and even studies of early material culture, which he might have drawn on for the narrative armature of his painting. Because Brink’s novella unsuccessfiully overtures some of the crudest of early colonial tropes defining the sexuality of the Indigene and the white woman as symbolic unit of exchange, it is a poor source choice for rethinking the colonial encounter in visual terms. When the final panel of a visually dominating national commemorating project is completed, the door shuts rather loudly on an important opportunity to revision a new sense of national identity or colonial past. Had the textual and material culture sources been researched with the same intensity as the European visual sources, had the perspective of the Indigene on early colonial contact been more genuinely
sought, had the dialogue of the artist with his source materials and the dialogue of his painting with its two predecessors advanced beyond the West acceding to its compulsion for public enactments of self-regard, had the bodily representations not followed so dutifully the contours of the colonial tropes that Coetzee meant to challenge and parody, then perhaps we would be discussing a truly post apartheid and postcolonial art work.

NOTES

1 See William Amphlett, *Notes on the Cape of Good Hope*: ‘Thirteen or fifteen boatloads... from April 1820 to June 1820′ landed in Algoa Bay (122–23).

2 For a particularly poetic treatment of the ‘groundless’ imperial exercises of mapping and the accompanying metaphors of land contestation, see Paul Carter’s *The Road to Botany Bay and Lie of the Land*.

3 Likewise, of course, American originary myths are built on elaborations of several key nautical miscalculations.

4 The ‘Miscast’ exhibition in Cape Town in 1997 is a good example of this. Pippa Skotnes curated an exhibit that included resin casts of ‘bushman’ bodies, colonial racial measuring devices, and so on. The exhibit was meant to be ironic and subversive, but a number of Khoisan objected on the grounds that it was merely re-enacting colonial violence.

5 See Lucy Graham’s essay presented at the Southern African Texts and Contexts Seminar (April, 2002). Graham’s paper contains excerpts from Brink’s critique of that novel in which Brink complains that ‘Nkosi’s problem is that he falls into the traps ... the image of the black male whose awareness of the body obtrudes on every page (including even the assertion of one of the crudest myths of sexist racism, the size of the black penis)...’ (qtd in Graham 6).

6 The existence and location of several southern African *padraos* are covered in Axelson, Theal, and Duffy. The limestone for stone crosses was brought on long sea journeys by the Portuguese and others. Called *Padraos*, they were erected on promontories along the coast of Africa, so that they could be seen from the sea and provide a European landmark for the voyagers that followed. Their location was noted on the *roteiros* or navigational aids of the time.

7 This phrase is from Daniel Herwitz.

8 HBI is the acronym for Historically Black Institution, sometimes now referred to as Historically Disadvantaged Institution.

9 I had asked him if he had thought about exhibiting them, but it turns out that there was a potential problem: he could take unauthorised photographs ‘for educational purpose’, but he could not use the unsuspecting dead, the fatally injured and the unaware anesthetised as photographic subjects in that documentary or art exhibit way.

10 In addition to the educational purposes, what might be termed the ‘nominal’ purpose of such images, there is in existence a body of work done in the United States that deals with ‘morgue portraits’, murders, corpses, and so on. See the work of Weegee (whose crime scene photographs attained recognition as ‘art’ in the 1960s) and Andreas Serrano’s morgue photos. However, also in the United States, a man was sentenced to eight years in prison in March of 2002 for producing ‘morgue shots’. However,
according to the *Cincinnati Mirror*, ‘the defence did not let the prosecution’s
characterisation of the photos as ‘garbage’ go unchallenged. Cal Kowal, a professor
of fine art photography, testified human corpses have been the subject of photos since
the beginning of photography in 1839. Photos of the dead are an area of interest in
contemporary art, according to Kowal, who cited photographers Andreas Serrano and
Joel-Peter Witkin. It is possible that these South African images were made and
‘conceptualised’ in that way: as some variant of ‘art’ photography — a perspective
that also raises troubling questions about the collaboration, or lack of, by the subjects.
It is also quite possible that the photograph was displayed as a critique of adult
circumcision, which, in the rural areas, sometimes results in infections and even death.

11 I know this from additional image information from a conversation with the

12 I am indebted to conversations with the artist Mandal Mlothswa about the notion of
masculinity, the black man’s helplessness in the hands of representational privilege,
and his suggestion that the young man’s torso grotesquely assumed the visual notation
of a ‘trophy’.

13 This and all subsequent references to shipwrecks are to the versions published in
G.M. Theal’s *Records of South Eastern Africa*, both in the original Portuguese and in

14 This is perhaps the least corroborated and the most famous incident of all the many
striking images of shipwreck survivors. It makes an appearance in Canto V of Camões
*Lusiads* (published 1582 in Portugal).

15 In Portugal in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries popular literature was distributed
mostly through the printing of pamphlets. These were enormously popular and were
widely circulated and translated. Many of these had to do with travellers’ experiences.
One variant of these pamphlets, called *literatura de cordel*, was printed with popular
literature (ballads, religious stories, historical accounts, and so on), was hung by a
cord from shops for all to read. Amongst the most widely read and distributed pamphlets
were those concerned with exploration and shipwreck accounts, and of these, the
account of the survivors of the shipwreck of the *St. John* was one of the most well
known. See James Duffy (36–39).

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Figure 2. Detail A of Cyril Coetzee, *T'kama-Adamastor*
Figure 3. Detail B of Cyril Coetzee, *T'kama-Adamastor*
Figure 4. Detail of Colin Gill, Colonists, 1826
Figure 5. Detail of J.H. Amschewitz, Vasco da Gama — Departure for the Cape
Figure 1. *IpiZombi*. Advertisement in Grahamstown National Arts Festival of the Arts Programme, 1999. (Photographer: Obie Oberholtzer.)
Figure 2. Image from *The Prophet*. (Design Brett Bailey; photographer Elsabe Van Tonder.)
Third World Bunfight presents

THE PROPHET

Time: 19:00
Dates: Sat July 3
Sun July 4
Tues July 6
Wed July 7
Thur July 8
Fri July 9
Sat July 10
No Interval
Duration: 1 hour 40 minutes

Company Manager
Barbara Mathers
Assistant Director
Saskia N. Hegt
Musical Coordinator
Phillip Nangle
Photography
Elsabe van Tonder and Brett Bailey

Third World Bunfight
ABEY XAKWE
Andile Bonde • Boniwe Tyota •
Silulami Lwana • Makhosandile
Yafele • Vuyani Hoboshe •
Nomanenkazi Tyala • Noxy
Donyeli • Xola Mda • Rhea
Cakwebe • Thulani Mene •
Luyanda Butana • Camagweni
Pali • Nomboniso Ebony •
Sonwabo Makhubalo •
Susise Dyan •
Tongesayi Gumbo

Figure 3. The Prophet. Advertisement in Grahamstown National Festival of the Arts Proramme, 1999. (Designer: Brett Bailey; Photographer: Elsabe Van Tonder.)