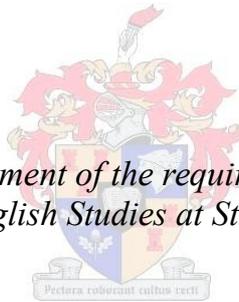


Picturing South Africa: An Exploration of Ekphrasis in Post-Apartheid Fiction

by
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Abstract

South Africa's period of transition has given rise to new forms of cultural and artistic production, which both speak to and reflect the nation's changing social, political and ethical climate. This dissertation explores a narrative form which remains relatively uncharted in current critical conversations about post-apartheid fiction, namely *ekphrasis*, or the textual re-presentation of visual art. Although ekphrastic narration can be traced to the Classical antiquity, it has also emerged in seminal post-1994 texts, including Zakes Mda's *The Madonna of Excelsior* (2002), Patricia Schonstein's *Skyline* (2000) and Ivan Vladislavić's *The Exploded View* (2004). Consequently, this study considers how the authors have used ekphrasis to represent the 'new' South Africa, as it undergoes the precarious process of transformation.

Beginning with an analysis of Mda's novel, I survey how the author employs pre-existing artworks created by the Flemish Expressionist painter-priest, Frans Claerhout, as a means of performatively rewriting the nation's troubled past, and engaging with the contemporary context of national reinvention. Specifically, I consider how the transliteration of these images serves to re-imagine the identities of black women publicly shamed and privately violated under apartheid's hegemonic ideologies. In so doing, I foreground how Claerhout's mystical protest paintings become central to the author's own narrative project of recovery, restoration and remembrance. Building on this, the chapter thereafter explores how the artworks also provide rich imaginative templates which enable Mda's narrative to challenge the social fractures and dissonances of the post-1994 transitional period. Focusing on the artist's hybridised formal aesthetic, I suggest that the ekphrased paintings model the conditions for psychic and social transformation; consequently, their presence signals a need for malleability, improvisation and renewal, in order to rework the available categories of South African identity, and the broader socio-cultural landscape.

Schonstein's *Skyline*, in turn, incorporates notional ekphrasis, or imaginary visual artwork, to represent South Africa's new social order based on the principles of Ubuntu. Chapter Three therefore considers how the ekphrastic pieces unsettle homogeneous paradigms of nationality, and serve to envision an inclusive, hospitable and multicultural public home-space. Diverging from Mda's and Schonstein's use of ekphrasis as a positive imperative toward transformation, however, Vladislavić's text offers a despairing portrayal of contemporary South African life. Accordingly, my final chapter explores how the fictional artworks accentuate the shortcomings of our democracy, and reinvigorate an awareness of the marginalised lives rendered invisible within the country's increasingly globalised and culturally opaque urban spaces.

These ekphrastic readings illustrate, in various ways, how South African authors have specifically drawn on the visual arts to represent the post-apartheid condition in their own works, as the nation attempts to reinvent itself in the wake of a traumatic past. Thus, the study foregrounds how this synthesis of literary and visual art

lends itself to opening new or alternative dialogues, critical frameworks and self-reflective spaces in contemporary transitional narratives, and indeed, within the present historical moment.

Opsomming

In Suid-Afrika se oorgangstyd het nuwe vorme van kulturele en artistieke produksie ontspring wat die nasie se veranderende sosiale, politieke en etiese klimaat aanspreek en reflekteer. Hierdie proefskrif ondersoek 'n verhalende vorm wat grootliks onontdek bly in die huidige kritiese gesprek oor postapartheidfiksie, naamlik ekfrasis, of die teksturele/verhalende aanbieding van visuele kuns. Al kan ekfrasiëse vertelling teruggevoer word na die Klassieke tydperk, kom dit ook voor gekom in seminale post-1994-tekste, insluitende Zakes Mda se *The Madonna of Excelsior* (2002), Patricia Schonstein se *Skyline* (2000) en Ivan Vladislavić se *The Exploded View* (2004). Gevolglik oorweeg hierdie studie hoe die skrywers ekfrasis gebruik het om die 'nuwe' Suid-Afrika voor te stel terwyl dit sy onseker transformasieproses ondergaan.

Aan die hand van 'n ontleding van Mda se roman ondersoek ek hoe die skrywer bestaande kunswerke van die Vlaamse Ekspressionistiese skilder-priester Frans Claerhout gebruik as 'n middel om die nasie se troebel verlede performatief te herskryf, en in gesprek tree met die kontemporêre konteks van nasionale herontdekking. Ek oorweeg spesifiek hoe die transliterasie van hierdie beelde dien om die identiteit te herskryf van swart vroue wat in die openbaar beskaam en privaat geskend is onder apartheid se hegemoniese ideologieë. Op die wyse toon ek aan hoe Claerhout se mistieke protesskilderye sentraal word tot die skrywer se eie verhalende projek van herstel, restourasie en herinnering. Om daarop voort te bou ondersoek die volgende hoofstuk hoe die kunswerke ook verbeeldingryke patrone verskaf wat dit vir Mda se vertelling moontlik maak om die sosiale gebrokenheid en dissonansies van die post-1994-oorgangstydperk aan te spreek. Met die fokus op die kunstenaar se hibriede formele estetika, stel ek voor dat die ekfrasiëse skilderye 'n model is van die omstandighede vir psigiese en sosiale transformasie; gevolglik kondig hul teenwoordigheid die behoefte aan aanpasbaarheid, improvisasie en hernuwing aan om die beskikbare kategorieë van Suid-Afrikaanse identiteit en die breër sosiokulturele landskap te kan her-vorm.

Op sy beurt inkorporeer Schonstein se *Skyline* veronderstelde eksfrase, of denkbeeldige visuele kunswerk, om Suid-Afrika se nuwe sosiale orde, gebaseer op die beginsels van Ubuntu, voor te stel. Hoofstuk drie oorweeg dus hoe die ekfrasiëse dele homogene paradigmas van nasionaliteit ontwig, en dien om 'n eksklusiewe, gasvrye en multikulturele openbare tuisspasië voor te stel. Vladislavić se ekfrasiëse teks wyk egter af van die positiewe imperatiewe van Mda en Schonstein se werk, en verskaf 'n wanhopige uitbeelding van kontemporêre Suid-Afrikaanse lewe. My finale hoofstuk ondersoek derhalwe hoe die fiktiewe kunswerke die tekortkominge van ons demokrasie beklemtoon, en versterk 'n bewustheid van die gemarginaliseerde lewens wat onsigbaar voorkom binne die toenemend geglobaliseerde en kultureel-ondeursigtige stedelike ruimtes in die land.

Hierdie ekfrasiëse geskifte illustreer op verskeie wyses hoe Suid-Afrikaanse skrywers spesifiek na die

visuele kunste verwys om die postapartheid-ingesteldheid in hul eie werk te verteenwoordig soos wat die nasie poog om homself te herontdek in die naloop van 'n traumatiese verlede. Die studie hou dus op die voorgrond hoe hierdie sintese van literêre en visuele kuns sigself leen tot die aanknoop van nuwe of alternatiewe dialoë, kritiese raamwerke en self-weerspieëlende ruimtes in kontemporêre oorgangsvertellings en, inderdaad, binne die huidige historiese moment.

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“Wrong will be right, when Aslan comes in sight,
At the sound of his roar, sorrows will be no more,
When he bares his teeth, winter meets its death,
And when he shakes his mane, we shall have spring again.”

C.S. Lewis

The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe

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Chapter One

General Introduction

Current scholarship in South Africa recognises that “literature is an integral part of a broad canvas where the end of apartheid and its aftermath are being repeatedly staged and restaged” (Da Silva, “Literature” 84). In this dissertation, the trope of a canvas is applied in a more literal sense, to encompass a narrative form which remains relatively uncharted in current critical conversations; that is, the textual re-presentation of visual art in post-apartheid fiction. Through close readings of Zakes Mda's *The Madonna of Excelsior* (2002), Patricia Schonstein's *Skyline* (2000) and Ivan Vladislavić's *The Exploded View* (2004), it aims to explore how ekphrasis, or the narrativisation of visual art-forms, has been used by the authors to represent post-apartheid South Africa, as it undergoes the precarious process of transformation.

More than a decade after the broadcast of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) hearings, former freedom fighter and judge of the South African Constitutional Court, Albie Sachs, suggested that “works of art ... hold the promise of new ways of being” (qtd. in Buikema 282) in post-apartheid South Africa. In a public lecture delivered at the University of the Western Cape, Sachs based this statement on the idea that art is “no longer a weapon of the struggle”, but a “practice that transcends politics and continues to produce new beginnings” by “yield[ing] truths that do not easily fit political or social mandates” (Buikema 282).¹ Reflecting on the work of regeneration that has taken place since 1994, Sarah Nuttall has similarly highlighted how cultural and artistic projects “claim the work of the imagination as a means to reconsider the history that we have”, and “[open] ... onto a series of self-reflective spaces” (“Wound” 433) within which to consider the present. However, while these imaginative frameworks have enabled us, in various ways, to represent individual and collective life in the wake of apartheid, the contemporary moment also presents its own challenges: here, “ongoing structural poverty, xenophobia ... crime”, “racism, illness and a past that weights heavily on the present” (433) persistently trouble the possibility of bringing a unified national identity to fruition.

Within this complex and often conflicted space of social, political and ethical transformation, new forms of cultural and artistic production are continually emerging. Written in response not only to the transitional phase of national life, but also to the literary arts in transition, Elleke Boehmer's article “Endings and New Beginnings: South African Fiction in Transition” (1998) has placed value on the “mixing and permutation of forms which ... give an occasion and a framework for new imaginings”, where “the structures of art, the organisation of plots, as much if not more than the content, create patterns, or a potential syntax of images, within which to think about the unrepresented future” (47). Contrary to literature *of* transition, which

¹ This lecture was delivered at the Centre for Humanities Research at the University of the Western Cape in 2010, and was later cited in the *Sunday Independent* and *Sunday Times* newspapers. It is also outlined more comprehensively in Rosemarie Buikema's article.

demarcates the specific historical time-frame of the “political (so-called) transitional period”, literature *in* transition refers to the “transitional stage of South African literature”, which registers this “dynamic of transformative influences and new social forms” (Ibinga 2). This study is particularly interested in an intertextual, intermedial or hybridised literary art-form that has been used both to speak to and reflect the post-apartheid condition, including the tensions between past and present, and the unique processes of change, innovation and renewal that exert a shaping force on the current social imaginary. The selected texts are exemplary of literature *in* transition, as fictional works which were published roughly midway between the beginning of democracy and the present day, and which are also formally characterised by “mixing and permutation” (Boehmer, “Endings” 47). In particular, their content and form are replete with textual renderings of visual artworks, which enable the authors to shape the fictional discourses in unique and unusual ways. Consequently, they invite an exploration of how these narrativised artworks have been employed to represent the post-apartheid condition, as the nation grapples with its new, democratic, multicultural identity.

As indicated in the title of this dissertation, the textual re-presentation of visual artworks is described by the somewhat enigmatic term, *ekphrasis*. As a narrative mode, ekphrasis has traditionally been defined as the “literary description of a work of art” (Hollander 89). Whether it appears in the form of poetry or prose, ekphrastic narration always involves a moment of “pausing ... before, and/or about, some nonverbal work of art, or craft, a *poiema* without words, some more or less aestheticised made object, or set of made objects” (Cunningham 57). This might entail a writer “giving a whole poem over to such consideration”, or interrupting the “narrative flow of a longer work, to direct his gaze, his characters' gaze, our gaze, for a while, at such a thing” (57). Rather poetically, ekphrasis has therefore been described as a “museum of words—a gallery of art constructed by language” (Heffernan 8).

The seminal work by James Heffernan entitled *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery* (1993) has provided perhaps the most comprehensive account of this narrative form. Although it appears to be a relatively novel feature of South African fictions, tracing its prevalence in literary texts from the Classical period² to our own reveals how this convention of creating a 'museum of words' is “extraordinarily enduring” (1), and “one of literature's oldest and longest-lasting effects and practices” (Cunningham 57). As such, it has been identified as “a mode of literature whose complexity and vitality—not to mention its astonishing longevity—entitle it to full and widespread recognition” (Heffernan 2). However, because it is a highly particular narrative form, Heffernan has suggested that its definition must be both “sharp enough to identify a distinguishable body of literature” and yet also “elastic enough to reach from classicism to postmodernism” (3), and across various cultural contexts. Accordingly, the studies of ekphrastic literature written by Heffernan, W.J.T. Mitchell and John Hollander have all offered a definition

² The earliest occurrence of ekphrasis has been traced to Homer's *Iliad*, dated roughly to 8 B.C., which narrativises the shield of Achilles in the process of its creation.

which is simple in form, but not necessarily in its implications, namely: the verbal representation of visual representation. Here, an ordinarily “autonomous image” becomes “an image of an image, a part of a new whole, a visual inset within a verbal frame” (Yacobi 3). Importantly, this excludes other textual forms which incorporate aspects of graphic representation, such as pictorialism and iconicity:

These three terms—ekphrasis, pictorialism, and iconicity—are not mutually exclusive. [...] But ekphrasis differs from both iconicity and pictorialism because it explicitly represents representation itself. What ekphrasis represents in words, therefore, must itself be *representational*.³ (Heffernan 4)

Although the formal features of ekphrasis are very precise, it is fairly versatile in its ability to represent various kinds of objects and images, such as paintings, sculptures, photographs, architecture and even films. Moreover, it can encompass both real and imaginary visual objects. As Hollander explains, it may take the form of either *actual* or *notional* ekphrasis. While *actual* ekphrasis depends on the availability of a real artwork that pre-exists the text, *notional* ekphrasis describes “an entirely imaginary and non-existing work of art, as though it were factual and existed in reality” (87). Additionally, it can narrate an artwork in an “inchoate state of creation”, or even describe it “in terms of another art, how it came to be made and the circumstances of its being created” (87). While notional ekphrasis, like fiction itself, allows a writer to imaginatively create objects and images of their own in an unrestricted way, the invocation of a pre-existing artwork via actual ekphrasis invites an enquiry into how it has been re-appropriated, re-interpreted and possibly reconstructed by the writer to illuminate a particular aspect of the text.

Some of these applications will be surveyed in relation to the selected novels; whereas Mda's *The Madonna of Excelsior*, for instance, relies on actual ekphrasis, Vladislavić's *The Exploded View* incorporates notional ekphrasis, and Schonstein's *Skyline* contains elements of both. Such critical enquiries are valuable because, as Heffernan has also indicated, the process of “turning ... fixed [visual] forms into narrative” (6) allows an artwork to “[challenge] both the movement and meaning of the narrative in which it appears” (7).⁴ In other words, it may serve to affirm, contest or confound the discourse presented in the broader narrative framework. As this dissertation will convey, “neither image nor text is free from the other” in ekphrastic narration; rather, the two become “mutually interdependent in the ways they establish meaning” (Wagner qtd. in Jacobs, “Picturing” 111).

Considering the scope of this topic, my dissertation will engage, quite broadly, with the following questions: How has ekphrasis been used by the authors to represent the 'new' post-apartheid nation, as it attempts to reinvent itself in the aftermath of a painful past? Moreover, in what ways does the narrativisation of visual

³ It is important to note that Heffernan is specifically referring to forms of visual representation here, as opposed to other representational forms such as texts, for instance.

⁴ This assumes the narrative centrality of an artwork, as opposed to one which occurs only briefly or incidentally as a “descriptive detour” or “detachable fragment” (7) within a body of text.

art, specifically, lend itself to opening new or alternative dialogues, critical frameworks or self-reflective spaces within these fictions? Due to the sparseness of current critical enquiries into this topic, addressing these questions has proven, at times, to be a rather formidable task, leaving a significant amount of uncharted territory open for exploration. While this research question is also somewhat interdisciplinary in nature, my focus remains, first and foremost, literary. Thus, I turn to the discourses of the visual arts only to the extent that they inform an ekphrastic reading of the texts.⁵

Beginning with Mda's novel, both the second and third chapters focus on the ekphrastic form of *The Madonna of Excelsior*. As an author with both local and international acclaim, Mda has been commended for his introduction of a “key and brilliantly original narrative voice within the South African story-telling landscape” (Mazibuko 1). Frequently infused with intertextual forms such as visual art, music, drama, film and folklore, his works have not only been recognised for their aesthetic richness, but also for their “consistent privileging of experiences from outside official nationalistic discourses” (1). *The Madonna of Excelsior* is a salient example of this, as a text which celebrates South Africa's “various discordant identities” (1), both historically and in the establishment of the new nation. Exemplary of the author's famously performative approach to writing, each of the thirty-five chapters begins or ends with the ekphrastic description of a pre-existing artwork created by the Flemish Expressionist painter-priest, Frans Claerhout. These ekphrastic performances are not merely cosmetic features of the novel, but serve to frame the characters and their lives as the narrative transitions from apartheid to democracy.

Chapter Two considers how *The Madonna of Excelsior* has been recognised as a “[contribution] to the many debates around nation-building, memory and reconciliation since 1994” (Fincham xiv). More specifically, it explores how Mda's transliteration of the artist's indigenised mystical protest paintings engages with the collective project of healing and restoration undertaken in South Africa's transitional moment. This exposition is grounded in the idea that national public discourses have frequently appropriated women as “tractable symbols with which to express [national and ethnic] ideals of homogeneous unity” (Samuelson 95). Alongside the novel's fictionalised representation of black women publicly demonised and privately instrumentalised under apartheid's Immorality Act, I consider various ways in which Mda's ekphrastic performances imagine redemption from a legacy of pain, trauma and shame. Here, I concentrate particularly on how the *subject-matter* and *arrangement* of Claerhout's artworks lend themselves to the author's narrative project of rewriting history.

Although the third chapter is a continued exploration of Mda's novel, my focus shifts to its representation of the “cultural, historical and social complexities of the 'new' South Africa”, and the process of “reforging a new national identity” (Fincham xiv). Building on the preceding section, which focuses on how the

⁵ Similarly, because none of the authors have included actual images of the existing visual pieces in the texts, I have also excluded them in this thesis, and focus on the textual descriptions themselves.

ekphrastic performances re-envision South Africa's past, this chapter considers how Claerhout's paintings are also employed by Mda to engage with the social fractures and dissonances of the transitional moment. This time, I turn to the somewhat more elusive *form* and *function* of Claerhout's hybridised aesthetic. Viewed within the broader context of national reinvention, I survey how these evocative, sensuous and emotionally-charged ekphrastic forms respond to the imperative to stimulate new “ways of thinking, ways of perception, that will help to break down the closed epistemological structures of South African oppression” (Ndebele, *Rediscovery* 65).

In summary, the first two ekphrastic readings explore how pre-existing art, or *actual* ekphrasis, has been used by Mda to dialogue with the complex processes of national reinvention undertaken during South Africa's transitional period. Conversely, the second two readings examine how Schonstein and Vladislavić employ fictional artworks, or *notional* ekphrasis, to engage with more specific issues that have troubled national life after 1994, such as structural inequality, xenophobia and crime.

Chapter Four turns to Schonstein's *Skyline*. As the author's most acclaimed novel, *Skyline* has been recognised as one of the first South African works to feature an African immigrant as a protagonist, and to address the xenophobic tensions which became a “common theme of post-2000 writing long before the so-called 'xenophobic attacks' of May/June 2008” (Fasselt 2). Much like Mda, Schonstein frequently incorporates intertextual modes of narration that are “rich in sensuality, fabrics, works of art” (Schonstein). In this particular text, fictional paintings produced by the Mozambican immigrant character, Bernard Sebastião, are positioned at the beginning or end of each of the forty chapters. Although the artworks themselves are entirely imaginary, the ekphrastic narrations often cite existing classical pieces as his creative point of reference. Grounded in an exposition of the philosophy of *Ubuntu*, and South Africa's project of forging a hospitable, multicultural public home-space, I explore what role Schonstein affords these paintings, as her narrative opens up conversations about nationality and foreignness, pan-African inclusivity, and the meaning of home.

Lastly, I turn to a short ekphrastic piece written by Vladislavić entitled *Curiouser*—one of four narrative vignettes making up *The Exploded View*. Vladislavić has been locally positioned by literary critics as “the voice of the 'now' in post-apartheid letters for his forensic analysis of South Africa in transition” (Gaylard, *Marginal Spaces* 16). Predominantly set in the rapidly shifting city-space of Johannesburg, his fictions scrutinise “the new boundaries constantly being established within South Africa”, and interrogate “the uneven and unpredictable process of transition from apartheid to democracy” (Goodman, “Space and Place” 36). Like both Mda and Schonstein, his creative practice is also informed by interdisciplinary approaches, and his novels are frequently complemented by additional visual and verbal art-forms. Formally characterised by notional ekphrasis, *Curiouser* describes fictional artworks created by the affluent protagonist, Simeon Majara, a conceptual artist living in the increasingly globalised and culturally opaque

context of Johannesburg. By exploring the ekphrastic representations of these pieces, composed of disassembled and reassembled curios, the final chapter considers how the artworks offer an illustrative model of urban South African space, as well as the broader “national community”, which is, according to the author, still very much “under construction” (*Willem Boshoff* 8).

An exposition of these ekphrastic narratives will foreground the key role afforded to the visual arts by the authors, in the process of shaping their own representational projects. The various strands of these explorations will, in turn, reveal how this synthesis of text and image lends itself to articulating both the richness and complexity of the post-apartheid condition, as a novel literary approach to re-presenting the injustices of apartheid, addressing the often ambivalent transitional present, and picturing a still uncertain national future.

Chapter Two

Violated Bodies and Redemptive Images? Ekphrasis as a Performative Act of Remembrance in *The Madonna of Excelsior*

Paintings are skins that are shed and hung on walls.

Mark Rothko
(qtd. in Jones 180)

Discourses meander through the centuries, leaving their traces in various texts.

Zakes Mda
("Intertextuality")

The act of anamnesis, or "recalling to memory things past" is, according to Ruth Rosengarten, "a critical aspect not only of the processes of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission,⁶ but also of post-apartheid art discourse in South Africa" (qtd. in Hess 127). During South Africa's period of transition, the articulation and acknowledgement of "historical lacunae between the apartheid and post-apartheid eras" (Hess 139) has played a key role in the construction of the present and its new social imaginary. In light of its historiographic strain, Zakes Mda's fictionalised re-presentation of the Excelsior trials in *The Madonna of Excelsior* can be regarded as such an act of anamnesis, which excavates the 'lacunae' of South African history. Written within the first decade of democracy, the novel is situated in the "transitional moment", during which "new myths, symbols and political structures were generated" (Samuelson 1). Moreover, like the TRC's "paradigms of memory, mourning, reconciliation and recovery" (2), it endeavours to re-present the past, towards the construction of a national present. Using Rothko's epigraph as a tentative metaphor for this chapter,⁷ I aim to explore the ways in which Mda's performative use of ekphrasis attempts to 'shed the skin' of a painful past, in line with the collective project of healing and restoration undertaken in South Africa's transitional moment. Grounding this exposition in the idea that national public discourses have frequently appropriated women as "tractable symbols with which to express [national and ethnic] ideals of homogeneous unity" (95), I consider how the narrative might imagine 'redemption' from apartheid's legacy of pain, trauma and shame. This redemptive agenda is not only engaged via the fictionalised stories of black women publicly demonised and privately violated under apartheid's hegemonic ideologies, but also via the ekphrastic paintings through which they are re-imagined, and re-membered.

In an unpublished lecture delivered at Stellenbosch University, Mda made a bold claim that "literature does

⁶ The acronym 'TRC' will be used for the remainder of this dissertation.

⁷ Although Rothko's quote refers to the personal nature of creating art, it lends itself as an apt pictorial description for the content of this chapter.

not exist beyond intertextuality; even texts which have never met know each other” (“Intertextuality”). Qualifying this statement by suggesting that “we build on what others have created before us” (“Intertextuality”), Mda highlighted the importance of intertextuality as a unifying principle of his oeuvre, which has been celebrated for its uniquely composite, hybridised form. Characterised by both indigenous and Western performance traditions, his literary works incorporate various aesthetic forms such as visual art, music, drama, film, and folklore, through which he represents the complexity and richness of South Africa, both historically and in the process of establishing the new, democratic nation. Because he has also asserted that he uses intertextuality “in a conscious and deliberate way to inform and harness the meaning of [his] work” (“Intertextuality”), these alternative representational forms are not merely cosmetic features, but play an authoritative role in shaping the narrative discourses. Among the most salient examples cited by Mda was *The Madonna of Excelsior*, in which he employs the artworks of the Flemish Expressionist ‘painter-priest’, Frans Claerhout, for his fictionalised project of rewriting South Africa’s historical Excelsior trials. To fully appreciate the key role that Mda affords these paintings in his narrative, I turn briefly to an introduction of the novel, as well as the artist.

Rewriting History in *The Madonna of Excelsior*

In their compilation of critical essays on the author, David Bell and J.U. Jacobs draw attention to the duality of Mda’s literary works, which frequently combine a faithfulness to history, place and authenticity with a performative aesthetic, characteristic of an African epistemology and storytelling tradition.⁸ In *The Madonna of Excelsior*, Mda re-presents a minimally fictionalised account of Excelsior’s historical miscegenation trials. These took place in the Orange Free State town of Excelsior in 1970, after nineteen rural Sotho women and five affluent white farmers were accused of transgressing the 1950 Immorality Act, a legislation which prohibited interracial sex under the enforced racial segregation of the apartheid regime.⁹ In his fictionalised account of the trials, Mda draws on his personal interviews with some of the women involved, as well on some archival sources¹⁰ which recorded the events. In particular, his narrative tells the story of Niki—a pseudonym for one of the actual ‘Excelsior 19’—whose ‘scandalous’ involvement in miscegenation originates in rape, and results in a lifetime of public shame following the birth of an illegitimate ‘coloured’ daughter.

As recounted by J.U. Jacobs, the Excelsior case was originally reported in *The Friend* on 2 November 1970 under the headline, ‘Immorality Act: 13 charged’, and appeared again two days later under the headline, ‘Four farmers on bail; ten African women held for immorality’ (“Towards”, 279).¹¹ Shortly after their incarceration,

⁸ This has also been outlined in Gail Fincham’s *Dance of Life* (2011).

⁹ Jacobs explains that prior to the Excelsior case in 1970, an estimated 10000 people had been charged with transgressing the Immorality Act, and 8000 convicted. A significant portion of these were professing supporters of the National Party. The Immorality Act was eventually renounced in 1985, at the decline of apartheid.

¹⁰ These consist mainly of newspaper reports published at the time, particularly those featured in *The Friend*.

¹¹ Jacobs notes that there had initially been five men involved; however, the fifth, 51-year-old J.M. Calitz, committed suicide after his appearance in court. Additionally, although only ten women were originally accused, this number

however, the men were released from the Winberg prison on bail, while the nineteen women and their infants were detained. Just days later, international newspapers such as *The New York Times* reported that the case had been dismissed: “[M]inutes before the trials were to begin ... the state Attorney General withdrew the charges. The reason: too much publicity had intimidated the state's witnesses” (qtd. in Kennelly 2).¹² Meanwhile, Attorney General and prosecutor, Percy Yatar, had received instructions from the Minister of Justice, P.C. Pelser, to drop the charges and decline prosecution following pressure from the Nationalist government, in order to avoid the public humiliation of the white citizens involved. The dropped charges were publicly justified by claims that the evidence presented by the black women was unsubstantiated and thus insufficient to convict the men. Additionally, many of the publicly shamed and disenfranchised women had accepted bribes to remain silent, in order to escape the dehumanising conditions of incarceration—to which their infant children were also subjected—with the promise of future financial support. The accused men subsequently claimed that they had been framed, and the case was forgotten. In the official documentation of the trials, the Nationalist government's prevailing “strategy of censorship” thus successfully ensured the silencing of the accused parties within South Africa's borders, while the “plight of the defendants caused 'widespread consternation’” (Kennelly 2) internationally.

Mda's fictionalised re-presentation of the events surrounding the so-called Excelsior scandal can, then, be read as an endeavour to uncover the decades of public silence under which it has been buried. In particular, the narrative dialogues with the injurious meanings inscribed upon the black women whose private instrumentalisation remained unacknowledged in public discourse. True to history, the story unfolds against the backdrop of 1970s South Africa, and apartheid's Immorality Act in particular.¹³ This legislation exemplified white supremacy's “polarised constructions of alterity”, and constituted a legal “attempt at colonial eugenics, appearing to even-handedly prohibit any mingling of race”, whilst also “covertly constructing black South Africans in particular as so degenerate that their genes had to be contained, lest they damage the fabric of society” (Goodman, “De-scribing” 63).¹⁴

Alongside this legislation, apartheid's discourse of miscegenation was deeply rooted in the long-standing

increased to nineteen after the publication of these reports.

¹² These articles were published in January 1971.

¹³ This “puritanical sexual morality” was championed by two of the most influential Afrikaners at the time: “Prime Minister John Vorster, whose government formulated and implemented the Afrikaner Nationalist segregationist ideology that was at least professed, if not practiced, locally in Excelsior, and his brother, Dr J.D. (‘Koot’) Vorster, who was elected moderator of the general synod of the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk in October 1970 and whose church provided apartheid with its imagined scriptural authority” (Jacobs, “Towards” 280).

¹⁴ Following an inquiry into the Human Rights violations occurring in local farming communities as recently as 2003, a member of the Blanke Bevrydingsbeweging voiced this crass discourse once considered normative during apartheid:

There are basically two groups of people in South Africa: the white race and the non-white mud races. In order to protect its purity, the white race should have no contact with the mud races. God created them superior to the mud races and it is consequently the white race's duty to avoid being contaminated by the mud races. [...] To sleep with a black is like sleeping with an animal; and we know that it is against God's law. (qtd. in Raditlhalo 112)

ideologies of Western colonialism, in which the black body, and especially the black female body, became “the site over which Europeans articulated their difference from Africans and justified their imperial excesses, the latter under the guise of the colonial 'civilising' or 'domesticating' mission” (Samuelson 95). Underwritten by a “discourse of race, concupiscence, and degeneracy ... a pervasive shame ... connected to a pathological female sexuality” (Wicomb 92), these iconological constructions of race, gender and sexuality served to counterbalance a purportedly 'civilised' whiteness with the 'savage' sexuality of the black woman. These conceptions flourished in the manichean categories of apartheid, perpetuating the culturally mediated belief that the black woman “corrupts, and is corrupted, by her sexuality” (Sanders 237). According to Evelyn Hammonds, this construction of identity is one which black women are still fighting to reclaim, as the “maimed, immoral, black female body ... can be and still is used to discredit them ... as speaking subjects” (qtd. in Lewis, “Empowering” 23).

The absurdities of this ideology are confronted in Mda's fictional project, which re-exposes its premise as “hypocritical, unworkable and a colossal sham” (Kennelly 3). The narrative recounts how Niki, then regarded by the community as a “rare flower in the middle of the desert that was Mahlatswetsa Location”¹⁵ (*Madonna* 14), is coerced into acts of miscegenation by Johannes Smit, a farmer “whose great sport was to waylay black girls in the fields ... chas[ing] them around and play[ing] harrowing games with them” (15). These so-called “hunting expeditions ... for swart poes” (94) exemplified the clandestine 'devirgination rites' commonly practised in Afrikaner circles under apartheid's Immorality Act. According to Mda, however, these were commonplace from “the very first day explorers' ships weighed anchor at the Cape Peninsula centuries ago, and saw the yellow body parts of Khoikhoi women” (93). This recalls colonialism's specular fascination with the bodies of indigenous women, which were cast as “corporeal, carnal, untamed, raw, and therefore also open to mastery” (Boehmer, “Transfiguring” 269). Echoing the colonial desire to 'domesticate' the black female body, Johannes likewise frames his acts of violation as “a chance to get rid of [their] wildness” (*Madonna* 48). Conversely, these traumas cause Niki to perceive her body, which “had the fullness of the moon ... chocolate brown and smooth” (14), as a site of enslaving shame: “[S]he went home and secretly wept while she bathed him off her body. But he was an obstinate stain. [...] She tried to vomit him out. [...] For many days she tried” (19).

This experience of corporeal debasement is repeated when Niki's employers, Cornelia and Stephanus Cronje, falsely accuse her of stealing meat from their butchery, and order her to “strip” in front of a group of onlookers:

Niki peeled off her pink overall and then her mauve dress. She stood in her white petticoat and protested once more that she was not hiding any meat on her person. [...] 'Take them off, Niki,' insisted Madam Cornelia. 'Everything! You must be hiding it in your knickers.' No meat hiding in her

¹⁵ This is the name of the township just outside of Excelsior.

bra. Only stained cotton-wool hiding in her knickers. She stood there like the day she was born. Except that when she was born, there was no shame in her. (41)

This incident is likewise registered by Niki as an act of bodily violation, whereby the spectators “rape her with their eyes” (41) and reduce her to an object of entertainment by “laughing as if it was a big joke” (42). Recalling, again, the imperial fixation upon the black female body as an object containing an 'innate' sexual savagery, this voyeuristic experience is described in similarly contradictory terms, whereby Niki's body is simultaneously demonised and fetishised. For the young Tjaart Cronje, “Niki's triangular pubes loomed large in [his] imagination. Threatening pleasures for the future” (42). Similarly, his father, Stephanus Cronje, is “seized by fiends of lust” (42), and “Niki's pubes, with their short entangled hair, [become] the stuff of fantasies”, causing him to see her only in terms of her “breasts, pubes, lips and buttocks ... only as body parts rather than as one whole person” (42).¹⁶

Reflecting on the hypocrisies of this cultural and political climate, or the “Golden Age of Immorality” (93), the communal narrator¹⁷ describes its prevalent public scandals in sardonic and hyperbolic tones. Likened to a plague-like epidemic overrunning the platteland towns, the seemingly irrepressible occurrence of miscegenation causes magistrates to prosecute fellow Afrikaners with “cannibalistic zeal ... all because of black body parts”, while they hypocritically “conceal painful erections under their black magisterial gowns” (94). The political upheaval caused by this “feast of miscegenation”, which is capable of “sending even the most devout citizen into bouts of frenzied lust”, is attributed to a depraved black corporeality, or “the devil in the guise of black women” (88): “The devil had sent black women to tempt [the Afrikaner] and to move him away from the path of righteousness. The devil made the Afrikaner covertly covet the black woman while publicly detesting her” (87). The same rationale is later reflected in the dismissal of the *Excelsior* case, which sought to preserve the public dignity of the white parties involved. By counterbalancing the colonial binary of white civility with the 'innate' degeneracy of the black woman, these views served to maintain a public image of South Africa's white citizens as “innocent” (75), “led astray” (88) and “framed by the blacks” (75).

¹⁶ This voyeuristic experience evokes the 'pathological summarisation' of colonial discourse, in which black female bodies, such as those of Saartjie Bartman, were seen in terms of their individual, sexualised constituents. Pathological summarisation describes the process whereby “individual features such as genitalia, buttocks or breasts come to be seen not only as the essence, but also a representative of the entire individual” (Sanders 216).

¹⁷ The presence of a communal narrator is another central feature of Mda's fictional work. This communal voice represents a collective, mostly retrospective, and often biased perspective, and is derived “very much from orature, because the story can be told in the plural form” (Naidoo qtd. in Bell and Jacobs 10). As also suggested by Fincham, Ralph Goodman and N.S. Zulu, the voice of the communal narrator introduces a 'fallible filter' to the narrative, thus serving as a “counter-discourse which insists on ontological slippages rather than certainties” (Goodman, “De-scribing” 67) by presenting “inaccurate, misled or self-serving perceptions of events, situations or other characters” (Chatman qtd. in Fincham 82). This is particularly true of the communal narrator in *The Madonna of Excelsior* who, as Fincham notes, allows the reader to register his insight and compassion as he recounts the lives of the characters, whilst also frequently displaying lapses into judgement and prejudice. Alongside the voice of the authorial narrator who guides the overall development of the story, as well as the presence of “simplistic, orderly ... historical documentation that only records one version of the South African past” (Wenzel 131), Mda's use of an 'unreliable' communal narrator demands “the reader's involvement in the process of challenging his/her assumptions, as well as those of the novel and the author” (Zulu 316).

As a fictionalised account of this libellous history, Mda's narrative grapples with the same questions that lay at the heart of the TRC's official memory project. Aligned with its goals of reconciliation and nation-building, which “required a re-imagining and reshaping of the past”, the TRC hearings “needed to contain and showcase people's grief and rage and to find a way to mediate between the discourse of the past self and the present and future self” (Goyal 30). A critique levelled against this project, however, was its limited ability to sufficiently “suture public spectacle with private grief, balance the demands of amnesty with the risks of amnesia, and offer a platform not just of state-mandated healing but of justice” (30). As a testament particularly to its inability to adequately account for private grief, Miki Flockemann argues that while the hearings provided a space in which to expose numerous violations to public scrutiny,¹⁸ 'secret' or 'taboo' subjects such as miscegenation and similarly shame-filled scandals remained largely unrecorded, thus maintaining decades of public silence (249). Accordingly, the reader of *The Madonna of Excelsior* is told that these transgressions are “never mentioned at dinner tables” (143), and that the women of Mahlatswetsa Location “no longer want to talk about these things” (217). This prevailing silence is also reflected in the account of the unreliable communal narrator, whose sardonic tone often reveals lapses into judgement and prejudice:

These sins of our mothers happened in front of our eyes. Hence some of us became blind. And have remained so to this day. [...] Reports of wholesale miscegenation in the Free State platteland abounded. Tlotlo le wele makgwabane, the people said. A free-for-all. Open season. A feast of miscegenation. (89)

As an endeavour to unearth this legacy of silence and blindness, Mda's narrative serves, according to Flockemann, to textualise the private and often traumatic experiences of those who have fallen through the cracks of public discourse. Importantly, Meg Samuelson has suggested that discursive routes such as these also give rise to “the question of why and how we remember whom we do, and how these acts of remembrance construct a particular identity for the nation and its citizens during this time of transition” (115). How, then, does Mda's text navigate the private violations of South Africa's past? Moreover, what kind of identity does his narrative construct for those whose stories it seeks to recover, re-present and restore to public memory?

Narrativising Art: Zakes Mda's Painterly Imagination and Excelsior's Painter-Priest

The ekphrastic artworks presented throughout the narrative offer an engaging means of approaching these questions. In much the same way that Mda's reliance upon archival sources and personal accounts reveals his commitment to history, place and authenticity, his incorporation of artworks created by the Flemish

¹⁸ Flockemann cites the Sharpville 6 and Gugulethu 7 incidents as examples here (249).

Expressionist painter-priest, Frans Claerhout, affords the novel its performative dimension.¹⁹ Each chapter is subsequently introduced, or concluded, with a textualised rendering of a painting, through which the characters and events are framed. As noted by Gail Fincham, the performative aspects of Mda's writing are not merely aesthetic, but also become central to his representational approach to rewriting history (xvi). Unlike the African performance traditions by which his work is usually characterised, however, *The Madonna of Excelsior* is atypically “informed by a Western European one, as indigenised by a European-born artist working in South Africa” (Jacobs, “Towards” 285).

Although the painter, referred to as “the trinity”—a “man, priest and artist” (*Madonna 2*)—is also fictitiously present in the narrative, he remains an elusive and mostly silent character. As elucidated in Leon Strydom's account of Claerhout's life and work in *Catcher of the Sun* (1983), the real-life artist was a Catholic Jesuit priest by vocation. Although he was born in Belgium's West Flanders town of Pittem in 1919, he emigrated to South Africa's small Free State village of Thaba Nchu in Tweespruit in 1946, where he worked as a missionary. Here, his ministry not only encompassed religious duties, but also his creative work as an artist, such that “the office of his priesthood ... [became] the constant source of his inspiration as an artist” (8). When asked in an interview whether he was “a priest who paints, or a painter who is a priest”, Claerhout therefore responded:

I am one, a human being created to grow—the rural environment, the seasons, the human being, a smile, a curse, a prayer, love, nudity, fertility, humour; from the soil, of the soil, Christian mysticism, nature, God, the question why, all are composites of my paintings and drawings. (qtd. in Wenzel 144)

Nationally, Claerhout's aesthetic is situated within the second wave of South African Expressionism. This artistic genre developed primarily from the works of Flemish immigrants, and contributed to the inception of the indigenous artistic movement in 1958. Jacobs highlights that although Claerhout initially began painting in the style and spirit of the Flemish primitives and Expressionists, he later adopted a style which more closely approximated nineteenth-century Symbolist Expressionism. Thus, although his work is most directly associated with Flemish Expressionism, it is also strongly informed by symbolic and mystical elements, through which he portrays his subject-matter “religiously and philosophically, through the eyes of Africa from a Western point of view” (Strydom 9). Grounded in a Christian metaphysic, his painterly aesthetic therefore endeavours to “reconcile the physical and the spiritual, the social and the mystical”, such that “the visual and the visionary, the ethical and aesthetic complement one another” (9).

Despite its seemingly demure origins, Claerhout's creative work was, however, not concerned with isolated aesthetic experiences; as a form of protest, his art functioned as a counter voice, or indeed counter vision, to

¹⁹ This refers to Mda's typically “theatrical style of story-telling, where the performativity of meanings is foregrounded” (Flockemann 254). Performativity, here, denotes “the illusion of a performance created in non-corporeal presentations of a narrative”, which “evoke[s] a performance in the mind of the reader or spectator” (Berns).

apartheid's dehumanising ideologies. Because he “regard[ed] nothing he encounter[ed] as being outside the range of human experience or unworthy of the art of painting” (9), he used both his priestly and painterly 'ministries' to foster a sense of compassion, inclusivity and shared humanity in the people he encountered. Through these, he sought to “bring new hope to people in order to search with love for new attitudes and opportunities for reconciliation” (Claerhout 1). Mda's novel picks up on these artistic and social principles, noting that this creative inclination “began when the trinity was nourished by Flemish Expressionists”, but contains an aesthetic “mystique ... embodied [by] protest” (*Madonna* 5).²⁰

Much like Mda's oeuvre, which predominantly features “poor and ordinary people whose voices have been silenced under apartheid”, and thus “speaks directly to those constituencies of class, gender, location, race, caste or ideology which ... have been largely overlooked” (Fincham 5), Claerhout also positioned the marginalised and disenfranchised at the forefront of his creative practice. The figures depicted in his paintings, for this reason, typically represent rural locals, many of whom also visited his mission station to pose as models. Among these were some of the publicly shamed women known as the Excelsior 19—the same women around whom Mda constructs his fictional discourse in *The Madonna of Excelsior*.

Painted Memoirs: Ekphrasis as a Performative Act of Remembrance

Just as Claerhout's mystical protest art sought to oppose apartheid's dehumanising constructions of identity, Mda's ekphrastic re-presentation of his paintings gives the narrative an occasion for imagining these historically shamed figures in new and alternative ways. Although the original pieces are never visually depicted or directly referenced, each chapter is introduced or concluded with a textualised portrayal of a painting, which serves to frame a particular character or event.²¹ Presented via the focalised and contemporary perspectives of the communal narrator, as well as Niki's daughter, Popi, they become communal paradigms of memory through which the stories of the Excelsior 19 can be retrospectively accessed. Mda writes:

It was before Popi's time. So these are things that she heard from those of us who saw them happen, even though today she relates them as if she herself witnessed them. She is no sciolist. She can indeed experience them in the immortal world that the trinity has bequeathed us. She is able to become part of whole lives that are frozen and rendered timeless. A memoir that conveys our yesterdays in the continuing present. (*Madonna* 38)

²⁰ Mda also dedicates the novel to Claerhout, citing the artist's work as a main source of his own inspiration.

²¹ The Oxford University Press 2005 edition of the novel does include black and white reproductions of Claerhout's paintings entitled *Ma en Kind* and *Donkey* inside the front and back covers, as well as stamp-sized prints of *Man with Straw*, *Music*, *Goat*, *Cross*, *House*, *Moon*, *Mother and Child*, and several other untitled mixed media, oil and charcoal pieces, next to the chapter titles. These are, however, not directly linked to the respective ekphrastic passages or the chapters in which they appear.

Positioned as remnants of an unspoken history, the ekphrastic paintings function as performative acts of remembrance, through which the narrative stages the tensions between past and present, private grief and public spectacle. This is also conveyed in the communal narrator's suggestion that these painted representations “live only in the continuing present” and that “their world has nothing to do with the outside world of miscegenation” (94). Moreover, like spectres that haunt *Excelsior* and its long-forgotten history, the images mirror their living counterparts like “second selves” (95). Juxtaposed to the “outside world of miscegenation” (94) presented within the novel's historiographic framework, the painted memoirs therefore offer alternative spaces in which the women whose stories “have remained [hidden] to this day” (89) can be remembered. As ekphrastic performances which endeavour to bring about an acknowledgement of a painful past, how do these pieces re-imagine the characters who are, in many ways, emblematic of countless women instrumentalised under apartheid's master narrative?²²

Before exploring how Claerhout's paintings have been appropriated for Mda's text, it is worth discussing a similar project of recovery and remembrance undertaken during South Africa's transitional moment. The case of Saartjie Bartman,²³ also commonly referred to as colonialism's Hottentot Venus,²⁴ has demonstrated how the act of memorialising the historically instrumentalised has been “vexed by the question of representation” (Wicomb 91). This emerged particularly in the repatriation and burial of her remains. In response to her legacy of ignominy, following her sexualised display before imperial audiences, this process sought to restore dignity to Bartman by reclaiming her identity from the historical “colonisation and violation of the body”, and thus redeem her from her inscription as “racialised and sexualised Other” (93). Despite its honourable intentions, however, Zoë Wicomb questions whether this performative ritual of 'redemption' could sufficiently bury the legacy of “the black woman as icon of concupiscence”, and “the shame of having [their] bodies stared at ... the shame invested in those females who have mated with the coloniser” (91).

In *Remembering the Nation, Dismembering Women? Stories of the South African Transition* (2011),²⁵

²² Although women of all ethnicities experienced violation and abuse during this time, the current chapter focuses specifically on the experiences of black women.

²³ Saartjie Bartman was born in South Africa's Gamtoos Valley in 1789. After being sold to Scottish doctor, Alexander Dunlop, and his attending showman, Hendrik Cesars, in her early adulthood, she spent years being exhibited for entertainment and examined for her physical 'anomalies', such as her enlarged buttocks and labia, which attracted the fascination of European audiences. After her death in 1815, her body was dissected and her remains were kept on display. After democracy in 1994, the South African government applied to France for the return of her remains, which were held in Musée de l'Homme in Paris. Her skeleton, preserved genitals and brain, and a plaster cast of her body, were returned to South Africa in May 2002, and buried on 9 August 2002, when Bartman's official funeral was also conducted. Framed as a 'home-coming' event for Bartman, this initiative sought to restore dignity to her memory, and thus redeem her from a lifetime of slavery and abuse. A more detailed account of her story can be found in Crais Clifton's and Pamela Scully's *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus: A Ghost Story and a Biography* (2009).

²⁴ 'Hottentot' was a contemporaneous term used to describe Khoisan people, which is now considered offensive. 'Venus' refers to the Roman goddess of love. Although Bartman's case is equally pertinent to the Khoisan heritage, this chapter focuses on how it also applies to black women in the context of a colonial history.

²⁵ I am much indebted to Samuelson's work in this chapter, as it has provided an invaluable foundation for my discussion. Although I refer to it frequently throughout, it is important to note that Samuelson makes no reference to *The Madonna of Excelsior*. The connections drawn between the two texts are therefore entirely my own.

Samuelson draws attention not only to this contentious notion of 'burying the past', but also to the “myth-making process” (85) spun around the violated bodies of historical figures like Bartman. She describes this 'redemptive' initiative as follows:

Bartman's funeral, which—like the Truth and Reconciliation Commission—returns to a traumatic past in search of present healing, was a ritual event through which the transitional narrative of national redemption was performed. This ritual gave birth to a nation as it buried Bartman. Her burial is symbolic of South Africa's political transition as, in the words of ... Vuyo Mbuli, it marks 'the beginning of an end and an end of a beginning' (*Funeral Broadcast*, 2002). (100)

Much like the TRC's official memory project, then, this initiative sought to “move our society from repression to expression” for the purpose of “rewriting ... South African history on the basis of validated mass experience” (Ndebele qtd. in Mazibuko 31). However, according to Samuelson, the sense of healing and closure professed in these public rituals, whereby “individual suffering [is] appropriated by the collective to express a redemptive national narrative” (100), risks commandeering these voiceless identities for the purpose of national catharsis. She elaborates:

In search of tractable symbols with which to express their ideals of homogeneous unity, national and ethnic claims commandeer women's bodies and deny the more messy aspects of their legacies that cannot be neatly enfolded with the nationalist script. Through acts of amnesia and foreclosure, or 'dismemberings', women are shaped into the ideal forms that reflect the desired national body—usually that of Mother, or simply Womb.²⁶ (2)

In other words, Samuelson argues that instead of restoring to historical figures like Bartman “some of their strangeness and challenging heterogeneity, that which does not necessarily serve the purposes of normative, naturalising national discourses” (95), such memorial initiatives have, rather, mobilised their identities for the purpose of forging a redeemed, unified national body. Rather than effectively deconstructing Bartman's inscription as “sexualised savage” in the imperial theatre, then, they have re-appropriated her as a “domestic and maternal symbol”, or as the “Mother of the 'rainbow' nation” (91). Consequently, Samuelson suggests that instead of “deconstructing the binary of domesticated (white) versus sexualised (black) femininity”, current discourse has merely shifted these identities “from one category to the other, without destabilising the terms themselves” (95).

Additionally, in appropriating the private grief of her story for the purpose of a collective national redemption, Bartman's funeral implicitly cast her as a “rescued and re(-)covered ... tragic victim” (Ngubane

²⁶ Samuelson highlights how Bartman's funeral was replete with such maternal terminology, including “references to her as 'Mama' or 'Ouma’” (91).

qtd. in Samuelson 101). According to Achille Mbembe, this discursive trajectory, which moves from 'colonial trauma' to 'postcolonial recovery', is typical of decolonising discourses which mobilise the figure of the African as a wounded subject, as an emblem through which to express healing from a painful past.²⁷ While these narratives allow us to “bear witness to pain and radical loss”, as well as create new myths, symbols, political structures and consciousness in the present, they may, however, also hinder an acknowledgement of the subject's “capacity for self-making, self-reference and self-expression” (qtd. in Mongin, Lempereur and Schlegel). This reductive representation and professed sense of closure may, by implication, reclaim any sense of agency invested in the identities commandeered for collective catharsis and, in this particular case, preclude “ways of imagining women in the nation beyond the binaries of *sexualised savage* and *domestic mother*” (Samuelson 101, my emphasis).

A similar concern emerges when engaging with Mda's novel, which likewise revisits a traumatic and shame-filled past by narrativising the stories of South Africa's historically instrumentalised black women. By re-exposing the atrocities of apartheid's culture of violence, the text suggests a restorative agenda which, like the TRC, “return[s] to the painful past in search of present healing” (100). As “memoirs” which facilitate a collective anamnesis in the narrative by “convey[ing] our yesterdays in the continuing present” (*Madonna* 38), how might Mda's ekphrastic performances envision 'redemption' for the women who are re-presented and re-imagined? To what extent do these ritualised acts of remembrance risk slipping into the injurious narrative trajectory against which Samuelson and Mbembe have cautioned?

As a central feature of the novel's performative dimension, the incorporation of visual art lends itself particularly well to addressing these questions. As art critic Barbara Thompson explains, the individual, social and historical identities of black women have largely been represented via particular iconographic symbols and images, which “have served very specific purposes of evoking associations in the viewer's mind that confirm expected ideologies” (“Decolonising” 297). Elaborating on this idea, Kimberly Wallace-Sanders writes that these ideologically-loaded representations have signalled an enduring and troubled union of racial and gender essentialism, underpinned by the construction of their bodies, and identities, as fundamentally excessive: either ultimately sexual, or ultimately maternal (165). Because these predominantly visually-dependent representations are, according to Thompson, “especially charged”, they call for “interventions upon historical images of black women as exotic Others, erotic fantasies, and super-maternal Mammies” (“African Female” 1).

Much like Samuelson's charge to restore to these subjectivities “some of their strangeness and challenging heterogeneity” (95), Thompson calls for subversive interventions upon these “familiar and expected” images, which might challenge the “disputability and mutability of both historical and contemporary 'truths'”, and instead reveal “the complex and multiple identities of black women throughout time and cultural contexts”

²⁷ This argument is detailed in Mbembe's *On the Postcolony* (2001), and is also incorporated in Samuelson's discussion.

(“Decolonising” 308). In exploring Mda's narrative, these charges should be heeded. To what extent do the ekphrastic performances intervene upon these injurious productions of black femininity, or potentially perpetuate them?

In *Catcher of the Sun*, Strydom provides a valuable analytical framework for reading both the content and themes of Claerhout's paintings. This, in turn, also illuminates how the images have been re-presented throughout Mda's narrative. Reflecting on Claerhout's broader collection, Strydom distinguishes between two consistent organising principles which emerge in the thematic arrangement of the artworks; the first being the 'cycle', and the second the 'series'. The cyclical organising principle refers to the “development of a theme in a time-space continuum, and thus entails a horizontal or linear arrangement” (16). Because the individual paintings “illustrate the consecutive phases of that narrative or process” (16), they serve to depict chronological development and change in the subject-matter.²⁸ Conversely, the serial organising principle exemplifies the “repetition of a theme discontinuous in time and space” (16). This repetition of subject-matter emphasises variation on a sustained theme, such that each painting accentuates a different aspect, or presents a “different perspective to illustrate the theme by means of other objects” (16). Serially-arranged paintings can, in this sense, be interchanged indefinitely without altering the overall meaning of the collection. This is because, unlike cyclically-arranged artworks, they do not aim to convey a specific conclusion, but rather privilege a sense of variation and variability.

Most of the paintings incorporated throughout Mda's narrative are based on Claerhout's *Christ in Tweespruit* and *Catcher of the Sun* series.²⁹ As echoed in the novel's title, many of the artworks in these series include variations on a sustained Madonna-and-Child theme, in the process of portraying Excelsior's rural Sotho women. Likewise, while the ekphrastic passages occurring throughout Mda's text are linked through their repetition of thematic imagery, they do not follow a particular chronological development. Rather, they appear to punctuate the text almost at random, while the external narrative events develop cyclically. However, as suggested by the art critic, the series endeavours to accentuate different aspects of a chosen theme, such that the viewer “recognises time and again the old in the new in a different guise” (17). Despite its adherence to particular thematic imagery, the interpretive framework constructed by the series therefore accentuates the variable, ambiguous, and indeterminate nature of the subject-matter portrayed.

This purpose of contesting rather than consolidating clearly defined conclusions about the represented subject-matter will be considered in relation to some of the novel's ekphrastic pieces. Focusing particularly on how black women and their bodies have been appropriated as “tractable symbols with which to express ... ideals of homogeneous unity” (Samuelson 2), thus potentially limiting “ways of imagining women in the

²⁸ The 'Stations of the Cross' images commonly displayed in Catholic churches constitute some of the most famous examples of the cyclical organising principle in Western art (Fincham 82).

²⁹ This is indicated in the compilation of critical essays by Bell and Jacobs.

nation beyond the binaries of *sexualised savage* and *domestic mother*” (95, my emphasis), I will survey how these images envision 'redemption' from a legacy of pain, trauma and shame. In so doing, I also explore to what extent they might lend themselves to articulating new myths, symbols, political structures and consciousness in South Africa's transitional moment.

Five Nuns and A Sunburnt Christ

Two salient ekphrastic exemplars, entitled *Five Nuns* and *A Sunburnt Christ*,³⁰ occur at the apex of Mda's fictionalised account of the Excelsior trials. Mda writes that “while miscegenation and immorality were doing the rounds, and the law was saving the Afrikaner from himself, the trinity was creating nuns in flowing blue habits” (94). Juxtaposed to the public spectacle presented in the external narrative, the ekphrastic description of the *Five Nuns* painting reads:

Nuns in procession. Their child-like brown faces peeping through head-veils that flow almost to the ground. Hiding their feet. [...] Yet each one of them is carrying a baby. [...] Babies wrapped in blue shawls. Only their round heads are showing. The first three nuns are looking ahead. The fourth nun is looking back at the fifth nun. Looking down at her. The fifth nun is the shortest of them all. She looks like a child. Her face has the innocence of a child. She ... does not understand why they are carrying the babies and where they are taking them. She is with child. (94-95)

A Sunburnt Christ appears shortly after the Excelsior 19 are prosecuted for their complicity in acts of miscegenation:

A black-roofed house camouflages itself amongst the cosmos and blue and green grass. Yellow light shines from a single window. Red blood seeps from the green door. A procession of women in blue dresses and shawls passes between the house and the big sunflower behind the cross. The sun has painted streaks of red on their Basotho hats. Their bodies are bent forward from invisible burdens. Four women led by an upright nun in a blue head-veil march to pay homage to the hanging Christ. Round-eyed nun with bare breasts and black nipples. A black navel planted on a brown round stomach. A stomach full of life hangs above a blue skirt with a frayed knee-length hem. (80)

During critical moments at which the narrative revisits the Excelsior scandal, Mda's ekphrastic performances are worked out around this recurring symbol of the Madonna figure. Considering the cultural and political climate in which the original artworks were produced, Claerhout's rendition of the familiar Mother-and-Child theme was received as subversive, affording it its recognition as protest art, which deliberately sought to

³⁰ These titles, as well as those mentioned throughout this chapter and the next, are taken from the novel's descriptions of the paintings, and are not direct references to specific works by Claerhout.

“[validate] ... the lives of black people, whom the National Party tried to paint as sub-human” (Mazibuko 221). Deviating from typical Western portrayals, these madonnas are modelled on, and thus both directly and symbolically representative of, Excelsior's rural Sotho women. Presented via the focalised perspective of the communal narrator, the ekphrastic narrations foreground the hybridised nature of the images, which blend traditional Western features with local indigenous ones. Reminiscent of familiar Western iconography, the madonnas are depicted with “blue shawls”, “head-veils” (*Madonna* 95), “blue dresses” and “blue skirts” (80). Yet, through a concurrent emphasis on “brown faces” (95), “Basotho hats” and “brown ... stomach[s]” (80), the painted figures are transformed into indigenised renditions of the Virgin. As painted memoirs which mediate between a painful past and an ambivalent transitional present, what kind of identity might these particular images construct for the formerly instrumentalised women re-imagined in Mda's narrative?

According to Michael Davis, portrayals of the Madonna figure have historically been subject to contestation, particularly where her image has been depicted according to the indigenous features, styles and traditions of non-Western cultures. Despite the previously subversive nature of such renderings, however, the indigenised Madonna icon is, from a contemporary perspective, neither novel nor unexpected. As a central feature of the narrative's performative dimension, the invocation of this by-now familiar and rather worn emblem appears, at first, to follow an obviously didactic, and even banal, redemptive route. In the most explicit sense, it plays on iconoclastic strategies whereby the mutually-dependent categories of black carnal depravity and virtuous white civility are scrambled, thus uncoupling the binary which has had particularly injurious consequences for black women from colonialism to apartheid, and beyond. This is further reinforced in juxtaposition to the narrative's affectively-loaded framing sentence, which attributes Excelsior's shameful legacy of 'immorality' to “the sins of our mothers” (*Madonna* 100). Reflecting the spectacularised public discourse of the past, the sentence echoes throughout the narrative as a refrain pervading communal memory into the “continuing present” (38), such that “[a]ll these things” are said to “flow from the sins of our mothers” (1).

As a loaded biblical reference, the novel's framing sentence recalls the image of the lascivious Eve, whose depraved corporeality led to Man's temptation and fall from righteousness.³¹ The connection drawn between the demonised black woman and the biblical Eve, as the epitome of the fallen Mother, is not unique to Mda's narrative; rather, it is deeply rooted in the same colonial ideologies which, in encoding the black female body with a deviant sexuality, came to associate the Hottentot Venus with the image of Eve: both represented the “corporeal and shameful figure that is the opposite of virtue and purity” (Mazibuko 222). Moreover, “in a biblical analogy, the ... Hottentot as lascivious Eve ... is required to cover her shame and condemned” (Wiss qtd. in Samuelson 94).³² By virtue of their corporeally-depraved status under apartheid's Immorality Act, the

³¹ The biblical account of the fall of man can be found in Genesis 3 of the Christian Bible.

³² Commenting on the nomenclature attached to the genital 'anomalies' of the 'Hottentot Venus', Rosemary Wiss explains that the Latin term 'sinus pudoris', or 'Hottentot Apron', means 'curtain of shame', and refers to a veil covering the genitals. As features which invited both the fear and fascination of imperial audiences, their “associations with aprons, veils, curtains and privacy” subsequently “encoded female Hottentot bodies with ... shame” (qtd. in Samuelson 94).

'shameful' and 'condemned' members of the Excelsior 19 likewise produce in public memory the image of fallen mothers, who “tempt” the virtuous Afrikaner and “move him away from the path of righteousness” (*Madonna* 87).

The iconoclastic nature of the indigenised Madonna icon is, then, implied in the contrast between these two biblical figures, who are positioned as binary opposites: to the same degree that the biblical Eve, like the Hottentot Venus, represents the fallen woman condemned by her shameful corporeality, the Madonna epitomises a transcendent virginal purity. In his seminal essay on iconology, Gilman Sanders posits that icons portray a given reality in “a manner determined by the historical position of the observers, their relationship to their own time, and to the history of the conventions which they employ” (205). Serving to draw the viewer's attention to the “relationship between the portrayed individual and the general qualities ascribed to the class” such that “specific individual realities are ... given mythic extension through association with the qualities of a class”, icons are constructed to “[synthesise] a convincingly homogeneous image” (204). Thus, just as the iconological construction of the Hottentot Venus synthesised a homogeneous image of black femininity and sexual savagery in the cultural imagination of the West, traditional representations of the Madonna icon presupposed whiteness in the portrayal of a pure, innocent and 'civilised' femininity. Commenting on indigenised portrayals of the Madonna icon, which deviate from imperial representations of a normative white virtuousness, bell hooks writes:

Racism and sexism combine to make it impossible for white folks, and even some black folks, to imagine a black Madonna, since such figures are representations of purity and innocence. Within racist and sexist iconography the black female is stereotypically portrayed as experienced and impure, hence, she can never embody that Birth-of-a-Nation fragile womanhood that is the essence of a Madonna figure ... a female must be white to occupy the space of sacred femininity. (19)

If Mda's narrative, like the TRC, revisits a traumatic past in search of present healing, the ekphrastic representation of Excelsior's black women as indigenised Madonna figures can, then, be read as a familiarly iconoclastic strategy, which attempts to uncouple this injurious binary. Alongside his narrative re-exposure of the private atrocities which befell these women, Mda's performative re-inscription of the publicly 'fallen' Excelsior 19 as meek and mild madonnas seems to follow a redemptive trajectory, which deconstructs the “convincingly homogeneous image” (Sanders 204) of the lascivious Eve that lingers in communal memory, in order to emblematically absolve them from a past underwritten by condemnation and shame.

This ritualised act of redemption consequently emerges from, and is performed through, the communal narrator's reflection upon the painted memoirs. Through a repeated emphasis on the virginal, “child-like ... innocence” (*Madonna* 95) of the painted subjects in *Five Nuns*, the lingering prejudices captured in the narrative's framing sentence are countered, calling for alternative ways of remembering the women whose

private experiences “have remained [hidden] to this day” (89). Inflected with this vision of childlikeness, the past injustices through which Niki's rapists remains, in public memory, “a good person who had been led astray by the devil in the guise of a black woman” (88), are confronted, calling for a re-articulation of the past in terms of the private grief of those whose 'innocence' truly was stolen.³³ The acknowledgement of these injustices and hypocrisies culminates in the viewer's final comment on the image, which foregrounds how the young girls are “with child” (95), while they are only children themselves.

Despite its endeavour to bring about an acknowledgement of this painful past, and re-expose its ideological absurdities, the redemptive inflection of Mda's ekphrastic performances may suggest that his narrative slips into the treacherous trajectory against which Samuelson and Mbembe have cautioned. By imbuing the publicly shamed figures with childlike innocence, and thus moving from 'trauma' to 'recovery', these particular re-presentations of identity might echo the homogenising discourses³⁴ which potentially preclude “ways of imagining women in the nation beyond the binaries of *sexualised savage* and *domestic mother*” (Samuelson 101, my emphasis). Projects which profess this sense of healing from past abuses are also particularly perilous as they can become “projections in the past tense that dangerously deflect women's lived experience in the transitional present ... in a time and place where (often sexual) violence against [them] has been on the upsurge” (100).

However, as memoirs which mediate between past and present, the ekphrased images disallow the sense of closure that is typically required for laying these past violations to rest. Through their representational variation and variability, the painted madonnas elude the sense of finality that has been central to state-mandated projects such as the TRC hearings, for instance. Although Mda's ekphrastic re-presentation of the Excelsior 19 via the *Five Nuns* and *A Sunburnt Christ* paintings conveys a restorative vision in which their hijacked innocence is re-established in public memory, these childlike madonnas deviate from the image of peaceful radiance which the Madonna figure typically portrays. Unlike idealised Western representations of the Virgin, which marry childlike innocence and graceful maternity, and thus typically depict “a woman of calm repose, of childbearing age, in the bloom of her youthful beauty” (Thompson, “African Female” 43), these madonnas are burdened and anxiety-stricken. In *A Sunburnt Christ*, for instance, the vision of “calm repose” and “youthful beauty” (43) is usurped by “round-eyed” ambivalence and “bodies ... bent forward from invisible burdens” (*Madonna* 80).

Here, the inflection of childlike innocence is neither schematic nor conclusive. As captured in the narrator's observations, the possibility of carefree, peaceful repose is troubled by this enduring sense of anxiety, thus precluding an image of ultimate restoration or healing. Highlighting an internal condition of crisis which is

³³ This is also emphasised towards the end of the narrative, when Niki confronts her rapist, and says: “You, Johannes Smit, wronged me. You stole my girlhood” (261).

³⁴ The term 'homogenising discourses', in this context, refers specifically to the expression of national and ethnic ideals of homogeneous unity (Samuelson 2).

also ongoing, the narrator infers that the girls do not “understand why they are carrying the babies and where they are taking them” (95). In mediating between past and present, private grief and public spectacle, these ambivalent and anxiety-laden memoirs indicate that the injustices of the past leave their mark, and live on, in the realms of private grief. As such, the image of burdened pregnancy and shed blood in *A Sunburnt Christ*—emblematic, here, of a culture of violence—also suggests that such violations project into the continuing present. Thus, while Mda's ekphrastic performances iconoclastically destabilise apartheid's inscription of black women as sexualised savages, they also resist the possibility of closure from the violations which live on in the private grief of the individual, and indeed in the lived experiences of women in the transitional present.

Despite the sense of ambiguity engendered in these ekphrastic pieces, though, Mda's re-casting of these historically instrumentalised black women as virginal madonnas, albeit ambivalent and burdened ones, may still appear to follow a trajectory which moves between the binaries of 'sexualised savage' and 'domestic unit'. Specifically, the conflation of childlike innocence and burdened anxiety risks painting a reductive picture in which the women become wounded subjects or tragic victims of the past. If such inflections risk producing a performance of black femininity which is underwritten by a discourse of victimisation, to what extent do the painted memoirs reinforce or contest this equally injurious inscription?

As an example which lends itself to this discussion, Zola Maseko's well-known visual documentary entitled *The Life and Times of Sara Baartman: 'The Hottentot Venus'* (1998) has been criticised as such a reductive narrative, in which Bartman is re-presented as a pure and innocent mother, as opposed to a depraved prostitute. Samuelson describes how Maseko's documentary enacts a ritual of redemption specifically by displaying the plaster cast of Bartman's body covered in a virginal white sheet. Using the sheet as a motif of concealment, modesty and decency, this performance plays on tropes of innocence and domesticity in order to restore dignity to her identity. Despite its honourable intentions of destabilising her inscription as colonialism's Hottentot Venus, Samuelson highlights that this representation problematically invokes the discourse of domesticity, and indeed domestication, that was imbricated with the Western need to “civilise” black women by “clothing them 'properly', so that their bodies would be covered and enclosed” (Comaroff qtd. in Samuelson 96). This performative return to innocence via motifs of concealment dangerously “inflects decency with the domesticity into which colonial agents attempted to mould African women, and which was defined precisely through its difference from the sexualised savagery that Bartman was called upon to represent” (Samuelson 96). Efforts to restore dignity to the violated black female subject through Western mores of 'decency' may, in this way, unintentionally reiterate the “colonial missionary endeavour of re-making savage subjects as decorous domestic ones”, and thus affirm its “shameful and shame-filled responses to the uncovered female body” (97).

Like Maseko's project, which attempts to redeem Bartman from a shame-filled history by emblematically

concealing her body with a virginal sheet, Mda's ekphrastic re-presentation of the Excelsior 19 as virginal madonna figures appears, at first glance, to similarly replicate these injuries. Juxtaposed to the representation of innocence and suffering, the portrayal of madonnas clad in “head-veils that flow almost to the ground” (*Madonna* 95), “blue dresses and shawls” and “blue head-veils ... [h]iding their feet” (80) might be read as a conflation of dignity with Western codes of decency, which “re-make savage subjects as decorous domestic ones” (Samuelson 97). To what extent do these 'redemptive' performances conform to a specifically 'domesticated' dignity, then, and potentially affirm apartheid's “shameful and shame-filled responses” (97) to black women and their bodies?

Once again, the ekphrastic pieces elude homogeneous inscriptions, and rather emphasise variation, ambiguity and heterogeneity. While the painted memoirs play on tropes of innocence by portraying the Excelsior 19 as childlike figures who are cloaked and veiled, they do not collectively adhere to an image of bodily concealment. Reinforced by the serial variation on a sustained theme, the same childlike madonnas whose bodies are entirely covered in *Five Nuns* appear again with “bare breasts”, “black nipples” and a “black navel planted on a brown round stomach” (*Madonna* 80) in *A Sunburnt Christ*. As portrayals in which the black female body is explicitly uncovered, these performances accentuate, rather than enclose, the intimate feminine features which have been subject to the 'shameful and shame-filled' responses of colonialism and apartheid alike, and thus re-expose them to the public eye.

Critics such as John Berger, Laura Mulvey and Mieke Bal have famously cautioned against such contentious re-exposures, arguing that they may invite a repetition of the voyeuristic Western male gaze and its exploitative effects.³⁵ However, Wallace-Sanders conversely argues that the protective act of concealment is equally detrimental as it “deters an audience from acknowledging and accepting black women's normal, healthy sexuality and their existence as whole—and sexual—human beings” (168). Mda's ekphrastic representations similarly appear to avoid this protective act of concealment as a means of restoring dignity to the previously instrumentalised characters; rather, by juxtaposing motifs of childlike innocence and intimate feminine sexuality, the painted madonnas resist being recast as either exploited, eroticised objects, or docile units whose dignity is underwritten by domestication. This vision of femininity invites a restorative view of “normal, healthy sexuality”, rather than eliciting a repeated 'dismemberment' which denies “their existence as whole—and sexual—human beings” (168). As ritualised acts of remembrance, these performative pieces therefore also encourage a nurtured, holistic view of femininity in the process of coming to terms with our painful “yesterdays”, and fashioning new myths, symbols, political structures and consciousness in an often ambivalent “continuing present” (*Madonna* 38).

³⁵ All three critics have argued that the portrayal of the female nude is an inherently voyeuristic act, which serves to reinforce the power of the male gaze. Berger's *Ways of Seeing* (1972) and Mulvey's *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Pleasure* (1975) in particular have pioneered this discussion.

She Is Holding the Sun

Thus far, the ekphrastic performances exemplified in *Five Nuns* and *A Sunburnt Christ* have endowed Mda's narrative with a vision of femininity that unsettles the silences and blindnesses of past injustices, and also deviates from the reductive representations of homogenising discourses. However, another piece entitled *She Is Holding the Sun* goes a step further, by also investing the subjects with a clear sense of agency, and defiant heterogeneity. Diverging from decolonising discourses which, to echo Mbembe, mobilise the figure of the African as a tragic, wounded subject, and deny their “capacity for self-making, self-reference and self-expression” (qtd. in Mongin, Lempereur and Schlegel), this ekphrastic performance provides a more complex view of subjectivity which does not shy away from powerful, and even militant, acts performed by these individuals.

Although the unclothed black female body has, according to Rory Bester, typically denoted a removal of power and agency, black women have also “used their nakedness to disarming effect, to claim or reclaim a power that is threatened or lost” (qtd. in Thompson, “African Female” 15), particularly in contexts of violence and violation.³⁶ If they have indeed deliberately “exploit[ed] ... the power of their own nudity as a tactic of resistance to disarm colonial and apartheid oppression” (Thompson, “Decolonising” 299), enshrouding these militant acts in a discourse of victimisation can be equally injurious to their identities, by “elid[ing] women's agency and resistance during the years of ... oppression and ... struggle” (Samuelson 101). In Mda's narrative, the ekphrased rendering of *She Is Holding the Sun* foreshadows imminent acts of resistance undertaken by the protagonist, and presents an image of militant feminine subjectivity that impedes this reductive view of victimhood. The painting is described by the communal narrator as follows:

She is holding the sun entwined in her arms. It is blazing red. With streaks of yellow. She is all impasto black and blue and yellow. The sun glows through her body, giving it patches of fluorescent red. She sits like a Buddha embracing the sun. She is wide awake, for night has passed. The whites of her eyes are milky white and the pupils are black like the night. Everything around her is fiery red. [...] She is dark and sinister. And beautiful. Under her impasto sun, plants are wilting. (*Madonna* 25)

Deviating from the images of childlikeness, anxiety and intimacy presented in *Five Nuns* and *A Sunburnt Christ*, *She Is Holding the Sun* confronts the viewer with a vision of visceral hostility. Evoking a performance of feminine subjectivity that has powerfully antagonistic effects, this madonna commandeers a blazing sun which, in Western traditions, has constituted an enduring and potent symbol of masculinity.³⁷ As

³⁶ Thompson recounts some famous historical examples of this: one such incident took place in 1929, when crowds of naked women protested in anti-colonialist demonstrations in Eastern Nigeria; another occurred in 1990, when a group of South African women in Soweto stripped off their clothes as an act of resistance against white policemen, who had ordered them to evacuate their houses in the informal settlement, which would be imminently destroyed by bulldozers (“African Female”, 15).

³⁷ This symbolism is also discussed by Fincham in *Dance of Life*.

the more forceful of the two bodies, the sun's fiery masculine power has traditionally been reinforced in opposition to the feminine, womb-like moon—the submissive receiver and reflector of the sun's light and heat. In stark defiance of these familiar Western symbols, this domineering madonna overturns their associations of power by using her physicality to expropriate it as “*her* impasto sun”, until “plants are wilting” (25, my emphasis). Despite her “dark and sinister” appearance, however, she is neither grotesque nor monstrous—rather, it is the fact that she is “beautiful” (25) that affords her this power.

Significantly, this domineering and hostile image is positioned as a performative frame for a chapter in which Niki responds to her abusers, who continue to prey on her with a “thirst for her [that] could not be quenched” (23), by “nursing an ungodly grudge” (43):

While the Cronje men were seized by fiends of lust, anger was slowly simmering in Niki. A storm was brewing. Quietly. Calmly. Behind her serene demeanour she hid dark motives of vengeance. [...] We wondered why she did not resign from Excelsior Slaghuis after being humiliated like that.³⁸ But she knew something we did not know. She was biding her time. (42)

Offset by the ekphrastic image of the concurrently threatening and alluring madonna figure, Niki responds to these ongoing violations by exploiting the seductive power of her nudity as a tactic of resistance. Her desire for vengeance eventually finds its expression in the “dark and sinister” (25) motives through which she seizes the power previously exercised over her, and turns it back onto her former abusers. As a means of countering her public humiliation by the Cronje family, Niki appropriates her physicality, which she has learnt to see as a site of enslaving shame, as a weapon which she uses against them. By putting on a display in which she wilfully 'succumbs' to Stephanus' sexual advances, Niki exploits his weaknesses to unravel the Cronjes' public image of stalwart righteousness in the local community. Mda recounts how Niki perceives these acts as opportunities to destabilise the power of her abusers, with the knowledge that they are, at least momentarily, “entirely in her power” (50). He writes:

She looked into his eyes in the light of the moon. She did not see Stephanus Cronje, owner of Excelsior Slaghuis. She did not see a boss or a lover. [...] She was gobbling up Madam Cronje's husband, with the emphasis on *Madam*. [...] Chewing him to pieces. [...] Squealing like a pig being slaughtered. Heaving like a dying pig. Ag, shame. (50)

These militant exploits continue in the organised acts of miscegenation that follow, in which Niki and her eighteen comrades, as well as five white men including Johannes Smit and Stephanus Cronje, participate. Mda describes how the Excelsior 19 collectively and consciously appropriate their sexuality not only to subvert the power of their former abusers, but also to dissolve their camaraderie. Recalling the ekphrastic

³⁸ This refers to the butchery incident outlined at the beginning of this chapter.

performance in which the madonna figure is “wide awake, for night has passed” (25), Niki engages in these unlawful “escapades” with sobriety and a “full awareness of the power packed in her body”, using it “consciously to get what she wanted” (53). The infighting that is eventually caused amongst the men during these “partner-swapping orgies” (53) places Niki in a new position of power, which allows her to humiliate her childhood rapist, by denying him the pleasures she freely grants his comrades, “as if he was something someone had forgotten to throw into a rubbish bin” (53).

As an example of how previously instrumentalised subjects have also consciously appropriated “the power of their own nudity as a tactic of resistance to disarm colonial and apartheid oppression” (Thompson, “Decolonising” 299), Mda recounts how these militant acts overflow into the political sphere, and unsettle its hegemonic ideologies. The political infighting amongst members of the National Party following the Excelsior trials is subsequently attributed to the “orgiastic moans” of the Excelsior 19, such that “the whole nation was shaken to its foundations”, and apartheid’s master narrative is put “under threat because of [their bodies]” (*Madonna* 103). Performatively framed by the dark, sinister and beautiful madonna figure in *She Is Holding the Sun*, these belligerent acts reinforce a vision of feminine agency that has the power to deflate, or “[wilt]” (34), the patriarchal ideologies of apartheid.

With reference specifically to Saartjie Bartman, Samuelson has tentatively concluded that the re-inscription of historically instrumentalised subjects as virginal, domestic or maternal symbols detrimentally conceals their capacity for agency, and thus renders them mute in cultural memory. By promoting a view of self-determination, this ekphrastic performance avoids such concealments of agency, which get lost in discourses of victimisation. Privileging, instead, their ability to “reclaim a power that is threatened or lost” (Thompson, “African Female” 15), *She Is Holding the Sun* gives Mda’s narrative an occasion for re-imagining, and remembering, not only the injustices of the past, but also the subversive acts performed by these subjects, which are powerful even within contexts of violence and subjection. Thus, in addition to iconoclastically unsettling apartheid’s construction of a degenerate black femininity, and restoring private grief to public memory, Mda’s ekphrastic performances also reinforce a vision of powerful female agency, rather than tragic victimisation.

Viewed as constituents of an interchangeable series of images, these heterogeneous performances resist, and subsequently trouble, an essentialised representation of identity. Woven around the stories of the Excelsior 19, Mda’s ekphrastic narrative re-presents the characters, concurrently, as innocent victims of childhood abuse, whose private grief projects into the continuing present, as suggested in *Five Nuns*; additionally, they are still affirmed as whole, sexual human beings, via the intimate feminine features accentuated in *A Sunburnt Christ*. Moreover, they embody the roles of powerful agents, as portrayed in *She Is Holding the Sun*. In envisioning ‘redemption’ from a legacy of pain, trauma and shame in South Africa’s transitional moment, these serially-arranged ekphrastic performances privilege a sense of variation, ambiguity and

indeterminacy, rather than conclusiveness. In so doing, they converge upon a protean view of femininity that both resists and unsettles homogenising discourses which “foreclose ways of imagining women in the nation beyond the binaries of sexualised savage and domestic mother” (Samuelson 101).

All These Madonnas

This final exemplary piece illustrates perhaps most poignantly how Claerhout's paintings give the text a framework for imagining 'redemption' from a painful past. Accordingly, the protagonist's own healing process is nurtured in the painter-priest's studio, where she becomes the primary subject-matter for some of his portraits. After the dismissal of the Excelsior case, Niki becomes a destitute, single mother of two children—one of them being the 'illegitimate' daughter resulting from her involvement in acts of miscegenation. As a result of her public disapprobation, her tainted reputation forces her to beg for handouts from members of Excelsior's white community, including those originally responsible for her violations.

Contrasting both the childlike innocence and militant agency by which she was previously characterised, Niki becomes a marginalised, spectral and mostly homebound figure who “withdraw[s] into a world of hermitry ... almost complete solitude” (*Madonna* 119). Her symbolic 'spectrality' is also reinforced by her appearance, which is now “marred by ... chubaba patches” (9), following her use of “Super Rose skin-lightening cream”³⁹ in order to dissociate herself from her own blackness, which she links to an “age of darkness” (82). In this latter half of the novel, her character therefore appears to slip into the role of the tragic victim which the text has, until now, avoided. This may, in turn, appear to contradict earlier inferences that the ekphrastic narrative encourages a heterogeneous view of feminine subjectivity, in the process of fashioning new myths, symbols, political structures and consciousness.

Problematically, Niki's embodiment and pursuit of a 'domesticated' identity appears to echo colonial mores in which dignity and respectability were primarily encoded as “domestic, and tied to an approximation of whiteness” (Samuelson 97). While this positions Niki's character within a discourse of domesticity, or indeed domestication, her identity becomes troubled further by the lingering judgements of the community. In an attempt to make an honest living, Niki poses for the painter-priest whose artistic practice has become renowned in Excelsior. However, this merely “seals her fate” as a shameful 'fallen Mother'; as the communal narrator scathingly remarks: “[T]he habit of stripping for white men had been so deeply embedded in her that she was not even ashamed to display her nakedness within God's own premises” (*Madonna* 124).

At this point, the protagonist appears to oscillate between the two equally deleterious poles of 'sexualised savage' and 'domestic unit'. However, once again, the performative dimension of the narrative presents a

³⁹ According to Mda, this cream was invented by the Krok brothers, who amassed “untold fortunes as a result of black women's quest for whiteness” (81).

paradigm of feminine subjectivity which evades such reductive conclusions. The ekphrastically rendered painting entitled *All These Madonnas*, which ties in most directly with the novel's title, imagines redemption from these injurious inscriptions as follows:

Madonnas all around. Exuding tenderness. Burnt umber mother in a blue shirt, squatting in a field of yellow ochre wheat. Burnt sienna baby wrapped in white lace resting between her thighs. Mother with gaping mouth. Big oval eyes. Naked breasts dangling above the baby's head. Flaky blue suggesting a halo. Unhampered bonding of mother and child in wheat.

Brown madonnas with big breasts. A naked madonna lying in a bed of white flowers. Her lips are twisted. Her voluptuous thighs are wide open, ready to receive drops of rain. A black pubic forest hides her nakedness. Her breasts are full and her nipples are hard. Under her arm she carries a baby wrapped in white lace. A naked madonna holds a naked child against a blue moon on a purple sky. The mother is kissing the back of the child's head. Another madonna kneels, her head resting on the ground near the child in white lace, and her buttocks opening up to the sky. Ready to receive drops of rain. [...] Like all the others, she is naked. (11)

Appearing, at first glance, to conform to an image of domesticity, this painted memoir recasts Mda's protagonist within the familiar Mother-and-Child motif with which the Madonna figure is traditionally associated. Because the figures “[exude] tenderness” in their “unhampered bonding” (11) with their infants, the ekphrastic performance seems to invite a vision of femininity that is embedded primarily in an immersive, nurturing, maternal role. As highlighted by Thompson, this maternal imagery has constituted one of the most prevalent and enduring icons of womanhood in Western and non-Western contexts alike. In the context of South Africa, and its transition period in particular, the image of the “fecund and bountiful [African] Mother” has, moreover, been deployed as a “symbol of wholeness and unity” for the collective “national body” (Samuelson 101).

Problematically, icons of African motherhood have historically also served to reinforce the patriarchal ideologies of colonialism's 'civilising' mission. In particular, they have distorted perceptions of black feminine subjectivity by yoking their agency to social and biological roles, which specifically “harness sexuality to motherhood and reproduction” (Lewis, “Myths” 21). Consequently, this inscription of black motherhood came to feature in Western discourses as a “metaphor for a claimable African female identity”, or a symbol for the “colonised, domesticated and racially mapped” (21) black female body. By re-presenting the Excelsior 19 as maternal nurturers, to what extent might Mda's ekphrastic performance in *All These Madonnas* risk appropriating their bodies as a “symbol of wholeness and unity” (Samuelson 101), and thus recasting them as a “metaphor for a claimable African female identity” (Lewis, “Myths” 21)?

A closer examination of the ekphrastic piece reveals that these madonnas do not conform entirely to

traditional ideas or images associated with the maternal symbol. Rather, they interrupt these projected readings. Via the communal narrator's emphasis on physical signifiers which appear misplaced, or even inappropriate, within the broader Mother-and-Child theme, the image of the benign maternal nurturer is quickly compromised. Here, the theme of domesticity is undercut by an emphasis on the figures' sexual, even erotic, physical features, such as a “gaping mouth”, “[n]aked breasts dangling”, “lips ... twisted”, “voluptuous thighs ... wide open”, “black pubic forest”, “breasts ... full and nipples ... hard”, “buttocks opening up to the sky” and, quite obviously, they are all entirely uncovered and unabashedly “naked” (*Madonna* 11). By converging signifiers of maternity and sensuality, this ekphrastic performance precludes a view of feminine subjectivity that is either hyperbolically lascivious or demurely domestic, or, ultimately, “claimable ... colonised, domesticated and racially mapped” (Lewis, “Myths” 21). As such, it affirms a sense of ambiguity, heterogeneity and indeterminacy, which resists essentialised or imposed demarcations of black womanhood.

Although the serially-arranged images remain within the boundaries of the Madonna-and-Child theme, and are therefore limited to a particular iconographic framework, they are neither stereotypical nor essentialised. *All These Madonnas* is a salient example of this. As a defining principle of her collaborative visual arts project documented in *Black Womanhood: Images, Icons and Ideologies of the African Body* (2009), Thompson has suggested that heterogeneous or “undecidable” representations, which evade the mores of familiar Western iconography, may “divorce black nudity from a history of the colonial or ethnographic spectacle” and the “stereotypes and ... taxonomies embedded in these images”; thus, they may draw the viewer's attention, instead, to “their own projected readings of the subject's identity [and] the real or imagined histories they convey” (“Decolonising” 288). These representational strategies may, in this way, advocate an image of the black female agent as a “conveyor of beauty, sexuality, and self-confidence over which *she* maintains control” (290, my emphasis).

Characterised by an inherent ambiguity, this ekphrastic performance not only unsettles the iconographic boundaries of the colonial or ethnographic spectacle, but also privileges a vision of femininity that is underwritten by a celebratory self-possession. Although it is potentially problematic that the artworks are originally Claerhout's portrayals, and then Mda's, and that the original subjects do not maintain direct control over the particular representations, the painted memoirs nevertheless champion a view in which the women are self-sufficient conveyors of a multi-faceted beauty and sexuality, and agents with a capacity for self-making and self-expression. This also contrasts the reductive, prejudiced perceptions presented in the external narrative. However, even here, the ekphrastic performance avoids an unambiguous view of restoration that effaces the ongoing presence and possibility of grief; once again, features like a “gaping mouth”, “oval eyes” and “lips ... twisted” (*Madonna* 11) become ambivalent signifiers which can denote either, or indeed both, ecstasy and suffering. Thus, while the image advocates a celebration of the subject's “capacity for self-making, self-reference and self-expression”, it also precludes an amnesia that conceals the

“pain and radical loss” (Mbembe qtd. in Mongin, Lempereur and Schlegel) of our “yesterdays”, which overflows into the “continuing present” (*Madonna* 38).

Linked most directly to the peritext of the novel's title, *All These Madonnas* is used to frame the beginning of Niki's “healing work”, which is catalysed “by the creations of the trinity” (267). In particular, this healing process is initiated through the voluntary uncovering of what she has learnt to view as her “maimed, immoral black female body”, which has been “used to discredit” her as a “speaking [subject]” (Hammonds qtd. in Lewis, “Empowering” 23). Although the reader is reminded that “the trinity's was clearly a male gaze”, and that “it was not the first time a white man had seen her naked”, this experience is “different” (*Madonna* 13). Diverging from the prejudices of Niki's external world, the trinity's mystical protest paintings present her with a vision in which she is neither overtly eroticised, nor domesticated. Thus, she concludes that “he did not seem to see her nakedness even though he painted it” (12). Alongside the ekphrastic performances, these experiences reinvigorate a view of feminine subjectivity in which there is nothing degenerate, undignified or shameful about the black female body. Indeed, Samuelson has emphasised that “shame requires the subject's participation in the discourse of shame—their complicity, in other words” (106). Towards disarming the power of this injurious legacy, the narrator describes Niki's refusal to participate in the discourse of shame any longer:

[Her] garments fell on the floor, one by one, until her smooth body glowed ... in all its glorious blackness. (*Madonna* 12)

Conclusion

Commenting on the notion that “memory is a key way in which a sense of continuity and unity can be restored in South Africa”, Sarah Nuttall and Carli Coetzee write: “It also remains as a challenge to all who are, in some way, involved in the past, to keep multiple versions of the past alive and not to privilege, as has so often been done, a few master narratives that offer a sense of unity at the cost of ignoring fracture and dissonance” (14). Referring specifically to narratives of the transition period which have sought to address this painful past in the process of navigating an uncertain present, Yogita Goyal likewise suggests that “rather than being collapsed together, past and present must be made to interact in dynamic ways ... in order to make these rituals meaningful” (49).

This sense of dynamism is engendered in *The Madonna of Excelsior*, which excavates the 'lacunae' of South African history as a means of generating new symbols, myths, political structures and consciousness in the transitional present. Through the performative dimension of ekphrasis, the narrative re-presents and re-imagines the past, in order to confront its legacy of injustice, trauma and shame, which echoes in our individual and collective memory, and the new social imaginary. However, by foregrounding the variable,

heterogeneous and indeterminate nature of the subject-matter, the serially-arranged memoirs also prevent a sense of closure, and resist integration into reductive homogenising discourses. In this way, the author's textualised rendering of Claerhout's protest paintings allows the narrative to performatively restore to public memory the complex, multi-faceted identities of formerly instrumentalised subjects, and female agents in the South African nation, both past and present.

Suggesting that the process of restoration does not always offer complete redemption, however, Niki's character remains a fairly peripheral member of Excelsior, haunted by “snippets of gossip” (*Madonna* 119). Additionally, Mda concludes that her “healing work” had merely “been *begun* by the creations of the trinity” (267, my emphasis). Thus, while the ekphrastic performances, as ritualised acts of remembrance, serve to mark the beginning of a new era, they continue to mediate between past and present; in this way, they indicate that the work of national healing is ongoing, and indelibly linked to the past. As such, they answer Nuttall and Coetzee's challenge to “keep multiple versions of the past alive”, rather than privileging a singular master narrative that “offer[s] a sense of unity at the cost of ignoring fracture and dissonance” (14) in the present. Accordingly, Mda's communal narrator remarks that the painted memoirs are representations of “*whole* lives that are frozen and rendered timeless” (38, my emphasis).

Finally, the ekphrastic dimension of Mda's novel also provides a paradigm for dialoguing with this legacy of pain, by advocating, and celebrating, a nurtured, holistic and unbounded view of subjectivity, which disarms the discourses of shame, condemnation and victimisation that leave their mark in South Africa's transitional present. Thus, the text-images are not merely cosmetic features, but also allow Mda to translate into the narrative the painter-priest's aesthetic and social vision, which sought to “bring new hope to people in order to search with love for new attitudes and opportunities for reconciliation” (Claerhout 1). Towards this vision of hope and renewal, but also continuous remembrance, the communal narrator concludes:

After twenty-five years, these naked madonnas still live. Popi tells us they will live forever because such things never die. (*Madonna* 12)

The following chapter considers the equally, if not more, ambiguous means of addressing the fractures and dissonances of the 'new' nation, as it navigates the precarious process of transformation.

Chapter Three

Transgressive Identities and Ekphrastic Transformations: Reinventing the Nation through the Painterly Space in *The Madonna of Excelsior*

Art constitutes a form of proof that we are more than the exterior bodies that transport us ... a subversive claim in the face of injustice and oppression and all that would turn human beings into counters to be manipulated, to be pushed and shoved ... as if they had not been created in the image of God.

Desmond Tutu
(qtd. in Hess 61)

Also: brown contains black—how would a person behave for us to say of him that he knows a pure, primary brown? We must always bear in mind the question: how do people learn the meaning of colour names?

Ludwig Wittgenstein
(qtd. in Wicomb 91)

The transition from apartheid to democracy has been read as a moment of social, cultural, political and artistic re-imagining, and a time in which South Africa has sought to “reinvent itself in distinction from the past dispensation” (Ibinga 1). In heralding a shift away from a nation “characterised by division” to one “united under the hazy glow of the rainbow” (Samuelson 2), many post-1994 literary responses aimed to represent the “contentious aspect of South Africa with regard to two dominant 'races' being able to accommodate and live harmoniously with one another” (Raditlhalo 103). By implication, however, many such responses also risked neglecting the social subjects occupying South Africa's ethnic and cultural interstices, and leaving little space for representing alternative forms of identity under the banner of 'unity in diversity'. While the first half of *The Madonna of Excelsior* revisits the painful recesses of South Africa's history, the latter half tells the story of Popi, a vilified “coloured girl” (*Madonna* 13), whose perceived racial and cultural 'in-betweenness' poignantly illustrates the problem of 'belonging' within a national body still shaped by the social prejudices of apartheid. Building on the preceding section, which focused on how Mda's ekphrastic narrative re-envisioned South Africa's traumatic past, I consider the ways in which it also grapples with the ambivalent period of transition. Turning from the *subject-matter* and *arrangement* to the more elusive *form* and *function* of Claerhout's paintings, this chapter aims to explore how Mda's evocative and sensuously-charged ekphrastic performances engage with these individual and collective dissonances, within the broader context of national re-imagining, reinvention and transformation.

Thus far, this study has surveyed how the ekphrastic form of *The Madonna of Excelsior* endeavours to re-envision, and rewrite, apartheid's legacy of pain, trauma and shame. However, the current chapter seeks to explore how it might also offer what Boehmer has called a “potential syntax of images, within which to think

about the unrepresented future” (“Endings” 47).⁴⁰ In anticipation of the myriad changes that democracy would bring to national life, Albie Sachs wrote a renowned paper entitled *Preparing Ourselves for Freedom* (1989), in which he called for an “artistic and cultural vision” that would correspond to the “phase in which a new South African nation is emerging” (239).⁴¹ For Sachs, the need for this new vision was qualified in light of the critical question: “Have we begun to grasp the full dimensions of the new country and new people that is struggling to give birth to itself, or are we still trapped in the multiple ghettos of apartheid?” (239). While his question foregrounded the richness and potential of the new nation, it also implicitly emphasised how the nation was not yet malleable enough to accommodate the complexity of the emerging socio-cultural landscape. Thus, it expressed the need to find new ways of addressing the residual “fracture and dissonance” (Nuttall and Coetzee 14) of the past, which would inevitably leave its mark on the coming democratic era.

In light of this ambivalent process of transition, Njabulo Ndebele suggested that the move from the old dispensation to a new balance of power would need to be forged through the “interactive struggles” (“Memory” 151) of new relationships—social, cultural, political and artistic. With reference to the wide “range of content at the centre of our interactive public space” (152), Ndebele called for the “generation of new meanings”, which would emerge from this evocative “in-between place”⁴² (Flockemann 250), and give rise to a “humanising space of immense complexity” (“Memory” 151).⁴³ He described the creative impetus of this interactive space as follows:

It is a space brewing with risk-taking ... intrigue, transparency and obfuscation, real and imaginary boundaries, negotiation and imposition ... alignments and realignments, shifting identities ... redeeming truths and insights leading to optimism and progress, and the excitement of infinite possibility. [...] [It] releases new energies that have the potential ... to render the inherited binary relationships ... transient. (151)⁴⁴

Much like Sachs, Ndebele also stressed the imperative for art, specifically, to not focus purely on the tribulations of apartheid, but rather to “prepare us for a radically different future by envisaging it in all its promise and all its complexity” (Medalie 52). In *Rediscovery of the Ordinary* (1991), he pinpoints the role of the writer as follows:

⁴⁰ Boehmer's idea was also outlined in the General Introduction at the outset of this study.

⁴¹ This paper was prepared for an ANC in-house seminar on culture in 1989, in anticipation of democracy.

⁴² This notion of an 'in-between place' is somewhat reminiscent of Homi Bhabha's 'Third Space', as outlined in *The Location of Culture* (1994). This point will be discussed in the second half of this chapter.

⁴³ Ndebele also refers to the narrative impetus of the TRC in this discussion.

⁴⁴ In this sense, the interactive “humanising space” referred to by Ndebele serves to overcome pre-determined binary relationships, and “explode [them] into a multiplicity of relationships” (151). This idea is also discussed in Flockemann's article.

[T]he greatest challenge ... is in the search for ways of thinking, ways of perception, that will help to break down the closed epistemological structures of South African oppression. [...] The challenge is to free the entire social imagination of the oppressed from the laws of perception that have characterised apartheid society. For writers this means freeing the creative process itself from those very laws. It means extending the writer's perception of what can be written about, and the means and methods of writing. (65)

As indicated by David Medalie, much of Ndebele's writing underscores the impossibility of bringing a new society into being, if it has not been invigorated in the individual and collective imagination first. In the context of “acute social transition” (Flockemann 248), enormous power has, for this reason, been accorded to the “aesthetic imagination” and “sensory experience”, as catalysts for “psychic transformation” and “enabling alternative ways of seeing and being” (250).⁴⁵ The generative potential invested in these imaginative forms can be explained in light of what Henri Bergson has called a “release of creativity” (qtd. in White 52). According to Bergson, processes of creativity and renewal are inhibited by pre-determined structures, customs or routines; however, by overwhelming the perception with new emotions or sensations, the imagination can cause a “profound and fundamental break”, and effect an “openness towards movement and change that provokes us to dispense with habitual modes of thinking and to embrace profoundly new insights and ideas” (52). Although Bergson specifically refers to the creative practice of the artist, here, his explanation also lends itself as an apt description of the imagination's capacity to stimulate processes of change and transformation, and, in Ndebele's words, work “towards creating *new* thoughts, *new* worlds” (“Thoughts” 17, my emphasis).

Mda is a salient example of a writer and artist who has responded to the imperatives expressed by both Sachs and Ndebele. Characterised by highly imaginative and often experimental form and content, his works have, accordingly, been described as “novels in transition—speaking and creating the unstable language of ‘the new South Africa’” (Mazibuko 24). Although the first half of *The Madonna of Excelsior* returns to the painful recesses of history, the latter half presents a moving coming-of-age narrative that mirrors the emergence of the democratic nation and its new social imaginary. However, while its ekphrastic dimension is replete with evocative and aesthetically-rich forms, the external narrative conversely explores the volatile social conditions which, for many, trouble a sense of stability and belonging. The story of Popi, a fictitious⁴⁶ “coloured girl” (*Madonna* 13), foregrounds these tensions particularly clearly. This chapter will, therefore, briefly outline how Popi's story serves to illustrate a potential entrapment in “the multiple ghettos of apartheid” (Sachs 239); additionally, however, it seeks to explore how the novel's ekphrastic performances

⁴⁵ Flockemann also notes that this “focus on re-invention through narrative”, which often registers a “shift from realism” (248), has specifically arisen in response to past trauma.

⁴⁶ Unlike Niki's character, who is based on one of the historical Excelsior 19 figures, Popi's character is fictional. Although many children like Popi were born under similar circumstances, the details of her story do not adhere to specific historical events.

offer alternative “ways of thinking, ways of perception” (Ndebele, *Rediscovery* 65), that allow these dissonant social realities to be challenged, and re-imagined.

Unbelonging, Strangerhood and Shame: Imagining Popi, Excelsior's 'Hotnot Girl'

Popi's character is introduced to the narrative in the fictionalised painter-priest's studio, five years after Excelsior's 1971 miscegenation scandal. Born to a black mother and white father, Popi embodies a perceived racial and cultural 'in-betweenness' that becomes a point of antagonism in the rural town's rigidly binarised community.⁴⁷ As a young child, she is already “conscious of her nakedness” (*Madonna* 107), and acutely aware of the external features which mark her difference from both the black and white members of the community: “She knew that the priest must have been wondering why Popi was so different from other children. Why she was so light in complexion. Why her eyes were blue, and why she had flowing locks” (3). Popi's anxieties are fuelled primarily by the judgements and prejudices of her black community, who stigmatise her as a “hotnot girl” or “morwa torwe”⁴⁸ (114), and the product of Niki's shameful “barn escapades” (59). These attitudes are mirrored with equal measure in the white community, where her resemblance to Tjaart Cronje, with whom she shares a white father, is a public secret. This “taboo subject” (143), evidenced in the fact that “they looked as if they had hatched from the same egg” (153), results in relentless personal attacks by Tjaart, which later begin to “[destabilise] her life” (198). Moreover, the scar covering her chest becomes a persistent reminder of how her own mother attempted to “[smoke] the pinkness out of her” (66), in order to “brown her”, and disguise her contentious difference.⁴⁹

As a source of contempt in both Excelsior's black and white communities, Popi's perceived racial and cultural 'hybridity' relegates her to the margins of social life well into her adulthood, as she unsuccessfully tries to eke out a niche of belonging. Although the complexities and nuances of the collectively termed 'coloured identity' surpass the scope of the current study,⁵⁰ Popi's experience resonates with how “colouredness” has historically been “constructed and experienced as a residual, supplementary identity, 'in-between' whiteness and blackness” (Nuttall, “City Forms” 733).⁵¹ Based on essentialised categories of racial

⁴⁷ The setting of Popi's story in a specifically rural context is significant. Its isolated nature does not offer a broad social exposure to alternative ethnicities and cultures, which a city context, for instance, would.

⁴⁸ These are offensive terms meaning 'coloured girl'.

⁴⁹ The narrative describes how Niki attempts to darken her daughter's skin, not only to prevent Popi's stigmatisation, but also to disguise the evidence of her own legal 'transgressions', which would lead to her prosecution. Mda writes: “Both heat and smoke would surely brown her and no one would say she was a light-skinned child again. [...] [T]he baby's skin began to peel from her chest right up to her neck. Until the baby became truly coloured, with red and blue patches all over” (66).

⁵⁰ South African writers and scholars such as Zoë Wicomb, Mohamed Adhikari, Zimitri Erasmus and Desiree Lewis offer more comprehensive discussions of these complexities.

⁵¹ The Cape census of 1904, for example, identified three “clearly defined” racial categories, namely White, Bantu and Coloured; the latter was said to include “all intermediate shades between the first two” (Goldin qtd. in Raditlhalo 110). As a term deployed in the Nationalist government's Population Registration Act of 1950, the “coloured” identity became redefined via negative signification, namely as someone who was “not a White person or a Black” (Wicomb 101).

purity, the imbrication of “colouredness” with terms like “biracial, half-caste, mixed blood” (Nuttall, *Entanglement* 76) has signalled its perceived racial and cultural indeterminacy, or doubleness, which has carried with it a sense of displacement, and the “silent inscription of shame” (Wicomb 101).⁵² In Mda's text, the collective prejudices of Excelsior's inhabitants, as well as Popi's own sense of unbelonging and shame, is attributed to her visible deviation from the community's received norms. Failing to fit the familiar, essentialised categories of racial and cultural identity, she consequently comes to embody an effective strangerhood in an otherwise clearly demarcated black-and-white home town.

Zygmunt Baumann uses the analogy of strangerhood to describe what he calls society's 'undecidables': people who are present yet unfamiliar, and who fail to conform to pre-established, ordered categories of identity. Such strangers do not “fit the cognitive, moral or aesthetic map of the world” and “by their sheer presence, make obscure what ought to be transparent, confuse what ought to be ... straightforward ... befog and eclipse the boundary lines which ought to be clearly seen [and are] deemed crucial to its orderly and/or meaningful life” (46). For the “stranger”, this liminal position may likewise “gestate uncertainty, which in its turn breeds the discomfort of feeling lost” (46). Because her appearance disturbs Excelsior's orderly boundary lines, Popi is received “as if [she] were polychromatic” or “as if everyone else ... was transparent” (*Madonna* 59), or monochromatic. Unable to achieve a sense of stability or acceptance, she becomes emblematic, in Mda's text, of those social subjects that “find that they live in a ... world in which they do not belong” (257).⁵³

Although much of her story takes place prior to 1994, its Bildungsroman form serves to trace both Popi's and the nation's ambivalent progression from apartheid to democracy. In this context, the emphasis of her story is not on the notion of the coloured identity as such, but rather, on the problem of belonging within a nation shaped by “the closed epistemological structures of South African oppression” (Ndebele, *Rediscovery* 65). Considering the performative inflection of Mda's novel, how might its ekphrastic form lend itself to engaging with these persistent social tensions and exclusionary structures, as the narrative both foreshadows, and moves into, a time of national re-imagining, reinvention and transformation?

⁵² As indicated by its nomenclature, the notion of colouredness commonly came to signify a historical “mixture of ancestry” (Nuttall, *Entanglement* 76) between more than one essentialised racial group; for example, between Western Europeans and Khoisan, or Zulus. Thus, it came to connote an “unwanted and unfortunate consequence of the colonisation of Southern Africa and a source of embarrassment ... as reminders of past lapses in morality” (Adhikari qtd. in Raditlhalo 110). Erasmus writes that “discomfort among some coloured people with the idea of being coloured has resulted, on the one hand, in attempts to reconstruct a sense of purity based on claims to ethnicity and indigenous roots, or on the other, a complete denial of this identity” (6).

⁵³ Popi is just one of many South African subjects in Mda's novel who, in the words of Tlhalo Raditlhalo, grapple with what it means “to have a polity and a state to which one belongs” and “to be able to assert aspects of (cultural) identity that go beyond the tenuous bonds of 'race'” (103). On pages 101 and 102 of the novel, an excerpt from *The Friend* newspaper records how culturally and ethnically ambiguous identities become progressively more prevalent, not only in Excelsior, but also across the broader context of the Free State, and South Africa at large. Ato Quayson's *Calibrations: Reading for the Social* (2003) offers a broader discussion of these so-called ex-centric identities, or communities, who fail to be comfortably assimilated into the narrative of the nation state.

Zakes Mda's Ekphrastic Expressionism: Involvement (Wonder, Compassion, Humour) Versus Detachment (Contrast, Judgement, Caricature)

In the same way that Popi's story illustrates how South African society risks remaining “trapped in the multiple ghettos of apartheid”, I suggest that the ekphrastic form of Mda's narrative reveals a commitment to creating an “artistic and cultural vision” that corresponds to the “phase in which a new South African nation is emerging” (Sachs 239). Although the ekphrastic narrations explored in the preceding chapter sought to fictionalise and transform apartheid's traumatic past, Claerhout's artworks are also appropriated by Mda as imaginative paradigms through which these residual social tensions are challenged. This time, however, the emphasis shifts from the *subject-matter* and *arrangement*, to the more elusive *form* and *function*, of Claerhout's paintings. Juxtaposed to the prejudiced, monochromatic views presented in the external narrative, the artist's sensuous, emotionally-charged, and even playful representations performatively destabilise preconceived judgements, and give rise to new modes of perception. These ekphrastic performances are, I suggest, not merely aesthetic features of Mda's novel, but ones which work towards re-imagining, and potentially reconfiguring, the realms of the social.

To better illuminate how Claerhout's paintings might lend themselves to eliciting this transformative social vision in Mda's text, it is helpful to turn again briefly to Strydom's *Catcher of the Sun*. This not only provides a foundation for understanding Claerhout's artworks, but also, by extension, how they inform Mda's narrative. Situating Claerhout's painterly aesthetic within the broader genre of Expressionism, Strydom delineates the form and function of his artworks as follows:

The Expressionist painting ... represents the beginning of the abstract in art and heralds the 20th century approach in which the two-dimensional canvas or panel is no longer the background against which a three-dimensional reality is projected, but a plane on which the artist, using colour and line, creates shapes that are subject to the laws of that plane and not to those that apply in the world of time and space. The shift of focus is from the representation to the viewer's consciousness, from the content of form to the function of form, and the result is that the barrier between subject and object is lifted, and the viewer becomes creatively involved in the image, whether it be purely colour and form, or whether it harks back to an observable reality. (10)

In his ekphrastic rendering of Claerhout's paintings, Mda likewise draws attention to these highly evocative formal qualities, through which the ordered appearance of reality is distorted, and meaning is achieved primarily through the expression of emotions, senses and moods. In the novel's introductory ekphrastic passage, the communal narrator, or viewer, describes this visual experience as follows:

Colour explodes. Green, yellow, red and blue. Sleepy-eyed women are walking among sunflowers. [...] True atonement of rhythm and line. A boy is riding a donkey backwards among sunflowers. The ground is red. The sky is blue. The boy is red. The faces of the women are blue. Their hats are yellow and their dresses are blue. [...] People without feet or toes—all of them. (*Madonna 1*)

Within this communal narrative space, the ekphrastic narration registers a shift in focus “from the representation to the viewer's consciousness, from the content of form to the function of form” (Strydom 10). Conveying their creative involvement in the painting, the communal narrator describes how the image “leaps out at us in broad strokes” (*Madonna 1*). In another subjective reflection, they remark that “an impasto world glares at you noisily. But this is not the kind of noise that turns your insides. It is not discordant. It does not grate your eye. It is a saintly noise” (27). These responses resonate with the long-standing relationship between colour and emotion in the Expressionist genre. The Expressionist artist, Wassily Kandinsky, asserted that colour could rouse a highly emotional or even mystical experience in the viewer. Referring to colour as a kind of “sound”, he described how “the artist is the hand that plays, touching one key or another purposively to cause vibrations on the soul” (qtd. in Acton 114).⁵⁴ In Mda's narrative, this emotive dynamic is also conveyed in the viewer's observation that although “[the trinity's] subjects are ordinary folk doing ordinary things”, “God radiates from them” (*Madonna 131*). In this way, the ekphrastic narrations are not merely descriptive; rather, by emphasising the evocative form and function of the paintings, they illustrate how the artist's expressionistic vision elicits a creative involvement in, and affective response to, the images and their subject-matter.

This creative involvement is also experienced by Popi, who from a young age would “peer from her mother's back at the white man as he warmly and masterfully daubed his broad strokes” (2). Facilitated via the formal qualities of the paintings, which fail to “apply in the world of time and space” (Strydom 10), this expressionistic vision of reality becomes a source of fascination that draws her into the artist's world, and becomes formative to her own worldview. Mda describes how,

she was precocious enough to wonder why the [painted] houses were all so skewed. [...] Her people, those she sketched on the sand in the backyard of her township home, were not distorted like the priest's. [...] Yet his elongated people overwhelmed her with joy. She saw herself jumping down from her mother's back and walking into the canvas, joining the distorted people in their daily chores. They filled her with excitement at their ordinariness. (*Madonna 2*)

Viewed in light of Strydom's theoretical framework, the subjective visual experiences of both the communal narrator and Popi align with Claerhout's Expressionist aesthetic, where “conventional beauty is sacrificed for

⁵⁴ I am much indebted here to Flockemann's discussion on the aesthetic imagination, on pages 248 to 251 of her article, which led me to this connection.

purposes of expression”, and “meaning emanates from form, rather than from the object or model depicted” (Strydom qtd. in Jacobs, “Towards” 287). By foregrounding the powerfully sensuous qualities of the artworks, rather than just their subject-matter, Mda's ekphrastic narrations similarly emphasise their ability to offer a specifically affective view of reality, “rather than a mere representation of reality, one which is felt rather than only seen” (Strydom 10). As explained by Strydom, these formal qualities are, therefore, not merely stylistic, but serve to lift the perceptual barrier between the viewing subject and the painted object. Thus, they invite the viewer to share in the subject-matter with an attitude of “involvement (wonder, compassion, humour)” rather than “detachment (contrast, judgement, caricature)” (10).

The contrast between these disparate attitudes, or modes of perception, is particularly significant in Mda's performative appropriation of the paintings. Importantly, as Strydom has highlighted, although the viewer's creative involvement may sometimes apply directly to the colour and form of an image, it can also hark back to an observable reality. While Mda's ekphrastic narrations do indeed emphasise the evocative effects of both colour and form, they also serve to re-present the 'observable realities' of the novel in ways that destabilise familiar categories, and modes of experience. By heightening emotion and sensation, the artworks excite unexpected moments of involvement, wonder, compassion and humour in the ordinarily prejudiced communal narrator. Thus, they serve to counterbalance, and destabilise, the attitudes of detachment, contrast, judgement and caricature which pervade the external narrative. This, I suggest, enacts what Bergson has described as a “release of creativity”, which causes a “profound and fundamental break”, and effects an “openness towards movement and change that provokes [them] to dispense with habitual modes of thinking and to embrace profoundly new insights and ideas” (qtd. in White 52).

This is illustrated most clearly in relation to Popi's story, where Mda also appropriates Claerhout's paintings more explicitly as templates for his own narrative. While the artworks themselves are real, and portray actual historical subjects, Mda derives many elements of Popi's fictitious character from this pre-existing portraiture. However, he specifically uses these emotionally-charged and wonder-filled portraits as foils for his fictional discourse, in which Popi's experience as Excelsior's reviled “hotnot girl” (*Madonna* 114) serves to foreground the deeply-entrenched judgements and prejudices of apartheid's distorting ideologies.

The Blue Madonna

A poignant example of this occurs in Mda's narrativisation of a portrait entitled *The Blue Madonna*. This particular image is used to frame the beginning of Popi's story, which takes place primarily in the second half of the novel. The ekphrastic passage reads:

The blue madonna is different from the other madonnas. No cosmos blooms surround her. She is not sitting in a brown field of wheat. No sunflowers flourish in her shadow. Yet she exudes tenderness

like all the others. She is drenched in a blue light. Blue and white strokes of icy innocence. Her breasts are not hanging out. She is not naked, but wears a blue robe. A modest madonna. A madonna with flowing locks that reach her breasts. Her features are delicate. Her face is round and her pursed lips are small. Smaller than each of the slanting eyes. A face of brown, yellow and white impasto. She holds a naked baby in her hands. [...] She holds the baby in front of her breasts like an offering. [...] This madonna [is] radiant. And serene. (107-108)

Unlike the iconographic Madonna-and-Child images surveyed in the preceding chapter, which clearly represent black female subjects, the appearance of this madonna figure is distinctly different, and somewhat more enigmatic. Juxtaposed to the adjacent narrative scene, however, it becomes apparent that the portrait functions as an additional, or alternative, lens through which Popi's character is viewed. Alongside the painting, Mda describes how passengers travelling on a bus with Popi and Niki comment on the “blue-eyed child with flowing locks”, noting that “she must be a white man's child” and that “her mother must be one of the *Excelsior 19*” (109). Popi is acutely aware of how her “hotnot” appearance invites these remarks, and feels “cursed” by the “aberrations” which “betray her” and expose her difference from the “normal black people” (111) of Mahlatswetsa Location. The community's prejudices are also highlighted in Popi's interaction with her black peers, who “[fight] her for being a boesman”⁵⁵ and publicly revile her appearance, which to them resembles a “white woman's buttock” (111). Mda describes her painful experience of unbelonging as follows:

When other children saw her in the street, they shouted, 'Boesman! Boesman!' And then they ran away laughing. At first she used to cry. Then she decided that she would not go to play in the street again. She would play alone in her mother's yard. She was only good for her mother's ashy yard. She did not deserve to play with other children in the street. (111)

While the external narrative exposes the community's collective attitude of detachment, judgement, contrast and caricature towards Popi, Mda's ekphrased *The Blue Madonna* portrait becomes an alternative framework, within which she is specifically envisioned through the artist's expressionistic lens. Importantly, the ekphrastic passage does not shy away from the features which mark her contentious difference, but rather emphasises how the viewer's attention is drawn to them. Here, the description of “flowing locks”, “small lips”, “slanting eyes” and “brown, yellow and white face” (108) clearly distinguish Popi as the subject-matter of the portrait.

The perceived indeterminacy of her identity is also pictured, somewhat more elusively, in the more symbolic elements of the image. The viewer describes how Popi's image is rendered such that “both the madonna and

⁵⁵ This is a term meaning 'bushman', which has historically referred to the Khoisan heritage. Its application to Popi, who clearly has no relation to the Khoisan, shows how it is intended to be a hurtful term, loaded with racial and cultural prejudice.

the child looked like Popi ... the trinity, with a few strokes of wizardry, had planted Popi's face onto Niki's body" (108). This bizarre repetition of her image as both mother and child is symbolically suggestive of the racial and cultural 'doubleness' which causes Popi's sense of unbelonging in her home community. This is also implied in her mother's response to the image; signalling Popi's liminality and estrangement, Niki comments: "The Father has painted you twice. You are now your own mother" (108). The intrinsic sense of shame attached to this racial and cultural 'indeterminacy', which makes Popi "conscious of her nakedness", is also reflected in the "blue robe" (107) that covers the painted figure. Although this differs from Claerhout's frequently uncovered black madonnas, the specifically "icy" (107) modesty pictured here connotes her painful desire for freedom from shame.

However, while the painted subject-matter clearly harks back to Popi's contentious 'in-betweenness', the artwork is also used to counter the binarised modes of perception which pervade the external narrative. True to its expressionistic form, it serves, here, to "convince the viewer ... of the artist's emotional or intuitive interpretation of reality" (Jacobs, "Towards" 287). Thus, as Mda appropriates Claerhout's portrait to depict Popi's vexatious difference, its sensuous formal qualities also elicit an affective response which momentarily disarms the communal narrator's preconceived judgements. In their subjective reflection of the artwork, the viewer's attention is drawn to the emotive elements of the image, rendered in rich "impasto" (*Madonna* 108) textures and "icy" (107) tonal values. Illustrating how this aesthetic encounter lifts the perceptual barrier between the viewing subject and painted object, the communal narrator's prejudices succumb to an alternative vision in which Popi is exuberantly tender, "delicate", "radiant" and "serene" (108). Here, the ordinarily prejudiced narrator undergoes what Bergson calls a "break" from preconceived structures, customs or routines, and, in turn, begins to experience an "openness towards movement and change that provokes [them] to dispense with habitual modes of thinking and to embrace ... new insights and ideas" (qtd. in White 52). Deviating from the community's collective attitude of detachment, contrast, judgement and caricature, they are invited, instead, to share in the subject-matter with an attitude of involvement, wonder and compassion.

While the ekphrastic dimension of Mda's narrative tentatively gestures towards a vision of psychic transformation in which preconceived judgements are disarmed, it is, however, not limited to isolated aesthetic experiences. Rather, it serves to performatively re-imagine the domains of social life and interaction. In human relationships, as in art, the painter-priest endeavoured to "reconcile the physical and the spiritual, the social and the mystical", such that "the visual and the visionary, the ethical and aesthetic complement one another" (Strydom 9). In Mda's text, this simultaneously aesthetic and ethical vision is not only conveyed via the ekphrased artworks, but also in the artist's self-affirmed expressionistic worldview, which becomes personified in his relationships with his subjects. Although the fictionalised Claerhout remains an elusive character, his Expressionist paradigm manifests in his interactions with socially marginalised figures such as Popi. When she first arrives at his studio, Popi emanates a self-loathing that

causes her own mother to perceive her as an “unforgiving” child with an “ugly heart”, who “rarely cried, rarely laughed” (*Madonna* 110). However, through his impassioned enactment of involvement, wonder, compassion and humour, the artist catalyses the exuberant childlikeness that Popi fails to experience in her ordinary, daily life. Mda writes:

The priest was captivated by Popi. He loved all children. Even those who were emaciated and unkempt. Though Popi stayed on Niki's back all the time they were in his studio, he played with her, making all sorts of funny faces. Then he tore out a page from a magazine and shaped her a donkey. He gave it to her and pranced around the room, braying like a donkey ... and Popi laughed and laughed. (3)

In a later scene, he is “bent on coaxing her out of her anger”:

The trinity brayed like a donkey.⁵⁶ Popi's face began to melt a little. But just before she could break into a smile, she remembered that she was supposed to be sulking, and became stone-faced again. The trinity jumped up and down around her, braying even louder. She couldn't help but smile. Then she laughed. She laughed and laughed and laughed. (110)

The expressionistic characteristics of both the artist and his creations have an alleviating effect on Popi, allowing her to experience playfulness and laughter, rather than being “the source of other people's laughter” (110).⁵⁷ It is also in these encounters that she experiences the sense of acceptance for which she has been yearning. Rather than returning to her formal home, where she is “only good for her mother's ashy yard” (111), she finds herself longing “to stay with the [artist's] distorted people in their skew houses” (2). Here, Popi's understanding of what it means to 'belong' is no longer limited to a formal place of dwelling, or a pre-determined racial or cultural category; rather, it is reconfigured towards a visionary space characterised by evocative, improvisational, empathetic encounters, which lift the barriers demarcating an otherwise dispassionate black-and-white world.

⁵⁶ The repetition of the donkey theme throughout Claerhout's paintings, as well as Mda's novel, is emblematic of the artist's self-affirmed expressionistic worldview:

I am *expressionisties*. If you paint a horse, you cannot make it funny or long tail or ear, *maar* a donkey ... you can make it long ear [sic], you can make them blue or yellow. [...] Maybe I'm a kind of donkey. (Claerhout qtd. in Fincham 80)

⁵⁷ Rita Barnard's article “On Laughter, the Grotesque, and the South African Transition: Zakes Mda's Ways of Dying” (2004) offers a discussion of the liberatory effects of laughter in Mda's novels.

Who Is This Little Girl?

The contrast between these disparate worldviews emerges in similar ways as the narrative recounts Popi's development into adulthood, and foreshadows the coming democratic era. Another poignant ekphrastic exemplar appears in juxtaposition to Popi's Year of Passage—a period which signals her transition into womanhood, and thus her official entry into the community. Instead of being a time of acceptance and conciliation, however, it becomes heightened with a sense of shame and marginalisation. Once again, Mda positions one of Claerhout's portraits as an alternative lens through which her character is viewed:

Who is this little girl standing against a powder-blue sky with pink flowers for stars? Big sky and pink cosmos down to her bare feet like wallpaper. Who is this little girl in a snow-white long-sleeved frock? Covering her legs down to her ankles. Delicate feet with ten toes. [...] One side of her chest bare ... neck peeling down to her chest. Who is this little girl with flowing locks and big bright eyes and small lips? Hair dyed black. Roots show that it is naturally light brown. Almost blonde. Sunburnt blonde. Her hands raised as high as her head. Pleading for peace. For rain. Big hands opened flat so that we can count all ten of her long fingers. [...] Who is this little girl? (113)

Of all the ekphrastic exemplars of Mda's narrative, this passage contains some of the most subjective and affectively-loaded descriptions. However, unlike the radiant and serene intonations of the *Blue Madonna* portrait, this one conveys a more melancholic temperament. Re-appropriated more directly for Mda's own creative purposes, the painting explicitly serves as a template for Popi's identity, and the sense of ambivalence that it elicits. As the ekphrastic narration becomes gradually more moody,⁵⁸ and is accompanied by the refrain, “Who is this little girl?” (113), the image not only mirrors her own sense of unbelonging, but also gestures towards the community's feelings of uncertainty about her identity. This is accentuated by the portrait's juxtaposition to a scene that reveals how her 'colouredness' continues to gestate apprehension amongst her peers. Mda writes:

Popi's withdrawal from the world of her age-mates had been an escape from their snide remarks. Even at school, she kept to herself. And when she did, they said she was too proud to mix with them because she was a misis—a white woman. But when she tried to socialise with them, they called her a morwa—a coloured girl. (117)

Here, the disquieting moods of the artwork also foreshadow Popi's desire to escape the 'indeterminate' features responsible for her exclusion. Just as Claerhout's portrait features a bewildered figure with “hair dyed black”, while “[r]oots show that it is naturally light brown” (113), Popi perceives her hair as a “curse”

⁵⁸ This is suggested in the descriptive transition from “a little girl standing against a powder-blue sky with pink flowers for stars” to a figure “[p]leading for peace. For rain” (113).

in which “the pain of [her] whole life is locked” (234). This feature not only marks her visible difference, but also prevents her from establishing relationships through normative cultural means:

She watched with envy as other girls relaxed their hair by frying it with chemicals or with red-hot copper combs. She herself was deprived participation in that ritual as her hair did not need relaxing. She could not be part of the camaraderie of braiding either. [...] She alone ... could flip her hair like a white woman. (234)

Like Claerhout's painted figure, Popi also frequently wears old frocks that cover her legs, which shamefully display the hairiness of a white woman's. Much like her blonde tresses, this 'hybridised' feature becomes another cause for her rejection. Describing her feelings of self-loathing, Mda writes that while “the moon⁵⁹ was part of becoming a woman ... hairy legs were not. [...] Her peers at school discussed the changes that were happening in their bodies. [...] But no one said anything about hairy legs” (119).

While Mda employs Claerhout's painting as a template for Popi's story, here, it also serves, at a more affective level, to emphasise the contrasting attitudes which are counterpoised throughout the narrative. Echoing the moody temperament of Claerhout's portrait, Mda describes how Popi engages with her subjecthood, which is reflected back to her in the mirror. Unlike the trinity's richly expressionistic representations which “filled her with excitement at their ordinariness” and “overwhelmed her with joy” (2), she perceives the cold reality of her mirror reflection as a reified reminder, or caricatured confrontation, of her unbelonging:

[S]he hated the mirror. It exposed her to herself for what she really was. A boesman girl. A hotnot girl. Morwa torwe! You bushman you! Or when the good neighbours wanted to be polite, a coloured girl. [...] A mirror was an intrusive invention. An invention that pried into the pain of her face. (113)

Popi's embodiment of strangerhood is also suggested in her desire for her freckles to “spread to cover her whole body” (116) so that “she could look like other black children of Mahlatswetsa Location” (114) and become “a whole human being” (116). In dwelling on these 'deviant' physical features, Popi's self-inflicted judgements reveal the extent to which she has internalised the prejudices of her community. In this way, the mirror's dispassionate realism becomes emblematic of the detachment, contrast and caricature which shape both her external and internal world.

The unsympathetic nature of this reality is illuminated even more tangibly when Popi's image is captured in a celebratory photograph during her Year of Passage. This photograph is taken by one of her peers, Sekatle, who has a vocal “distaste for coloured girls” (115). For him, racially 'impure' people like Popi are responsible

⁵⁹ This is a metaphor for menstruation.

for “bringing shame into his home” (115), as living reminders of the scandalous history which he and the 'upstanding' black members of Mahlatswetsa Location have “never forgiven” (115). Just as Popi's mirror callously “exposed her to herself for what she really was” (114), Sekatle's photograph depicts an impassive vision of reality which becomes symbolic of the community's monochromatic worldviews. Unlike the “trendsetting [black] girls” (115) of Mahlatswetsa Location who enjoy having their picture taken, Popi therefore perceives the photograph merely as “cold and distant”, failing to “feel anything when she looked at it” (115).

In both of these examples, Mda draws a contrast between the cold detachment of the external narrative, and the performative ekphrastic vision of involvement and compassion. This is suggested more explicitly in the repetition of imagery which occurs in both of the artistic media. As Popi poses for Sekatle's photograph, Mda describes how the camera captures “her sombre image and the cheerful bush in full bloom with pink November roses” (114). Similarly, Claerhout's portrait depicts a figure “standing against a powder-blue sky with pink flowers for stars ... pink cosmos down to her bare feet like wallpaper” (113). This visual correspondence is not incidental, but serves to counterbalance the two disparate worldviews that the art-forms represent. While both the “sombre” photograph and the “intrusive” (114) mirror serve as emblems for the prejudiced attitudes displayed by community members like Sekatle, Popi also registers how they are fundamentally “unlike the trinity's depictions” (115). Thus, she vocally rejects them on account of their inability to excite the sense of wonder and acceptance for which she has always yearned.

While these examples serve to contrast the prejudices of Popi's external world with the painter-priest's richly evocative representations, the framing ekphrastic performance in *Who Is This Little Girl?* also gestures towards the transformative impetus of this vision. Like the previous exemplar, this portrait clearly harks back to Popi's contentious 'in-betweenness'; however, once again, it offers a specifically expressionistic interpretation of this reality, where new meanings are achieved through distortion and the subjective expression of senses and moods. Registering a “shift of focus ... from the representation to the viewer's consciousness, from the content of form to the function of form” (Strydom 10), the ekphrastic passage captures the viewer's creative involvement in, and affective response to, the portrait. As the communal narrator is drawn in by the sensuously-charged image, their ordinarily derisive tones are subtly converted, and begin, instead, to intuitively register Popi's sense of grief. This is illustrated particularly clearly in their highly subjective interpretation of her “pleading for peace. For rain” (*Madonna* 113). Contrasting the cold realism of the external narrative, the ekphrased art-forms performatively destabilise preconceived judgements, giving rise to new modes of perception in which Popi transcends her status as a despised “hotnot girl” or “morwa torwe” (114), and is re-imagined as a “delicate”, bright-eyed “little girl” (113) worthy of involvement, compassion and wonder.

Thus, while Popi's story poignantly illustrates how South African society risks remaining “trapped in the

multiple ghettos of apartheid” (Sachs 239), the narrative's ekphrastic dimension also offers a transformative vision of social life; by representing disarming, evocative encounters in which judgement gives way to empathy, the ekphrastic performances gesture towards new, visionary, humanising spaces which destabilise the rigid binaries of apartheid. Importantly, however, the clear contrast between the external narrative and the novel's performative dimension also draws a distinction between the liberatory effects of the imagination, and the material conditions of reality. Corresponding to the challenge of national reinvention, though, these performances signal the potential of such creative encounters to stimulate the conditions for re-imagining, and possibly reconfiguring, the social. This idea has also been expressed by Sachs as follows:

What are we fighting for, if not the right to express our humanity in all its forms, including our sense of fun and capacity for love and tenderness and our appreciation of beauty in the world? There is nothing that the apartheid rulers would like more than to convince us that because apartheid is ugly, the world is ugly. [We] are full of fun and romanticism and dreams, we enjoy and wonder at the beauties of nature and the marvels of human creation, yet ... everything is obsessed by the oppressors and the trauma they have imposed, nothing is about us and the new consciousness we are developing. [Through art] you are in a universe of wit and grace and vitality and intimacy ... in which the emergent personality of our people manifests itself. [...] It bypasses, overwhelms, ignores apartheid, establishes its own space. (241)

Transforming the Nation through Imaginative Reinvention

This allusion to the ability of art to “bypass, overwhelm, ignore apartheid” and “establish its own space” (241) lends itself as a valuable second point of departure for exploring the ekphrastic dimension of Mda's narrative. Although the evocative art-forms surveyed thus far clearly resonate with this statement, and the need to invigorate “alternative ways of seeing and being” (Flockemann 250), the creative work referred to by Sachs does not constitute fleeting aesthetic experiences, but rather endeavours to imagine and generate change on a greater socio-cultural scale. The ekphrastic performances explored in this chapter have, however, offered only temporary, and transiently palliative, glimpses of psychic transformation. Does Mda's narrative suggest, then, that these isolated aesthetic experiences are sufficient for envisaging transformation in the broader context of society and culture?

Marita Wenzel has described Mda's creative paradigm as one which views art as a “liminal zone, a means of interpreting and understanding life”, whilst also indicating that “life and experience have definite boundaries that should not be transgressed or confused with art and its artificial liminal zone” (128). This, I suggest, becomes evident in the latter half of Popi's story, which unfolds against the backdrop of the newly established democracy. As the narrative grapples with the ambiguities of the 'new' South Africa, Popi's perpetual inability to integrate into society conveys how the nation is not yet malleable enough to

accommodate the diversity of the emerging socio-cultural landscape. Regardless of her personal contribution to Excelsior's changing political environment as one of the town's council members, Popi's racially and culturally 'in-between' status remains a relentless cause for her social marginalisation. The communal narrator comments that “even though on one hand we praised her ... we continued to laugh at her for being a boesman” (*Madonna* 143). Subjected to these “daily flagellation of taunts”, she begins to “lose hope that anyone would accept her” (142), and perceives herself as a “prisoner of the perpetual doek on her head, of blue eyes and of hairy legs” (143). If the ekphrastic form of Mda's narrative has, thus far, endeavoured to catalyse “alternative ways of seeing and being” (Flockemann 250), how might it suggest that social subjects like Popi make sense of their place in a national body that fails to accommodate them?

At this stage of the narrative, Popi turns to the trinity's artworks, in the form of printed postcards, as a source of comfort “when nostalgia got the better of her”, allowing the alleviating, wonder-filled forms to “[calm] her when she had had a particularly bad day” (*Madonna* 139). Although she is still captivated by the “beautiful madness” of the artist, who “had mastered the art of distorting everything” (227), she becomes increasingly frustrated by the elusiveness of his representations. Yet, she also perceives that it is precisely because she “could never figure out the trinity” (226) that the paintings excite a sense of nostalgia and familiarity in her.

According to Sean Scanlan, nostalgia denotes “a powerful yearning that connects home to personal identity” (1-2). However, it can also “fuel a yearning for a new sense of place” and, in this way, holds the power to “overwhelm—even when a stable home has seemingly been achieved” (2). Because Popi has never achieved a stable sense of home, the richly expressionistic representations become tangible reminders of the acceptance that she once experienced in the artist's studio, where her understanding of 'belonging' shifted to encompass a visionary space characterised by improvisational and empathetic encounters. This overwhelming sense of nostalgia consequently leads her back to Claerhout's Tweespruit studio “to bathe her soul in the colourful canvasses” (*Madonna* 227), with the hope of exorcising her haunting sense of unbelonging. Her return is captured in the subsequent ekphrastic passage, which describes her emotionally- and sensuously-charged aesthetic encounter as follows:

Colour goes haywire. Once more beautiful. Once more beautiful madness. Life throbs in the green field where two black reapers cut green wheat with their invisible scythes. They put it over their shoulders, where it immediately assumes a yellow ochre colour with tinges of red. [...] A black donkey pulls a red cart in the field, trampling the crops. A black man and a black child sit in the cart. Not black as in black, but black as in Payne's grey. [...] The field is not only green. It has broad strokes of titanium white. Strokes of yellow and ochre. Strokes of naphthol crimson. Green, white, yellow and crimson strokes extend to the cobalt blue sky.

A wide-eyed girl stands against a deep blue wall. The whites of her eyes are white and the

pupils are black. She hides a subtle smile in her blue and green face. [...] Nothing else. No other detail. Just the questions that remain in her eyes. (235-236)

Foregrounding a “view of reality ... which is felt rather than only seen” (Strydom 10), this cathartic visual encounter not only reinvigorates Popi's awareness of the artist's expressionistic worldview, but also becomes a catalyst for generating new modes of perception in her that extend beyond the gallery space. This process is initiated via her renewed interest in the paintings, and the elusive formal qualities which appear to obfuscate any clear categorisation or meaning:

What did it all mean? Did it matter that she did not understand what it all meant? Was it not enough just to enjoy the haunting quality of the work and to rejoice in the emotions that it awakened without quibbling about what it all meant? Why should it mean anything at all? Is it not enough that it *evokes*? Should it now also *mean*? (*Madonna* 236, emphasis in original)

In Mda's narrative, these questions are not merely aesthetic reflections, but are contextualised in relation to Popi's earlier attempts to familiarise herself with the classifications of the Flemish Expressionist genre. When confronted with the trinity's artworks anew, though, she finds it “very hard to identify the Flemish Expressionist influence that she had read about in the oversized books in the library” (236). The artworks not only portray atypically indigenised subject-matter, but also display a highly idiosyncratic and amalgamated painterly technique involving “palette knives instead of the usual broad brush strokes”, as well as “multiple glazes” (236).⁶⁰ Instead of reflecting the traditional characteristics of their European counterparts, the trinity's formally composite artworks reveal, quite unexpectedly, how he has “clearly strayed away from that early influence” (236). However, Popi also identifies how it is precisely this unique, hybridised aesthetic that allows the artist to create the “feasts of new colours” that draw her “into the canvases, making her walk the same canvas as the trinity's subjects walked” (236).

In addition to foregrounding how the images “fuel a yearning for a new sense of place” (Scanlan 2) in Popi, Mda's ekphrastic narrative also illustrates, here, how the art-forms derive their meanings from an ambivalent 'in-between' place; through the re-combination and amalgamation of different formal elements, they deviate from any familiar, pre-determined categories or boundaries, and, in so doing, give rise to new forms, and new meanings. The hybridised nature of this creative process can be aligned with the notion of an 'in-between' or 'third' space, as described by postcolonial theorists such as Homi Bhabha.⁶¹ According to Bhabha, the significance of these hybridised processes is not their ability to “trace two original moments

⁶⁰ Jacobs explains that this so-called 'cloisonné technique' was derived from a method of paint-application introduced by the Post-Impressionist artist, Émile Bernard, in the nineteenth century, and was later employed by Expressionists such as Georges Rouault. However, such techniques were not common practice in the genre of Flemish Expressionism (“Towards”, 285).

⁶¹ This postcolonial, sociolinguistic theory is outlined more comprehensively in Bhabha's *The Location of Culture*. Although this theory is usually applied to social or cultural contexts, it can also be extended to creative practices.

from which the third emerges”, but rather, their ability to signal how this new space “enables other positions to emerge” (211). Nikos Papastergiadis similarly describes how hybridity does not merely refer to “the ambivalent consequences of mixture” (57), but more importantly, to the process of creating something entirely new. This involves “ripping [something] out of one context, pushing against existing boundaries, rearranging the order of things” (62). However, this process can also stimulate a “shift in the mode of consciousness” (57). He writes:

By mixing things that were previously kept apart there is both a stimulus for the emergence of something new, and also a shift in position that can offer a perspective for seeing newness as it emerges. [...] These disruptive acts of mixture can lead to new forms of awareness. (62).

Thus, whether these hybridised processes take place in creative, social or cultural contexts,⁶² they draw attention to how these new 'in-between' spaces are able to “[bring] about something new and unrecognisable, a new era of negotiation of meaning and representation” (Bhabha 211). In Mda's text, this sense of reinvention emerges at a material level in the trinity's artworks, which derive their meaning from the artist's specifically composite, hybridised creative practice. As Popi subsequently remarks, it is precisely this fusion of new and old elements that gives them a “robustness that had escaped the Flemish Expressionists” (*Madonna* 236), as well as their unique ability to “exude an energy” (239) capable of catalysing new modes of awareness in the viewer.

Importantly, Mda's performative invocation of the aesthetic imagination and sensory experience is not merely a transient feature of the narrative, but also draws attention to how processes of renewal take place within these composite, ambiguous and even ambivalent 'in-between' spaces. More specifically, these innovative forms vividly enact the work of re-imagining and reinvention that takes place within the broader context of society and culture, as well as at the level of the individual identity. For instance, it is in relation to this idiosyncratic creative space, which eludes categorisation and transcends binarisms, that Popi gains a new understanding of her own identity. Freed from the constraints of racial, cultural and social determinisms, her own so-called 'in-betweenness' becomes reconfigured as a space in which she can inhabit a subject position of her own construction. Although this thought-process is not explicitly mapped in the text, Mda describes how, after immersing her imagination in these formally composite paintings, Popi “felt she had been healed of a deadly ailment she could not really describe ... weakness was replaced by a great feeling of exhilaration” (238).

This hybridised process of imaginative reinvention is foregrounded in various other examples throughout the narrative, especially in relation to other characters who perceive themselves, or are perceived, as being

⁶² Fredrik Fahlander explains that these encounters are “not restricted to confrontations between different individuals or groups, but also [concern] [ones] between individuals and materialities” (15).

socially or culturally 'in-between'. Popi and her brother Viliki identify similarly innovative potentials in the “chimurenga songs of the Zimbabwean war of liberation” and the “songs of the Frelimo cadres of Mozambique”, which infiltrate Mahlatswetsa Location after local freedom fighters return from the “underground” (240). The songs' ability to excite a sense of change and renewal is explained in light of the specifically hybridised, evocative qualities that they take on in this new context. The narrator describes: “They did not understand the languages of these songs. It was possible that they were not even pronouncing the words correctly. But it did not matter. The haunting harmonies were good enough to evoke a feeling” (240).⁶³ Likewise, Viliki and his 'coloured' girlfriend⁶⁴ later begin to create their own unique, composite musical forms which, in turn, allow them to eke out new social niches as they travel through the country:

He bought an old accordion at a second-hand music shop ... and she taught him how to play it. She herself had never played the accordion before. She just pressed a few keys, listened to the notes each one produced, and created her own music. [...] Within three months Viliki could accompany the difela poetry and famo music of the mountain people of Lesotho. She accompanied his accordion with her flute, which in itself was an innovation, as that combination of instruments was unknown in the kind of Sesotho music that they played. (203-204)

Although Viliki is, unlike Popi, a black member of the community, his own process of imaginative reinvention emerges from his passion for the new dispensation, and its stimulation of mixture,⁶⁵ improvisation and renewal. This is reflected in an adjacent ekphrastic passage, which draws attention to the hybridised formal qualities of the painting itself, as well as of the subject-matter it depicts:

He looks quite different from the fruit accordion player of the glorious years of the garden parties. He is of the *new world*. Nothing Flemish Expressionist about him. The black outlines are thicker than ever. And rougher. [...] He squeezes his purple and white accordion, and its folds breathe out the nostalgic wails of the mountain people of neighbouring Lesotho. (203, my emphasis)

Thus, while Mda's ekphrastic narrative conveys how these interactive creative exchanges are able to generate new meanings and modes of awareness, they do not only occur at the level of the individual imagination or identity in *The Madonna of Excelsior*. Rather, they become a means of picturing the transformative processes that take place on a broader socio-cultural scale, as the nation undergoes its reinvention. Writing about the globalised postcolonial context, Salman Rushdie similarly asserted that transformation “comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs ... *Melange*, hotchpotch

⁶³ Of course, these particular examples also gesture towards the processes and effects of globalisation, and specifically the influx of African immigrants into South Africa after 1994. This topic will be fleshed out in the following chapter.

⁶⁴ Much like Popi, Viliki's girlfriend—a busker referred to as the 'Seller of Songs'—was born to a black mother and white father after Excelsior's miscegenation scandal.

⁶⁵ Mixture, here, refers to all levels of social and cultural interaction that occur between previously segregated individuals and communities.

... *this is how newness enters the world*" (qtd. in Boehmer, "Endings" 54, emphasis in original). Likewise, Bhabha's theory conceives that,

all social collectives, nation states, cultures or small-scale ethnic groups are caught in a *continuous* process of hybridity. They have all developed in relation to a larger context and therefore consist of elements of different origins which they to varying extent have in common. The process of hybridity thus makes the idea of cultures and ethnic collectives as homogeneous entities inconceivable, or ... elusive. (Fahlander 19, emphasis in original)

As a performative representation of South Africa's ambivalent transitional period, then, Mda's appropriation of Claerhout's paintings not only illustrates how these innovative hybridised processes can bring about "something new and unrecognisable, a new era of negotiation of meaning" (Bhabha 211), but also how they become fundamental to re-imagining, and reconfiguring, the new society, as it moves away from the binarised determinisms of the past.

However, although Popi's cathartic aesthetic encounter enables her to reinterpret her own subject position, it also registers how this visionary space, and the sense of acceptance, belonging and freedom that it evokes, needs to be consummated in the context of lived experience. Mda describes how, after leaving the gallery, she realises that "weakness was replaced by a great feeling of exhilaration", but a "void" or "emptiness" (*Madonna* 238) still remains. Although these evocative creative forms are presented as "catalyst[s] for psychic transformation" (Flockemann 250), then, Mda's ekphrastic narrative still highlights a distinction between the liberatory effects of the imagination, and the material conditions of reality. Thus, the artworks function specifically as a "liminal zone, a means of interpreting and understanding life" (Wenzel 128). Subsequently, the artist's hybridised expressionistic vision becomes a paradigm through which Popi reconfigures her volatile, and ordinarily binarised, relationships with others. Of course, Bhabha's notion of an 'in-between' or 'third' space has also been applied as a model for the transformative processes that take place in interpersonal social exchanges, where "a new situation, a new alliance formulates itself", and which often also "[demand] that we ... translate our principles, rethink them, extend them" (216). However, as Fredrik Fahlander also cautions, "a wide range of different responses" such as "confusions, misunderstandings, tension, trauma, and possibly social change" (15) may emerge within these improvisational and affectively-loaded exchanges.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Fahlander elaborates:

The normal every-day encounters can be described within the concept of structuring practices that re-constitute the basis of inert social fabric, while [another] concerns a different range of provoking confrontations that demand some sort of reaction or response. It may seem likely to assume that a higher rate of confusion or conflict occur[s] when people do not share the same traditions or language—but that is not necessarily always true. Also the most mundane social situations involve a certain rate of uncertainty and misunderstandings (Žižek 1989). (15)

One example of this is illustrated in Popi's reconciliation with her mother. Reflecting the artist's vision of involvement, wonder, compassion and humour, Popi not only takes ownership of her identity without inward shame, but also relinquishes her own attitude of detachment, judgement and contrast towards her mother. This exchange is initiated by Popi as follows: "At least as a coloured person I can complain that in the old apartheid days I was not white enough, and now in the new dispensation I am not black enough," said Popi jokingly. [...] 'What's your excuse?'" (*Madonna* 259). Giving rise to a new social space characterised by improvisation and empathy, this spontaneous encounter dissolves the troublesome racial boundaries that have prevented mother and daughter from transcending the ordinarily "taboo subject" (143) of Popi's identity. Freed from the blinkered epistemologies of the past, they are able to laugh together "for the first time in many years" (260). Mda captures this intimate and emotively-charged moment of transformation and renewal as follows:

'You are free, Popi, and you have made me free too. For a long time, I felt guilty that I had failed you ... that I had made you coloured! Every time they mocked and insulted you, it ate my heart and increased my guilt.'

'God made me coloured, Niki, not you. You have no business to be guilty about anything.'
(260)

Just as this evocative encounter demonstrates how "a new situation, a new alliance formulates itself" (Bhabha 216), another salient example occurs in Popi's reconciliation with her clandestine white half-brother, Tjaart Cronje. Shortly before Popi's visit to Claerhout's studio, the narrator describes Tjaart's most recent attempt to humiliate her, by publicly ridiculing the features which mark her shameful difference. His personal contempt is recorded in the following public insult: "What do you know of culture when you can't even shave your legs?" asked Tjaart Cronje, looking at Popi's legs with disgust. [...] 'She is no lady ... Ladies shave their legs. She doesn't. She is therefore no lady'" (*Madonna* 194). After Popi's transformative encounter in the trinity's studio, she finally calls a truce with Tjaart. In turn, he gives her a hair-removal product as a gift, with the sincere but misguided intention of helping her to "enhance the beauty of [her] long legs" (263), and thus temper her visible difference. Mda describes this exchange as follows:

For a moment, anger flashed across Popi's face. Her hand did not move to take the insensitive gift from his shaking hand. But when she saw the earnestness of his face, she took it and said, 'I don't shave my legs, Tjaart.' [...]

'But you must,' cried Tjaart Cronje. 'You are a lady. A beautiful lady.'
Popi was blushing all over. [...]

'I'll take the cream, Tjaart, because in my culture they say it is rude to refuse a present. But I will never use it. I love my body the way it is.' (263)

While their previously contempt-filled relationship served as an example of apartheid's lingering judgements and prejudices, their reconciliation conversely illustrates how the ambivalent process of social change and renewal often “demands that we ... translate our principles, rethink them, extend them” (Bhabha 216). Although this moment is riddled with misunderstanding, confusion and tension, it gives rise to an empathetic and innovative space; once again, the expressionistic display of involvement, compassion, wonder and humour catalyses the psychic conditions that allow the perceptual barriers of an ordinarily black-and-white world to be lifted. Thus, while the artist's hybridised creative vision enables Popi to gain a new understanding of her own identity, the external narrative also conveys how this visionary space, and the sense of acceptance, belonging and freedom that it evokes, becomes a means of re-imagining, and reconfiguring, the social.

Finally, it is only hereafter that Popi begins to feel 'at home' in her body, and consciously inhabits a new subject position of her own construction. Instead of being haunted by a sense of indeterminacy, she openly embraces her individuality, by growing her hair until it “reached behind her knees”, “wearing the isigqebhezana, the micro-miniskirts of the new millennium, displaying her long yellow-coloured legs” and refusing to be a “Barbie doll”; “she would not shave her hairy legs” (*Madonna* 266). Although this sense of self-acceptance might suggest a frivolous idealism that effaces ongoing pain and inequality, it serves, more emblematically, to represent a visionary, humanising space in which the work of both individual and collective reinvention can take place. Wicomb has described this space as one in which people can resist received social, cultural or racial descriptions, “make their own meanings” and, in turn, catalyse “new discursive spaces in which modalities of [cultural identity] can wipe out shame” (106). Thus, Popi's conscious inhabitation of this improvisational 'in-between' space becomes a means of envisioning the new nation under construction, where individual and collective identities and relationships need to be continuously re-imagined, and reinvented.

Leaving the novel's conclusion somewhat open-ended, the communal narrator remarks that Popi is, for the first time, able to “smile back at those of us who looked at her with strange eyes” (*Madonna* 267). However, the narrative also subtly suggests that much like the trinity's richly expressionistic vision, and its ability to stimulate psychic transformation, Popi's new subject position slowly begins to lift the community's barrier of detachment, contrast, judgement, caricature, and catalyses change and renewal in those around her. The communal narrator remarks:

[O]ur mothers gave birth to beautiful beings. As beautiful as the Seller of Songs, who could create beautiful things. As beautiful as Popi, who could not create, but knew how to love beautiful creations like the trinity's. (243)

Conclusion

Many of Mda's novels have received criticism for their apparent “romanticism of utopian endings” (Flockemann 260), which evoke “nice warm feelings” (Willoughby qtd. in Flockemann 261), and emphasise rainbow-nationhood at the expense of past and present traumas. Taken at face-value, the sensuous, playful and even ecstatic narrative modes of *The Madonna of Excelsior* might likewise be read in this way. Although the subject-matter and arrangement of Claerhout's artworks have also been appropriated by Mda to re-envision and rewrite apartheid's injurious legacy, their formal deviation from realist modes, as illustrated in this chapter, may leave little space for engaging the problematic material conditions which continue to impact the current socio-cultural landscape. However, by imagining the processes of national reinvention via these richly evocative forms, Mda's ekphrastic narrative concurrently suggests that this vision is needed precisely *because* it has not yet come to fruition in the spaces of lived experience. Thus, it responds to the imperative to “go beyond testimony, towards creating new thoughts, new worlds” (Ndebele, “Thoughts” 17).

Commenting on this ambivalent period of transition, Boehmer has asserted that “we may have a democracy of new voices in place, but without the structures to combine them, and a constant adaptation, readaptation and interleaving of those structures to suit changing circumstances, we will have achieved very little” (“Endings” 54). By foregrounding the hybridised expressionistic form of Claerhout's creative practice, the ekphrastic performances signal this need for malleability, improvisation and renewal, in order to reconfigure both individual and collective experiences of South African identity. However, while Mda appropriates these sensuous and emotionally-charged forms to envision the process of psychic and social transformation in his writing, the narrative still maintains a distinction between the generative potential of the imagination, and the material conditions of reality. Accordingly, Popi's character also remains, much like Niki, a somewhat marginalised figure, who never fully integrates into society.

Read with this somewhat utopian inflection, the narrative concludes with a final ekphrastic exemplar which pictures the new Rainbow Nation in the making; however, we are reminded, via the specifically performative role accorded to the paintings, that this vision still occupies the space of the imagination, and not of a consummate social reality:

The real new millennium has dawned. Four women with pointed breasts walk in single file. Their long necks carry their multicoloured heads with studied grace. Their hair is white with age, but their faces glow with youth. They do not lose their way, even though they undertake their journey with closed eyes. They walk straight and rigidly, their brown shoes hardly leaving the naphthol crimson ground. Their profiles foreground a white and yellow sky. (*Madonna* 265)

While Popi's character has served as a poignant emblem of the local identities who have struggled to be

assimilated into the narrative of the new nation state, South Africa has, of course, also attempted to include foreign, transnational identities in its vision of multicultural unity. This idea will be surveyed in the following chapter, which turns to the ekphrastic narrative form of Schonstein's *Skyline*.

Chapter Four

Galleries of Self-Discovery in Patricia Schonstein's *Skyline*: Ekphrastic Encounters with the Cross-Border Stranger

In that journey of self discovery and the restoration of our own self-esteem, [...] we must retune our ears to the music of Zao and Franco of the Congos and the poetry of Mazisi Kunene of South Africa and refocus our eyes to behold the paintings of Malangatane of Mozambique and the sculptures of Dumile Feni of South Africa.

Thabo Mbeki

(“African Renaissance”)

Affirming the well-established role of the “socially committed writer”, recent South African fiction has increasingly incorporated “African immigrant characters in its cast of protagonists” and featured “discussions of South African ways of (un)welcoming the continent” (Fasselt 3). Patricia Schonstein is one such writer, who has championed the need to engage with the nation's changing socio-cultural landscape. Accordingly, she describes her “author's voice” as one which “advocates ... non-violence” and “the need to engender peace” (Schonstein). In addition to placing at the centre of her oeuvre “questions about ethical light and darkness, intolerance, the recurrence of war and genocide”, her writing is also often complemented by intertextual narrative modes “rich in sensuality, fabrics, works of art” (Schonstein). As the winner of the 2002 Percy Fitzpatrick Award, *Skyline* is not only Schonstein's most acclaimed novel, but also one of the first post-apartheid works to feature an African immigrant as a protagonist.⁶⁷ Schonstein's intertextual approach to writing is also vividly illustrated in this work, where descriptions of fictional paintings produced by the Mozambican immigrant protagonist, Bernard Sebastião, frequently punctuate the narrative development. As imaginary forms which are mediated via the text, these ekphrastic artworks formally contrast the actual, pre-existing pieces re-presented in Mda's *The Madonna of Excelsior*. Expanding on the previous chapter's discussion of strangerhood and unbelonging, as well as the writer's role in narrating the new society, this chapter considers how the author's socially-committed literary approach finds its expression in these notional artworks. In particular, it aims to explore how the ekphrastic forms participate in conversations about (in)hospitality towards the cross-border stranger, as an identity that has become intrinsic to the new, multicultural⁶⁸ South Africa.

⁶⁷ Rebecca Fasselt has listed the following works published prior to *Skyline*, which also include African immigrants but only as minor characters: Nadine Gordimer's “The Ultimate Safari” in *Jump and Other Stories*, Zakes Mda's *She Plays with the Darkness*, Jonathan Morgan's *Finding Mr Madini* and Gomolemo Moka'e's “Milk and Honey Galore, Honey!” in *At the Rendezvous of Victory and Other Stories*.

⁶⁸ Although multiculturalism has mostly been presented as a positive and productive concept in various public discourses throughout the world, it is not entirely unproblematic. An elaboration on some of its disadvantages and limitations can be found in Paul Gilroy's article “Civilisationism, Securitocracy and Racial Resignation” (2009), as well as in Sneja Gunew's *Haunted Nations: The Colonial Dimensions of Multiculturalisms* (2004). Although this chapter focuses primarily on how it has been deployed in a positive and productive capacity in South Africa, it also remains

The preceding chapter considered how Mda's ekphrastic narrative signals a need for malleability, improvisation and renewal, in order to reconfigure both individual and collective experiences of South African identity, and the broader socio-cultural landscape. Similarly, *Skyline* has been described as a work which “sets up a rich and vivid description of the complex social processes of change and transformation” (Da Silva, “Literature” 91) that have occurred since 1994. However, Schonstein focuses specifically on the unique changes that have resulted from “South Africa's 'return to Africa'”: representing the “increasingly porous world” of national public life, *Skyline* mirrors how the country is being altered in “radical yet often imperceptible ways”, as “local and global human flows meet and mix”, and both “citizens and aliens” converge in “new human geographies made possible by the end of apartheid” (91).⁶⁹ The novel's title is taken from the name of a fictive apartment building in Cape Town which houses numerous “immigrants ... from the rest of Africa” (*Skyline* 7), as well as the unnamed first-person narrator—an angsty South African teenager—and her autistic sister, Mossie. As a liminal home-space for the “community of refugees” who “arrive in Cape Town and have nowhere to go” (10), *Skyline* is both a place of refuge and a dynamic thoroughfare in which the lives of its mostly displaced and marginalised residents become closely intertwined. As such, the narrator describes how,

[t]he building is crowded with them sharing space, renting beds and corners of rooms. Not many have the right to be here and most of them carry forged papers or pay bribes to stay in the country. They arrive from all over Africa by taxi, by bus, by train. They hitch rides on overland transporters. Many just walk. Their worlds cry through the stairwell like egrets flying home. (7)

In addition to sheltering formally displaced subjects, *Skyline* also hosts other socially marginalised identities such as Alice and Bluebell, a transgendered couple, Cliff and Gracie, a blind couple, and Mrs Rowinsky, a Jewish fugitive of the Second World War. Based on their shared experiences of placelessness in public city-life,⁷⁰ the residents of *Skyline* collectively forge their own, improvised home-spaces by extending friendship and gestures of hospitality to one another.⁷¹ At the forefront of the narrative is the friendship shared by the narrator, her sister, and Bernard—an illegal immigrant traumatised by the Mozambican Civil War.⁷² The narrator describes how he “lives alone and has no friends except us”, has lost his wife and children, “has no

cognizant of its limitations.

⁶⁹ These processes are also linked to the broader influences of globalisation and modernity, and the growing trend of multiculturalism throughout the world. While the scope of this chapter does not allow me to outline these topics in detail, they are implicitly included in this discussion.

⁷⁰ The exclusionary structures of South African city-space will be specifically addressed in the next chapter.

⁷¹ Fasselt has highlighted how *Skyline* conveys a “resistance to oppositional role allocations in the practice of hospitality, as both South Africans and immigrants perform acts and rituals of welcome” (3).

⁷² The Mozambican War of Independence ended in 1975 and was followed by the Civil War, which started in 1977. This lasted until 1992, and was later followed by Mozambique's first democratic elections in 1994. This war led to an estimate of one million casualties, as well as to the displacement of around five million civilians. A more comprehensive account of this can be found in Malyn Newitt's *A History of Mozambique* (1995).

home to go back to”, and is in the country “illegally, but we are the only ones who know” (25).⁷³ Dealing with the recent disintegration of their family unit, the sisters relate to Bernard through their own experience of 'homelessness'; for them, “home” is a place that is “broken and ugly”, and without “tenderness” (104). Through the mutual lack of a stable or hospitable home-space, Bernard becomes an ersatz father-figure for the girls; they, in turn, become the custodians of his personal story and private memories, which emerge in traumatised fragments and broken English as their friendship deepens.

Considering the South African context of the narrative, these hospitable exchanges between citizens and foreigners alike evoke the notion of Ubuntu, which has played a key role in the construction of the democratic nation and its vision of pan-African inclusivity. Rebecca Fasselt has likewise suggested that *Skyline* scrutinises “Ubuntu discourse” as a “political tool ... in post-apartheid nation-building rhetoric” (1). According to Christian Gade, the negotiators of the South African Interim Constitution of 1993 agreed that in order to address the dissensions of apartheid, “there is a need for understanding but not for vengeance, a need for reparation but not for retaliation, a need for Ubuntu but not for victimisation” (483).⁷⁴ The philosophy of Ubuntu arose from the Nguni proverb *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, meaning 'a person is a person through other people'. In its later application in South Africa's transitional process, it developed to mean 'a person becomes a person through other people'. As such, the “Ubuntu spirit” is characterised by, and enacted through, interrelational gestures of hospitality, where “one's human-being is folded together with the other, the human being of the other; and that of the stranger” (Sanders qtd. in Fasselt 4). Emphasising this vision of human interconnectedness, Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela⁷⁵ has described it as the “capacity for empathy for another person ... to connect with another human being, to be touched, to be moved by another human being” (qtd. in Gade 490). Similarly, Desmond Tutu has suggested that the Ubuntu spirit can be identified in someone who is “generous, hospitable, friendly, caring and compassionate” (qtd. in Gade 490) towards both friend and stranger, citizen and foreigner.

Aligned with the progressive vision of the new Constitution, the philosophy of Ubuntu was originally deployed as “an argument against the segregation ideology of the previous apartheid regime” (Gade 487). Affirming the unified, inclusive redefinition of the nation state, the years following the democratic moment have therefore seen South Africa “advertising itself as the home of Ubuntu, an epicentre of the African Renaissance, a model of a working, multiracial 'rainbow' society and a successful transitional state” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 281). Significantly, this has not only applied to the interactions of South African citizens, but also to the influx of African immigrants seeking to integrate into the country's rejuvenated political, economic and

⁷³ At one point, Bernard tells the narrator that he “does not know whether his wife and children are still alive” (25); however, the severity of his grief and trauma suggests that they have in fact been killed.

⁷⁴ Gade is citing the *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa*, Act 200 of 1993: Epilogue after Section 251, here.

⁷⁵ Gobodo-Madikizela was a member of the Human Rights Violation Committee of the TRC.

socio-cultural sphere after 1994.⁷⁶

In his article entitled “Hos(ti)pitality” (2000), Jacques Derrida differentiates between what he calls unconditional hospitality and conditional hospitality. While the former involves “saying yes to who or what turns up, before any determination, before any anticipation, before any identification” (10), the latter “assumes the us-them distinction through which the community defines itself ... and defends [itself] against the stranger” (11). While both the philosophy of Ubuntu and the congenial home-space represented in *Skyline* evoke this vision of unconditional hospitality, Schonstein's narrative also considers the relatively recent phenomenon that has “united black and white South Africans” after apartheid, namely the negative response to “the growing influx of people from other countries” (Da Silva, “Paper(Less)” 64). Recounting how these cross-border strangers provoke public hostility, *Skyline's* narrator describes how locals frequently denigrate the “illegals” who “come down from Africa and take over our country”, and feel that “the country's just gone to shit” (*Skyline* 45).

In staging these tensions between citizen and foreigner, host and guest, *Skyline* therefore also signals a disjuncture between the altruistic vision of Ubuntu and the xenophobic attitudes which have, instead, foregrounded the hostilities of the South African nation.⁷⁷ In fact, the obvious shortcomings of this claim to pan-African inclusivity have “sharpened the perception that the [African immigrant] ... is the new other in the post-apartheid nation”, indicating “the limits of the rainbow vision” (Pucherova qtd. in Dodd and Kurgan 344). Considering the failure of this progressive vision to adequately accommodate the transnational guest in national public life, how might writers like Schonstein attempt to address these tensions from within the South African context?

Galleries of Self-Discovery in *Skyline*

Obliquely evocative of the national 'journey of self discovery' mentioned in Mbeki's introductory quote, the novel's synopsis describes how *Skyline* becomes a “gallery of self-discovery” for both the young narrator and the marginalised residents who “bear down on her fragile world, then scoop her up into theirs” (*Skyline*). The description of self-discovery in terms of a gallery, here, does not apply in a purely metaphorical sense,

⁷⁶ In more recent years, Ubuntu has been suggested as a “moral remedy” for xenophobia, in order to “regain the hospitable image of the country in public and political discourse” (Fasselt 4). Towards emphasising an awareness of “the obligations of South Africans towards their African brothers and sisters” (4), Ubuntu was re-deployed to remind South Africans of “our interconnectedness, our common shared humanity, and the responsibility to one another that flows from that connection” (Nussbaum qtd. in Fasselt 4).

⁷⁷ This was demonstrated in the upsurge of xenophobic attacks in 2008, for example, when at least sixty-two people were brutally murdered and tens of thousands were left displaced. Indicative of an “intolerance of foreigners”, fuelled primarily by a belief that they were “taking jobs from citizens”, the attacks “laid bare the vast ... disparities that underlie the celebrated yet contested South African ideal of libertarian multiculturalism” (Dodd and Kurgan 343). In more recent months, xenophobic violence has escalated, particularly in the surrounds of Johannesburg, Durban and Cape Town. Rooted largely in unemployment and socio-economic insecurity, these attacks against foreign nationals have also drawn attention to the inadequacies of the country's current public policies and labour relations.

but refers more directly to the narrative's ekphrastic form. Like Mda's novel, each of *Skyline's* forty chapters is introduced or concluded with the description of a visual artwork. Although the pieces implicitly relate to a particular character or experience narrated in the adjoining chapter, they are described from the perspective of an anonymous viewer, or multiple viewers, in a public exhibition space. At the novel's conclusion, the narrator confirms that these elusive artworks have been created by Bernard, and are posthumously exhibited at the National Gallery and the Pan African Market after he is killed by a neurotic shop-owner. She recounts:

After Bernard was killed, Mrs Rowinsky catalogued all his work and set up an exhibition ... She thought it better not to sell any of his paintings but to keep the collection complete. (167)

Unlike the ekphrastic form of *The Madonna of Excelsior*, which re-appropriates actual, pre-existing paintings, the artworks represented in *Skyline* are entirely fictional. As Hollander has explained, this particular variation is known as “notional ekphrasis”, which portrays an “imaginary and non-existing work of art, as though it were factual and existed in reality” (87). Conveyed via the focalised perspectives and detailed appraisals of the imagined viewer(s), Bernard's artworks are described as though they were actual, pre-existing pieces in a gallery. As such, particular consideration is given to their subject-matter, form, composition and even titles, as well as to the uniquely hand-crafted frames in which they are displayed.

Viewed as a complete collection, the paintings predominantly convey scenes from the personal lives and daily experiences of the artist and his subjects. This subject-matter is figured on canvas in alternatively joyful, sombre, or disturbing images, which portray both the memories attached to Bernard's former Mozambican home, as well as his new life as a refugee in Cape Town. Thus, the artworks frequently depict people he has met in Cape Town, and particularly the friends he has made at Skyline. Also featured are people with whom Bernard is not necessarily familiar, but who nevertheless form part of his daily experiences as a refugee in the city. These include, for instance, local vagrants, who are estranged from, and yet intrinsically linked to, public city-life, as well as prostitutes and drug dealers. Interestingly, he even portrays those who treat him with hostility, such as the Italian shop-owner, Mr Giovanni, whose racial intolerance and xenophobic neurosis eventually leads to Bernard's murder.

As suggested by this diverse and yet highly personal collection, *Skyline's* ekphrastic form offers a glimpse into the 'gallery' of Bernard's personal story, and those who have become part of it. In addition to being translated onto canvas, these subjective visual narratives make their way into the exhibition spaces of the Pan African Market and the National Gallery, where they become publicly accessible. Remaining cognizant of the author's socially-committed literary paradigm, this chapter seeks to explore what role this somewhat elusive “gallery of self-discovery” (*Skyline*) might play in the narrative. In particular, it considers how these textually-mediated visual encounters might participate in conversations about (in)hospitality towards the cross-border stranger, as “the new other in the post-apartheid nation” (Pucherova qtd. in Dodd and Kurgan

344).

Redefining South Africa's Public Home-Space

Because *Skyline's* content is pertinent to the contemporary social, cultural, political and artistic climate, I introduce this ekphrastic reading with some recent theories and projects that have emerged from both the Visual Arts and Cultural Studies in South Africa. Like Schonstein, Kerry Bystrom, Terry Kurgan and Alexandra Dodd have attempted to address South Africa's changing political and social structures, and particularly the “new human geographies” (Da Silva, “Literature” 91) that have emerged from them. Bystrom has made a significant contribution to these conversations, particularly in her examinations of how cultural products ranging from literature to performance and visual art are “playing a vital role in challenging entrenched and divisive understandings of South Africa's physical and social geography” (351). Whilst cautioning against an overemphasis on art's role in shaping culture, she does, however, also highlight how it can offer “vibrant ways of thinking in public and thinking the public” (333), and work as a form of social commentary. Dodd and Kurgan have given similar affirmation to contemporary projects that have “turned the ethnographic lens inwards to examine the precarious limits of group and individual identity in post-rainbow nation South Africa” (345). In particular, they commend those that have “attempted to sculpt social spaces” in which the country's transnational guests can feel “safe and welcome” to “narrate their experiences of nationality, geography, foreignness, difference” and define “what constitutes a sense of being at home” (345).

Based on how *Skyline's* ekphrastic form evokes a personalised exhibition space, I turn specifically to Bystrom's theory of 'intimate exposure' to illuminate how Schonstein's notional artworks may open up, or participate in, conversations about public (in)hospitality. Bystrom has formulated the concept of intimate exposure as a means of extending private, interior life into shared, public space, and thus connecting people in new ways by encouraging a broader conversation about the meaning of home. Although it can take on various forms, intimate exposure refers primarily to the “risky' but necessary work of sharing oneself with others in public” (334), and “revealing inner aspects and places of the self and self-making (Bystrom and Nuttall 310).⁷⁸ Informed by notions of hospitality, Bystrom suggests that it may be through this 'risky' work of self-exposure that “new ways of living together are being invented and inhabited” (310). She explains:

Sharing intimate spaces and stories—making them habitable in public—may be a way of breaking down distances between people in the imaginative realm that can and does cross over into the realm of physical space, potentially opening up new ways of thinking and feeling as well as moving, acting and relating to others. (334)

⁷⁸ Bystrom locates risk at the centre of post-apartheid culture, defining it as “embrac[ing] uncertainty; to accept the possibility of danger, distress or disaster”, but also as “an inherently creative act”, as “without taking a risk, there is no prospect of surprise, change or unexpected gain” (McGregor and Nuttall qtd. in Bystrom 351).

Modelled largely on Ndebele's article, "A Home for Intimacy" (1996), the concept of intimate exposure demonstrates how hospitable acts and attitudes can be extended from enclosed, private home-spaces to open, public life. Reflecting on the physical, emotional and symbolic senses of home as an intimate communal space, Ndebele describes how, after 1994, the "process of building a home came to mean that of building a country" (A Home). Consequently, the emblem of the home-space became fundamental to "anchoring public life, connecting people across social rifts, and sustaining a democratic nationhood" (A Home). Questioning whether there could be "any society ... without homes where individuals can flourish", Ndebele posits that "intimacy in the national 'home' is inextricably linked to intimacy in the multitude of private home spaces that make it up" (A Home). As indicated by Bystrom, this particular form of intimacy is complex: it is not only, or necessarily, "one of warm and close private ties", but also encompasses "a tense but open engagement with those with whom we do not necessarily feel comfortable" (336). In a broader social or public context, it can, therefore, become a "dangerous word" which is "bound up with confronting and coming to terms with former enemies through an unpredictable process of negotiation" (339).

Despite the inherent element of risk, however, Ndebele has argued that a public experience of intimacy can only be established through self-exposure, as a means of revealing mutual vulnerabilities and shared dependencies (Bystrom 339). In this sense, the 'risky' act of sharing oneself in public—"not through gossip", but rather through "genuine, reflective, if sometimes agonised, personal testimony" (337)—can work towards building trust, and thus fostering social intimacy in the national public 'home'. Based on this formulation, Bystrom has suggested that by infusing the public domain with private stories, "a world of new, interpersonal solidarities, that extend into broader, more affirming social solidarities" (337) can become possible.

Bystrom has explored this idea in relation to cultural and artistic projects that enable acts of self-exposure, or intimate exposure, by translating private interiors into shared, public, social spaces. She surveys how the expressive and evocative potentials of these creative infrastructures can provide fruitful sites for "enfold[ing] within them people previously separated" (339). Kurgan's participatory public art experiment entitled *Hotel Yeoville* (2013) has been cited as a salient example of this. Kurgan explains that the project, which ran from 2007 to 2010, worked specifically "in the shadow of a deadly seam of xenophobia that runs through ... society", with the goal of allowing local South Africans to "understand the realities of African immigrants and refugees who have come ... in great number since 1994" (470).⁷⁹ Using both physical and imaginary infrastructures, the team set up an installation space in a public library located in the Johannesburg suburb of Yeoville, which remained open to the participation of immigrants and refugees, as well as to the attendance of local South Africans. Through a variety of different media, such as writing, photography, visual art and

⁷⁹ This project was part of the Forced Migration Studies Programme at the African Centre for Migration and Society at the University of Witwatersrand.

social media platforms, the participants were invited to document themselves and share their personal stories, making them publicly accessible to South African locals.⁸⁰

Although the project arose largely in response to xenophobia, it also aimed to address public reactions that tended to stereotype immigrants as “helpless victims in need of aid” instead of “providing ways to integrate [them] into the wider South African community” (Bystrom 348). Consequently, its goal was also to create a space for “sharing intimate or personal stories” that would “[add] depth and density to the social life of migrants” and “[provide] a more complex picture of migrant life” (348). An important aspect of this participatory public art project, then, was its emphasis on creating a hospitable space in which people could “safely 'show themselves' in a way that did not threaten their lives or residence in the city, but at the same time boldly asserted their presence ... serv[ing] to testify that this particular person is here now, claiming space, asserting identity” (Kurgan 475). Bystrom describes the project's potential as follows:

Faced with the (at best) atomizing and (at worst) downright hostile public culture that enabled the xenophobic violence and often prevented constructive responses to it, the project creates public space for personal offerings of the self, and uses these offerings to build ties of trust and communication between the migrants living in Yeoville themselves as well as between the migrants and the South African inhabitants of the suburb. (349)

In this way, *Hotel Yeoville* aimed not only to counter public xenophobia, but more saliently, to offer “points of connection and intersection rather than distance” (348). Whilst also avoiding portrayals of foreign nationals as “marginalised and exoticised 'others’” or mere “victims of xenophobia”, the subjective and testimonial nature of these participations rather aimed to “[turn] the spotlight around to examine what binds 'us' and what sets 'us' apart” (Dodd and Kurgan 346).⁸¹ In this context, Dodd and Kurgan indicate that “us” becomes a concept that “self-consciously collapses the distinct and separate positionalities of the self/other binary” and “acknowledges a hybrid mutuality in which strangeness is not outside and beyond us, but within

⁸⁰ Because the framing concept for *Hotel Yeoville* was informed by the “political importance of the minutely observed details of personal everyday life”, these documentations primarily emphasised “subjectivity and personal identity through 'normal' everyday life categories” (Kurgan 472) such as home, displacement, community, work, love, family, and dreams. In this sense, the translation of these personal stories into a shared, public space became a way of “talk[ing] back to this big and abstract story; taking it away from the body politic to little intimate stories about this *particular* person's loss, that *particular* person's dreams” (Dodd and Kurgan 349). Most of these personal offerings, and migrant voices, have subsequently been collated in the cited articles, as well as in the portfolio edition of Kurgan's book, also entitled *Hotel Yeoville* (2012).

⁸¹ This formulation recalls Nuttall's theory of entanglement, which describes South Africa's socio-cultural landscape as follows:

Entanglement is a condition of being twisted together or entwined, involved with; it speaks of an intimacy gained, even if it was resisted, or ignored and uninvited. It is a term which may gesture towards a relationship or set of social relationships that is complicated, ensnaring, in a tangle, but which also implies a human foldedness. It works with difference and sameness but also with their limits, their predicaments, their moments of complication. [...] The term carries perhaps its most profound possibilities in relation to race ... but it brings with it, too, other registers, ways of being, modes of identity-making and material life. (*Entanglement* 1)

and among us” (346). The productive potential of projects such as these, then, is contained in their ability to re-imagine the public home, not on the basis of nationality and foreignness, but according to broader multicultural communities in which individual, private lives become publicly intertwined.

Re-imagining the National Public 'Home' through Ekphrasis

The principles outlined by Bystrom and Kurgan provide a helpful foundation for reading Schonstein's ekphrastic narrative. Somewhat like *Hotel Yeoville*, *Skyline* works towards re-imagining South Africa's public home; through the convergence of individual lives and personal stories, it pictures new communities that collectively transcend the categories of 'friend and stranger', 'citizen and foreigner', 'host and guest'. While this is embodied in the Skyline community itself, it is also signalled in the desires of Schonstein's young narrator. As an aspiring writer, she feels an urgency to create a space in which society's 'strangers' or 'outsiders' can be welcomed. Through the narrative space of her writing, she longs to represent the stories of “those who have triumphed after their long march, those who have turned their backs on what they left behind and built a new life here” (*Skyline* 49). Although she sometimes slips into victimising rhetoric by emphasising the suffering she perceives in the city's transnational guests, where “you can read the words in their eyes, stained by despair; in their mouth, silenced and tightened ... in their torn and weary clothing” (10), she nevertheless identifies a need to create a platform for, and give voice to, the stories “written on the parchment of their hearts which they don't recite easily” (10). However, this conviction is troubled by her own awareness of how the city's mostly hostile and impersonal public has failed to accommodate them in its daily social interactions. She describes:

I gather up the words which I find spewn across the tar of Long Street and at the foot of the wind and try to turn them into poetry. I try to re-embroider these splintered words into the finery they once were—old litanies from Ethiopia; chantings from Sudan; fables from Eritrea. But I cannot turn the city's laments into anything of beauty. (50)

In reflecting on this 'writer's block', the narrator yearns to “find words in places other than wind and war ... find beauty and words of a new order” (51). This new order is, critically, linked to the narrative's vision of an unconditionally hospitable social space, where ordinarily disparate lives can come together without prejudice or fear, thus accommodating personal stories of loss, suffering and trauma, but also creating “sweet stories of delight” (49).⁸²

The narrator's conviction is reciprocated by another character who, unlike the privileged South African

⁸² Ha-Eun Grace Kim has also drawn attention to how the narrator's “aim of creating new narrative worlds in which to accommodate the other” indicates “the need to write the new society, to reproduce it, before she can integrate into it” (79). She also argues that the narrator's namelessness might, in this way, “suggest an effacement of self, and a renunciation of her 'privileged position' to represent the stories of others” (79).

teenager, has understood more fully what it means to experience life as a diaspora or refugee. Growing up in war-torn Europe, Mrs Rowinsky, an elderly woman now living in Long Street, helped to shelter fellow Jewish people from German Nazis, and was later herself sheltered by Russian soldiers and nuns. Her own experience as a fugitive subsequently “stimulated ... the whole question of shelter” and how “displaced persons return home” (94). The notion of a shelter, here, denotes a safe, although often improvised, home-space. For Mrs Rowinsky, this became defined not only in terms of physical structures, but also relational ones, which emphasise human interconnectedness by accommodating the 'homeless' person and, more importantly, “what is inside of him” (93). Echoing the narrator's desire to create a space in which the stories of the city's transnational guests can be accommodated, Mrs Rowinsky starts running public art classes at the Pan African Market, which are attended by many of Skyline's migrant residents. This is where the paintings which eventually comprise the 'Bernard Sebastião Collection' are produced.

While the artistic production that takes place in these classes may be read as simple acts of creativity, they fulfil a much more intimate purpose in Schonstein's narrative. Extended specifically to the displaced and marginalised, these creative infrastructures become hospitable spaces in which their stories can be safely shared. As exemplified in Bernard's case, this specifically visual rather than verbal form of self-expression is critical. As a result of war, trauma and displacement, he has not only lost his former home, but is also unable to communicate his personal experiences in a coherent way. In addition to being afflicted with “silent terrors” (34) which often render him bereft of speech, his everyday linguistic capabilities are limited to a fragmented form of spoken English, and writing abilities that are reliant upon “copy[ing] the words from somewhere” (143). The specifically visual medium of narration therefore becomes one of the only means through which he can freely translate his story into a publicly accessible form.⁸³

Considering the personal nature of the artworks produced by *Skyline's* immigrant protagonist, I suggest that this invocation of visual art can be read as a means of creating hospitable spaces in which marginalised identities like Bernard can “narrate their experiences of nationality, geography, foreignness, difference”, and define “what constitutes a sense of being at home” (Dodd and Kurgan 345). As indicated at the outset of this chapter, Bernard's artworks portray diverse scenes which reflect both the memories of his former Mozambican home, as well as his new life as a refugee in Cape Town. In this sense, the ekphrastic paintings stage and mediate what can be read as his acts of intimate exposure, or performances of the self, which subsequently become 'habitable' in the public spaces of the Pan African Market and the National Gallery. Viewed in light of the author's socially-committed literary paradigm, however, I suggest that this artistic collection ultimately works towards re-imagining the multicultural national public home in *Skyline*.

Before turning to the paintings, it is important to highlight that many of the ekphrastic passages also cite

⁸³ Of course, this does not take disabilities like blindness into consideration—Skyline's blind couple, Cliff and Gracie, for instance, cannot visually access Bernard's paintings.

existing classical masterpieces as Bernard's inspiration, in the process of describing the compositional elements of his works. This still falls primarily under the category of notional ekphrasis, which can also describe an artwork “in terms of another art, how it came to be made and the circumstances of its being created” (Hollander 87). In *Skyline*, this creative cross-fertilisation is contextualised by the narrator, who observes how Bernard frequently refers to the works of the old and early modern Masters in his artistic practice, and thus often represents his own story in allusion to these classical pieces. Jacobs has also picked up on this influence, noting how “canonical works of a European artistic tradition have been appropriated and ... reinterpreted” in the “postcolonial, diasporic African context” (“Picturing” 113) of Bernard's life. While Jacobs focuses specifically on the “fractured identities of the uprooted foreign Africans in Cape Town” (97),⁸⁴ I wish to expand on some of these transcultural⁸⁵ art-forms in order to explore how they might also open up conversations about hospitality, and the meaning of home, in the context of South Africa and its vision of pan-African inclusivity.

It Is La Senhora, Untitled Painting and Untitled Triptych

Three ekphrastic exemplars illustrate particularly clearly how Bernard shares his own story within the artistic framework of pre-existing Western pieces. Working through memories attached to his Mozambican home, he affectionately portrays the wistful gaze of his Portuguese Senhora—his former employer who was later killed by rebels—in a work entitled *It Is La Senhora*. Via the figure's facial expression and the “elegance” of the image, rendered in “hibiscus reds with source-of-the-Nile greens and blues” (*Skyline* 27), the painting evokes both the form and imagery of Henri Matisse's *Portrait of Madame Matisse with a Green Stripe*. In his tenth painting, which remains untitled, Bernard attempts to represent his wife. Translating his memories of ordinary, everyday home-life onto canvas, he depicts her as a “thin black woman wearing a floral-print dress”, as she works in a tobacco-sorting shed. As an image portraying both the familiarity and hardships of home, the viewer registers how the flowers on the woman's dress are “faded such that they have a sorrow about them” (36). As in the painting of his Senhora, Bernard also refers to the work of an artistic Master here. In creative allusion to Giotto di Bondone's *Madonna and Child*, and the Madonna's expression of “tender dignity” (36), he positions his wife as the “emotional centre of the picture”, as she “lifts her face to look at the viewer” (36).

While the first two examples convey the artist's personal grief and loss, his “most ambitious work” (71) comes together in three individually described paintings, which together constitute an untitled triptych. In

⁸⁴ The first four paintings that I analyse in the following section are also referenced in Jacobs' study.

⁸⁵ Transculturation describes the phenomenon of convergence between different cultures or nationalities, or the “new cultural synthesis created by the merging of elements from ... old and new cultures” (Firmat 7). This theory developed from Fernando Ortiz's study of Cuban culture, in light of its African and European origins. Positing that this process is characterised by “mutability, uprootedness, and change” (8), and is therefore “provisional, changeable, migratory” (13) in nature, Ortiz used the term 'transculturation' to describe the “processual, imperfective aspect of culture contact” (9). Here, culture becomes a “hyphenated creation”, comprised of the “non-synthetic ... combination of disparate elements” (1).

portraying his personal experiences of war, he turns again to the works of the Masters to translate the source of his silent terrors into visual form. The first panel of the triptych deliberately evokes Marc Chagall's "monumental" work abruptly entitled *War*, where "ash-greys, blue-greys and grey-whites are relieved only by the strelitzia-orange flames in the background" (71). Similarly, the second and third panels recall Francisco Goya's *The Third of May, 1808* and Pablo Picasso's *Guernica*. Applying "subdued grey", "mournful tones of irons and silvers" and "messy scarlet" in "slow, pensive and concentrated brushwork", Bernard depicts the brutal massacre of the holy sisters at a local Mozambican Catholic mission. Additionally, a panel features Bernard's wife—suggested by the inclusion of the "often-used image of the faded floral dress" (164)—crawling towards a group of soldiers. It is tragically obvious, according to the viewer, that "they will shoot [her] later" (164).

From within the exhibition space, the imagined viewer registers the highly subjective nature of the painted images, as they translate some of Bernard's most intimate and unspeakable memories of home into visual form.⁸⁶ Yet, while these paintings serve as visual narratives that make his personal experiences publicly accessible, their deliberate re-imagining of a European artistic tradition is noteworthy. To some extent, this localised rendering of Western forms resembles the artworks re-presented in Mda's novel, which translate an originally Flemish artistic tradition into the South African context. However, whereas Mda directly transliterates the artist's hybridised works into his text, the fictional pieces created by Schonstein's character are conversely imagined, or mediated, *via* specific classical artworks. Why might the author's immigrant protagonist appropriate these Western works as creative templates for narrating his own story? Moreover, bearing in mind *Skyline*'s preoccupation with notions of hospitality, how might these transcultural forms participate in conversations about South Africa's vision of Ubuntu?

A reading of these artworks could, it seems, follow one of two familiar trajectories: Bernard could possibly be re-appropriating and thus subverting a Eurocentric tradition, in response to the hegemonic colonial history of his former Mozambican home; alternatively, these paintings might suggest that his own identity, and sense of agency, has been shaped and limited by dominant Western modes. However, Schonstein's text offers a less conspicuous alternative. An enquiry into the histories of the masterpieces suggests that their purpose in *Skyline* is neither subversive on Bernard's part, nor indicative of his subversion. This idea is subtly concealed in the author's ekphrastic strategy. Schonstein has cited Sister Wendy Beckett's *The Story of Painting: The Essential Guide to Western Art* (1994) as her source for the classical paintings referenced throughout *Skyline*. As also indicated by Jacobs, this compendium offers a more complex historicisation of the artworks than their generalised classification as 'Western' products initially suggests. In tracing the stories of their creation, and indeed creators, Beckett documents how most of these seminal works were produced by painters who were, in fact, "exiles and émigrés—from Revolutionary Russia, from Fascist Spain, from Nazi-occupied

⁸⁶ Bernard's inability to voice his painful story echoes in the lack of titles given to the portrait of his wife and the triptych.

France” (Jacobs, “Picturing” 112). Now known as some of Europe's old and early modern Masters, these transnational nineteenth- and twentieth-century artists “found their collective, diasporic identity and artistic home in the larger category of 'Western Art'” (112). A critical point made in Beckett's compendium, then, is that “what we now uncomplicatedly refer to as Western art is itself not an essential, unified concept”, but refers, instead, to individual “cultural products of long and continuing histories of migration, and to works of art that are themselves scattered among art galleries and collections all over the world” (114). In other words, the artworks are themselves products of migrants and migration, and reveal fractured and varied histories.⁸⁷

While there is much potential for delving into the diasporic identity of Schonstein's protagonist, here, this ekphrastic approach also offers a valuable reformulation of South African public life and space, and the “local and global human flows” (Da Silva, “Literature” 91) of which it is made up. To quote Dodd and Kurgan's description of *Hotel Yeoville*, I suggest that by referencing this (inconspicuously) transnational artistic context, Bernard's art “self-consciously collapses the distinct and separate positionalities of the self/other binary” and re-imagines public life on the basis of hybrid mutualities, where “strangeness is not outside and beyond us, but within and among us” (346). Just as Beckett's reading troubles a homogeneous categorisation of 'Western' art by locating it within a context of migration, multiculturalism and heterogeneity, Bernard employs these transnational forms as creative frameworks in which both his story, and those of others, meet and mix.⁸⁸ However, in so doing, his collection specifically gives rise to themes of home and hospitality, which work towards creating new, shared, intimate public narratives. This will be unpacked throughout the chapter, with reference to specific ekphrastic pieces.

This idea emerges, though still somewhat vaguely, in the three preceding ekphrastic exemplars; here, Bernard narrates his own experience of home and displacement via the works of artists who “found their collective, diasporic identity and artistic home in the larger category of 'Western Art'” (Jacobs, “Picturing” 112).⁸⁹ Creatively enacting the narrative's formulation of a 'shelter',⁹⁰ Bernard employs these artworks as hospitable frameworks within which he can articulate his “untold nightmare” (*Skyline* 35), and thus share “what is inside of him” (93). Rather than simply reproducing these pre-existing forms, though, his localised renditions open up broader themes of displacement, migration and transnationalism which, in turn, gesture towards experiences of 'homelessness' across geographical and temporal locations.⁹¹ However, in so doing,

⁸⁷ Interestingly, both Beckett and Schonstein are themselves émigrés. Beckett was born in South Africa, raised in Scotland, educated in England, and later returned to her South African home. Schonstein grew up in Zimbabwe and later moved to South Africa, where she still currently lives.

⁸⁸ This also recalls Bhabha's notion of the Third Space, as outlined in the preceding chapter.

⁸⁹ This applies primarily to the artists cited in his untitled triptych.

⁹⁰ We are reminded that a 'shelter', here, denotes a safe, although often improvised, home-space, which emphasises human interconnectedness by accommodating the 'homeless' person and “what is inside of him” (*Skyline* 93).

⁹¹ Of course, this does not suggest that Western, African and indeed global experiences of displacement are analogous. However, Gunew has highlighted that while “there have always been migrations and diasporas, after two world wars and many other conflicts [last] century the mix of people within borders [has] increasingly rendered traditional national models anachronistic” (“Postcolonialism” 23). The concluding section of this chapter will return to this point.

they also illustrate how “displaced persons return home” (94), or experience home in foreign places, by offering moments of human interconnectedness and intimacy.⁹² Through the focalised perspective of the imagined viewer, the ekphrastic narration deviates from a formal appraisal of Bernard's triptych, pausing to link the subject-matter of the final panel back to the private interior of the diasporic artist:

[It is a work] which should have stood on its own, and it should have been executed on a much larger canvas. But the overwhelming despair it transmits, together with the pain of useless slaughter, suggests that the artist would have been overcome by the horror and palpitation of the episode he was capturing, had he dared to express himself as hugely as did Picasso. (79)

Thus, while Bernard refers to the compositional elements of these classical pieces, his artworks are not registered in a disruptive or reproductive capacity; rather, their value is identified in their ability to tell his particular story, and transmit intimate glimpses into the personal experiences which shape his interior world.⁹³ This is also registered by the narrator, who describes how his story is transposed into her own interior world:

I feel the hot breath of war puff into my face and make my eyes sting with the ash of burning villages; ash from the burning thatched roofs; ash from the torched corn stores. War has crept in on its belly through the long grasses of the dry season and crossed the dry riverbeds to come close, close to me here in the city where bush war should not reach. [...] It is the numberless refugees marching down like a column of ants to reach Skyline. It is Bernard's untold nightmare. (34-35)

In this sense, Bernard's paintings suggest neither a subversive agenda, nor a lack of agency. Rather, as he narrates his own story in allusion to this transnational artistic context, he affords the works of these artistic émigrés a symbolic 'hosting' role: reflecting the improvised home-spaces described by Mrs Rowinsky—a member of the diaspora herself—they act as creative 'shelters', which emphasise human interconnectedness by accommodating the stories of other migrant identities like Bernard and, more importantly, “what is inside of him” (93).⁹⁴

⁹² Significantly, Ndebele's call for (re)gaining a national public 'home' also acknowledged how intimate public spaces could be established in new ways through a “shared experience of homelessness” (A Home), which is more explicitly defined by mutual vulnerabilities and dependencies.

⁹³ This subtly recalls the framing concept of *Hotel Yeoville*, where the translation of personal stories into shared, public spaces became a means of “talk[ing] back to this big and abstract story; taking it away from the body politic to little intimate stories about this *particular* person's loss, that *particular* person's dreams” (Dodd and Kurgan 349, emphasis in original).

⁹⁴ It is worth noting that Bernard later produces a series of paintings in which he represents Mrs Rowinsky's own story of war and displacement. The images depict Mrs Rowinsky, at various points of her life, in scenes riddled with Nazi soldiers and bomb-damaged buildings. Based on her re-tellings of the story, Bernard translates her memories of bewilderment, loneliness and despair onto canvas. Subsequently, the imagined viewer reads “in the dark and light paints the sorrow of one waiting for the return of a loved one”, noting how “the artist conveys an expectation of movement to suggest that the young woman ... will walk into the world, alone within twisting brush strokes and sinuous ribbons of greys, blues and gun-metal-silvers” (92).

These leitmotifs of home, hospitality, intimacy and interconnectedness define the broader themes of the ekphrastic collection, which is developed throughout *Skyline*. Diverging from the broader geographical and temporal locations of this Western artistic backdrop, however, Bernard extends these themes to re-imagine notions of home and belonging within his own immediate context of foreignness and transnationalism. Thus, his collection converges upon the transcultural landscape of South Africa, and its tentative Ubuntu society. As the following examples will convey, these ekphrastic artworks become intrinsic to *Skyline*'s vision of an unconditionally hospitable social order, where ordinarily disparate lives come together without prejudice or fear, and collectively forge new, improvisational, intimate public home-spaces.

It Is the Portrait of the Artist with His Good Friends

This idea is illustrated more directly in what becomes the final and perhaps most important piece of Bernard's collection, entitled *It Is the Portrait of the Artist with His Good Friends*. As the viewer explains, this is the “largest of the paintings”, which is executed in “oils of bright, vibrant colour and has an extravagance of emotion that never escapes the artist's control” (170). Significantly, it is also his most self-referential work: not only is it the only painting to carry a title referring directly to the artist himself, but also the only one to feature his self-portrait. This is also affirmed in the viewer's identification of the piece as belonging within the broader “Bernard Sebastião Collection” (171), where his name is attached to the artworks in a public context for the first time.

Whilst highlighting the extravagant formal qualities of the painting, the viewer describes the portrait of Bernard “wearing a broad-brimmed panama hat and sunglasses” and a “crocodile-skin belt holding up the elegant trousers of his suit”—a portrayal which suggests a “slight eccentricity” (171) in the artist's personality. Bernard also self-referentially affirms his artistic presence via “an artist's palette smudged with luminous oils of aloe-crimson, shadowed-chameleon-green and butterfly-mauve” (171) which appears in the image, while another painted self-portrait of “a broadly smiling black man wearing a red beret” (171) appears in the background. Pictured alongside him is a young teenager—the narrator—whose “strong face with a half-smiling, slightly disgruntled mouth” is painted with “supreme delicacy and restraint” (170). Reminding the viewer of “the open savannah of central Africa”, the tonal values of her skin recall “the colour of the fine, white dust churned up by disturbed herds of galloping antelope” (170). Also featured in the image is the narrator's sister, Mossie, adorned with “strands of carnelian, ebony and Ethiopian silver beads”, and with “her head thrown back, laughing as a flock of pigeons hovers to her right” (171).

Interestingly, Bernard does not reference a particular classical piece here. He does, however, include a painted image of Sister Wendy Beckett's compendium in the background of the scene, affirming the unifying themes of his collection. As Jacobs has also noted, Bernard's works “have an expressive, aesthetic logic of

their own, and do not simply reproduce ... the source paintings” (“Picturing” 111). Showcasing his creative agency and innovation, this artwork is, like the others, neither reproductive, nor disruptive; rather, it is productive. As the painted scene is set at a “rundown block of flats” (*Skyline* 170), this image represents Bernard's reconfigured home-space at Skyline. Diverging from stereotypical representations of immigrants as “helpless victims in need of aid” (Bystrom 348) or “marginalised and exoticised 'others’” (Dodd and Kurgan 346), though, this image conversely foregrounds the experience of acceptance and belonging that Bernard has accessed in the improvised home-spaces forged alongside those who share his sense of 'homelessness'. Rendering his self-portrait alongside the South African sisters, here, Bernard represents his diasporic experience not in terms of victimised isolation, but rather, as one which highlights points of connection and intersection across national and cultural boundaries. Much like Skyline itself, then, Bernard's painting represents communal life, and the public home-space, according to interrelational hospitality, where “one's human-being is folded together with the other, the human being of the other; and that of the stranger” (Sanders qtd. in Fasselt 4).

This idea is further developed, though perhaps more obliquely, via the hand-crafted frames in which many of the paintings are housed. The viewer accentuates how the frame of “this, the last painting in the Bernard Sebastião Collection, is made of small stars cut from old tin” (*Skyline* 171). These frames, which will also be surveyed in a few other ekphrastic exemplars, play an equally important role in informing the themes of Bernard's collection. Commenting on the interrelationship between a picture and its frame, Katie Pickett describes how the purpose of a framing device is contained most directly in its role as a “support” structure, “skeleton”, or “outline ... not filled in” (Pickett). In this sense, its 'enclosing' function also connotes an “element of lack”; because a frame, on its own, signifies something “not filled in”, its meaning is “absent or inchoate, requiring body and substance to complete it” (Pickett). In other words, its purpose is only consummated through the reciprocal relationship with the picture, as its 'filler'.

Although it may seem, at first, like a somewhat nebulous analogy, this reciprocal relationship between picture and frame can be read, in Bernard's artworks, as a mimesis of Ubuntu, where 'a person *becomes* a person through other people'. In this particular piece, the materiality of the frame, which is made of up “small stars cut from old tin (*Skyline* 171), contains a highly personal and intimate meaning which emerges in Bernard's friendship with the sisters. As he finally risks verbalising the private memories which haunt him, he tells the narrator:

'You see the stars lying in the sky? These the same stars I see in Mozambique [sic]. [...] All the stars of my wife, I share them with you. [...] The first time I see your face; before I even know your name, I see in your face these stars of my wife and childrens [sic], shining in your eyes. I see the moon and those stars are somethings you bring back to my dark life [sic].' (163)

For Bernard and the sisters alike, notions of 'home' and 'family' become reconfigured here. Spurred by their reciprocal extension of compassion, friendship and hospitality, Bernard both shares and accesses the memories, or “stars” (163), of his wife and children, and thus his most intimate experiences of being at home. Ha-Eun Grace Kim highlights how this reformulation of familial ties “not through biological or genetic lines, but through memory and narrative, through creating shared histories” envisions a “community that is not delimited by a boundary between 'inside' and 'outsider’”, and therefore “breaks the divisions of exclusion and inclusion within the nation-state” (78). Thus, just as the friendship itself redefines communal life on the basis of mutualities and shared dependencies, the ekphrastic portrait and its hand-crafted frame work in interrelationship to envision the intimate, albeit improvised, home-space forged between Bernard and the South African sisters.

In explaining the historical importance of a frame's material composition, Michael Carter has also indicated that the old “convention of constructing frames out of precious materials clearly signals the image as being a precious object, but it can also signify depictive intensity, the place where something special or extraordinary is taking place” (74-75). Significantly, the value of Bernard's hand-crafted frame is not contained in the materials used to construct it, but rather, in the interpersonal, relational currency to which it testifies. Emphasising the symbolic preciousness of the painted image, as a “place where something special or extraordinary is taking place” (75), the signified value of these tin stars is likewise contained in the intimate social collectives into which both citizens and foreigners are welcomed.

Once again demonstrating Bernard's creative innovation, this hand-crafted frame not only supplements the overall composition of the artwork, but works alongside the painting to picture a new social order based on hybrid mutualities and shared dependencies. Rather than emphasising a sense of estrangement or marginalisation, the reciprocal relationship between the portrait and its frame mirrors how Skyline's residents collectively reconfigure shared, intimate home-spaces, through mutual extensions of hospitality. Informed by these themes of interconnectedness, the ekphrastic portrait as a whole works towards re-imagining the South African public home according to the vision of Ubuntu, where the boundaries between 'citizen and foreigner', 'friend and stranger', 'host and guest' are rendered increasingly opaque.

It Is the Little Sister

This reading also emerges in several other ekphrastic artworks which occur throughout *Skyline*. In a similar sense that the previous exemplars position Bernard's own story within a paradigm of heterogeneity, hospitality and interconnectedness, the artworks also become a means through which he extends creative gestures of hospitality to others—particularly those who share his sense of 'homelessness'. One such example is captured in an ekphrastic portrait of Mossie. Although she is a middle-class South African child, her autism frequently renders her estranged from the social interactions of public life. Moreover, having a

physically absent father and an emotionally absent, alcoholic mother, both she and the narrator experience a sense of 'homelessness' through the lack of a stable familial environment. In an artistic enactment of hospitality, Bernard opens up the creative space of his art to accommodate Mossie's highly misunderstood but rich interior world. In a piece entitled *It Is the Little Sister*, Mossie's "soft and questioning" eyes are captured in "carefree staccato brush-strokes" and "wistful colours", "like the softened yellow-grey-green of a baobab's fruit" (*Skyline* 24). Noticing "borrowings from Amedeo Modigliani's *Little Girl in Blue*" (24) and Chagall's *Ida at the Window*, the viewer reads in the "open movements of translucent colour" the subject's "sense of serenity and thoughtfulness", as "there is a stillness in this picture which compels [them] to think about the girl's quiet thoughts" (66).

Whilst observing how the portrait of Mossie likewise draws on this hybridised 'Western' artistic context, the viewer also draws attention to the intimate personal dimension of the image; noting how the artist has affectionately applied the paint using his physical touch, they "imagine [him] dipping his thumb into hadeda-silver-grey and ... fixing [it] to the canvas" (24). Via these formal qualities, the painting conveys Bernard's affection for the sisters, as he "holds [them] close to him" (149) as a surrogate father-figure. This is contrasted in the narrative by the lack of physical or verbal affection in their formal home, where their mother "just looks over at Mossie and her eyes linger over her for a little bit" (74). However, in this image, Mossie is not represented in terms of her social marginalisation or familial exclusion, but rather—as in Bernard's self-portrait—according to the relational points of intersection through which she is included in the reconfigured home-space of *Skyline*.

This is further accentuated by the hand-crafted frame in which the portrait is enclosed. This time, it is "made of pigeon feathers and coloured beads" (24). The material composition of this frame not only represents the "two things Mossie likes best in the world" (61), but also the objects through which she navigates, interprets and communicates her subjective reality. Whereas her obsessions with collecting beads and 'communicating' with birds are received as outwardly alien in public social situations, Bernard and the *Skyline* community employ these objects to mediate conversations and facilitate relationships with Mossie, and thus accommodate her otherwise misunderstood interior world.⁹⁵ Mimicking, again, the way in which 'a person *becomes* a person through other people', the image and its frame work in interrelationship to reflect the hospitable contexts where Mossie is assimilated into an intimate home-space, despite her social estrangement. Once again, notions of family, community and the public 'home' are re-imagined in this ekphrastic piece, not in terms of "biological or genetic lines", but according to an Ubuntu society that "breaks the divisions of exclusion and inclusion within the nation-state" (Kim 78).

⁹⁵ Examples of this can be found in chapters 21, 26 and 32 of the novel.

It Is the Woman of Rwanda

This theme is similarly repeated in another artwork entitled *It Is the Woman of Rwanda*. This portrait depicts Princess, a Rwandan immigrant, who extends more customary rituals of hospitality to the other residents of Skyline. Princess has herself experienced the hardships involved in making a new life in South Africa, after losing her husband and children to the violence of her home country. Unlike the South African locals who respond to the influx of refugees by telling them to “go back to their own country ... back to Congo or whatever” (*Skyline* 9), she turns her Skyline apartment into a shelter which accommodates those who “arrive in Cape Town and have nowhere to go” (10). The narrator identifies Princess' home, which accepts anyone without question, as a place where hospitality is embodied not only in the provision of physical shelter, but also in the sharing of emotional intimacy. Here, private interiors and stories “[unfold] next to a steaming enamel teapot and baked maize bread” (35).

Princess is described as “a big, strong person, always sweating; always brewing tea; always filled with lament [...]. Her arms move with her voice and her hands open and close like black lilies” (9-10). Thus, she embodies a rich, extravagant and dramatically eccentric personality in Skyline. Her personal presence is subsequently translated into, and hosted in, one of Bernard's portraits, where she is portrayed with “small ritual scars, cut into her cheeks when she was a child” and “lips ... luminous ... red” (11). Accentuated by the “frenzied ... profusion of colours” which “leap out from the canvas in their richness: mulberry-purple, burnt ochre, paw-paw-orange and sacrificial-crimson” (11), the viewer is reminded of Auguste Renoir's *Woman of Algiers*.⁹⁶ Like the previous ekphrastic exemplars, this artwork is also completed by a hand-crafted frame, “made from slightly rusted, flattened out Coca-Cola cans”, which seems, at first glance, to “detract somewhat from the timelessness of the woman's face” (11).

Once again, the creative constituents of the piece work in interrelationship to signify the mutual exchange of vulnerabilities and dependencies that takes place in Princess' home. Corresponding to the time of the artwork's creation, the narrator recounts how Princess' latest 'guests'—refugees who work as sweet-sellers on the pavements of Long Street—have “settled in like her family”, and how she “likes them close to her, breathes in deeply when they are beside her” (10). The intimate home-space which emerges between Princess and her guests is correspondingly mimicked in the interrelationship between her richly sensuous portrait and its enclosing frame, which is this time fashioned from products with which the sweet-sellers are associated. As these compositional constituents complete each other, Princess and her 'guests' likewise collectively forge an improvised family unit. Because the signified value of this frame is also contained in an interpersonal rather than material currency, the artwork as a whole testifies to Princess' home as a “place where something special or extraordinary is taking place” (Carter 75); in other words, where both friends and

⁹⁶ This painting potentially opens up an interesting point of enquiry and debate, as the subject depicted in the original piece is the member of an oriental harem.

strangers, hosts and guests, citizens and foreigners are welcomed into a shared humanitarian embrace.

It Is the Woman Travelling

Similarly, in *It Is the Woman Travelling*, Bernard portrays a displaced Sudanese woman who is brought to Princess' apartment, where her “story of Sudan and its war” (*Skyline* 12) is shared amongst the local residents. This framed artwork functions as another reflection on Skyline's reconfigured home-spaces. Demonstrating how Bernard extends the creative infrastructures of his art to host the Sudanese woman's story, the painting portrays her agonising journey through the desert. Recognising in its tonal values the influence of Henri Rousseau's *Sleeping Gypsy*, the viewer empathetically registers “the colours of dry and thirsty semi-desert plants”, and likens the clothing covering her “thin body” to “dry scrub covering a thirsty hill” (15). Interestingly, in this exemplar, the handmade frame is described before the actual image, as its “bright enamels of erythrina-scarlet, lime-green and mango-yellow ... contrast strongly with the more subdued colours of the painting itself” (15). These rich tones are an iteration of those appearing in the preceding portrait of Princess, whose extravagant personality is translated into the painting's sensuously colourful form. As this artwork is once again completed through the interrelationship between its individual constituents, the Sudanese woman likewise comes to experience the unifying effects of the Ubuntu spirit in the familial enclosure of Princess' home, despite her realisation that the promises of “King Mandela” (12) are insufficient to restore justice to her situation.

In the Harare Township

As a final example, *In the Harare Township* conveys the story of the newest Skyline residents who have come “from Zimbabwe and to nobody in particular, just to our address” (106). Like many other immigrants, Kwaku, Cameron and Liberty have experienced the challenges of navigating the city's public domain, as they try to forge a new life in Cape Town as curio-sellers. Representing the story of Kwaku, who “walked from Ghana to Zimbabwe and is so thin that he is almost a hollow reed” (109), Bernard portrays a young boy at the outskirts of a Zimbabwean township, wearing tattered and over-large adult's clothing. Along with the artist's “brisk use of grey-blues and post-tempest grey”, this sombre image “makes the viewer feel cold” (110). Although this ekphrastic passage does not cite a pre-existing work as Bernard's inspiration, the painting is likewise housed in a frame, this time made of “twisted wire threaded with bottle caps” (110). Earlier, the narrator explains how Kwaku and his friends “connect with the Zimbabwean wire-workers who live in flat 300” (106), who not only enfold them into their physical home-space, but also offer emotional support by caring for their safety. The wire-workers introduce them to the local merchant who “controls the pavement space” and will see to their protection “because they are kwere kwere, foreigners who are not really welcome here”, and might “get beaten up because people think they're stealing jobs” (109). Whilst translating Kwaku's sombre experience of displacement into painted form, the artwork concurrently reflects

how he and his companions redefine 'being at home' through the intimacy and trust established in this improvised home-space; this is suggested in the enclosing role of the frame—this time constructed of the materials with which the Zimbabwean wire-workers are most directly associated.

As these examples have illustrated, Schonstein's use of notional ekphrasis works towards re-imagining the new South African society, or public 'home', not on the basis of nationality and foreignness, but according to individual, private stories which merge to create new, shared, intimate narratives. Just as the communal space of *Skyline* is extended to friends and strangers, citizens and foreigners alike, Bernard employs the creative infrastructures of art to narrate his own story of 'homelessness', and accommodate those of others. In so doing, the ekphrastic forms elicit a vision of hospitality, heterogeneity and interconnectedness which, much like *Hotel Yeoville*, “turn[s] the spotlight around to examine what binds 'us' and what sets 'us' apart” (Dodd and Kurgan 346). Thus, they envision the increasingly globalised, multicultural South African community through a lens of unconditional hospitality, or Ubuntu, which destabilises the homogeneous nationalistic views that frequently provoke public antagonism. Although Schonstein's socially-committed literary paradigm clearly emerges here, the somewhat schematic nature of the artworks themselves is similarly reflected in the resolute optimism that they seem to communicate. To what extent, then, do they engage the problematic material conditions and exclusionary social structures that shape urban South African experience?

Untitled Watercolour

While Schonstein's ekphrastic narrative has, thus far, offered an altruistic and even utopian vision of South Africa's multicultural community, it does not completely elide the reality of exclusion which many immigrants, and other 'placeless' identities, still face. In the same way that the interrelationship between picture and frame works as a creative mimesis of Ubuntu in Bernard's artworks, it also informs some of the pieces which suggest very different experiences of public life. In these works, however, Bernard seems to invoke a deliberate lack of framing devices to host the stories of those who remain entirely marginalised from public life, with no possibility of having their “human-being ... folded together with ... the human being of the other” (Sanders qtd. in Fasselt 4). For example, a painting described only as an “untitled watercolour” depicts a local “white vagrant” whose “eyes have nothing in them but a plea, captured by translucent dove-grey ... worked in the smudgy blue-grey of rain-laden clouds ... and muddy creams” (*Skyline* 51). Earlier, the narrator becomes aware of this homeless subject's estrangement from the city's public interactions; disturbed by his embodiment of social anonymity, she notes how his cardboard sign—his only form of identification—should be translated to convey his personal story to the dismissive public:

'I am Charles. I sleep in the outside toilet of my ex-brother-in-law's house. I've been to Angola and back again. I think I helped shoot up hundreds of blacks. If I don't have a drink I go crazy listening to

them babble from a mass grave. I get a disability pension and a small army pension but it's not enough. [...] You are quite right, I'm going to drink myself to death.' (51)

Although Bernard extends the creative infrastructures of his art to accommodate the vagrant's story, the imagined viewer registers how this painting's subject-matter, form, and lack of signification—as a simultaneously untitled and unframed piece—primarily accentuates the subject's embodiment of public anonymity. Additionally, the deliberate omission of an enclosing frame, here, indicates how the possibility of both physical and emotional 'shelters' remains foreclosed for him, as his literal homelessness renders him marginalised from the social interactions of public city-life. Contrasting the semiotic and artistic robustness of Bernard's framed pieces, this unframed work has a “torn and flimsy” appearance, as though “the artist would like the wind to blow it away” (52). Diverging from the optimism communicated in the previous exemplars, this suggestion of incompleteness, lack and deprivation conversely mimics the vagrant's absolute social estrangement. By foregrounding these dire social and material realities, this piece signals the limits of bringing an unconditionally hospitable public home-space and its hopeful humanitarian vision to fruition.

In the concluding remarks of her article, Bystrom cautions her readers that neither the notion of home, nor the effectiveness of these artistic and cultural projects, should be idealised as a means of shaping public life, as “the meaning of home, and sense of inviolability, is as much in need of reformulation as the barren or smooth public space that encloses it” (351). This word of caution also eventually emerges in Schonstein's novel, not only in ekphrastic pieces like the preceding exemplar, but also, finally, in Bernard's death. Interrupting the tentatively utopian message of the narrative, Bernard's brutal murder is a harsh reminder of how even the altruistic home-space of *Skyline* remains vulnerable to the realities of public hostility. Thus, while the narrative offers a rich illustration of the new Ubuntu society, its tragic conclusion also indicates that the community represented in *Skyline* occupies an imagined, utopian space.

This disjuncture is also obliquely emphasised via Bernard's artworks at the novel's conclusion. The narrator notes how the pieces that do not remain “on permanent exhibition at the National Gallery and the Pan African Market” are “shared among us, Mrs Rowinsky, ... Cameron and Liberty, Princess and the sweet-sellers” (*Skyline* 167). Thus, they return, as diasporic objects, to those who have truly accommodated Bernard and “what is inside of him” (93). As a final point, however, the display of Bernard's artworks at the Pan African Market and the National Gallery is noteworthy. While Schonstein's reference to the Pan African Market more directly echoes her own preoccupation with promoting multiculturalism and pan-African inclusivity in South Africa,⁹⁷ the imaginary inclusion of these artworks at the National Gallery also functions

⁹⁷ Margie Whitehouse documents how this market was launched in Cape Town's city-centre in 1997, with the aim of showcasing the diversity of African creativity and art production, and challenging homogeneous views of African culture; thus, it includes various stalls which represent different countries from across the African continent (Craftsmanship). Its location within the city also foregrounds the social, cultural and artistic cross-fertilisation, and thus transculturation, that is currently taking place between these various nationalities.

as a metafictional commentary on her ekphrastic narrative strategy. In contradistinction to the “institutional racism” of its historical acquisition policies, which only “gave privileged positions to the contributions of Europeans and white South Africans” (Hess 128), the National Gallery's post-1994 mandate has been to “build a national collection which ... reveals the African and Western roots of South African art, as well as the range and diversity of contemporary visual art production” (Du Bow qtd. in Hess 129). Emma Bedford underscores how these revised acquisition and exhibition policies enable the museum to “redress the imbalances created by our history and by our ... attitudes and approaches, to participate in the writing and rewriting of South African history and art history, and to use the context of art to address the historical problem of cultural difference” (qtd. in Hess 129). As this 'problem of cultural difference' now encompasses not only local but also transnational identities, the inclusion of migrant voices in social, cultural and artistic contexts alike has become equally critical to constructing the democratic nation, and fostering its vision of multicultural inclusivity.

As a socially-committed writer, Schonstein evidently responds to this mandate. By creatively hosting, and 'welcoming', both local and foreign identities in her novels, she extends this vision of hospitality, interconnectedness and inclusivity through her writing. In this sense, *Skyline's* ekphrastic dimension becomes a metafictional marker of her own role as a South African artist, or novelist, in accommodating the stories of the displaced and marginalised, and writing the new society and its vision of Ubuntu into being. Perhaps, there is an unintentional irony in this narrative approach; somewhat cynically, Derrida has argued that there can be no such thing as unconditional hospitality, as the presence of a guest always implicitly reaffirms the place and authority of the host. Of course, the notional artworks portrayed throughout *Skyline* are, in fact, Schonstein's creations, and not those of an actual migrant subject. Positioned as proxies through which the fictional migrant voice is mediated, the ekphrastic forms implicitly reaffirm Schonstein's place as the creative host. Although this is potentially problematic, Loren Kruger has also argued that the “imagined representations” of the stories of others can “give us an opportunity to test, in the subjunctive, narratives of belonging, becoming and encounter with strangers that have yet to find a secure place in the indicative reality” (239). Much like Mda, then, Schonstein seems to afford these notional artworks a specifically performative role in her novel. Echoing the concluding remarks made in the preceding chapter, this suggests that the vision of Ubuntu, much like the Rainbow Nation, still projects into an uninhabited future, rather than reflecting a consummate social reality.

Conclusion

In this chapter, Schonstein's use of notional ekphrasis has been read as a means of creating hospitable spaces in which the immigrant protagonist narrates his experiences of “nationality, geography, foreignness, difference”, and redefines “what constitutes a sense of being at home” (Kurgan 345). Sneja Gunew has highlighted that while “there have always been migrations and diasporas, after two world wars and many

other conflicts [last] century the mix of people within borders [has] increasingly rendered traditional national models anachronistic” (“Postcolonialism” 23). The value of Schonstein's narrative is, in this way, contained in its re-imagining of South Africa's increasingly globalised, transnational and transcultural post-apartheid landscape. Through Bernard's paintings, which represent the public 'home' according to hybrid mutualities and shared dependencies, the author posits an inclusive and hospitable redefinition of the nation state. This tentatively utopian inflection is somewhat reminiscent of the ekphrastic narrations explored in the previous chapter; however, the specifically performative role of the artworks likewise signals that this remains an imagined social space, which is accessible only through fictional mediation. Nevertheless, because these textually-mediated visual encounters are extended to an imagined public viewer, as well as to the actual reader of *Skyline*, we are, by implication, invited to participate in bringing this vision of Ubuntu to fruition.

In closing, Bystrom has suggested that by providing platforms for “welcoming others—or helping others to welcome others ... into private spaces as well as ... lives, feelings, memories and histories”, artists and authors may “help readers, spectators or participants to reshape the 'imaginary infrastructures' framing their interactions with [the stranger] and to find and feel points of relation in this still too stratified society” (352). This idea is similarly suggested at the conclusion of *Skyline*, via the unnamed narrator. In mourning her personal loss of Bernard, she overcomes her 'writer's block' and finds her own creative voice. Reflecting the rich inheritance of stories that are testified and shared through his artworks, she finally configures her own authorial paradigm not to re-present, but rather, to open a hospitable space, in which ordinarily disparate lives can converge to create new, shared, intimate public narratives. Whilst still lamenting society's inability to adequately accommodate 'strangers' like Bernard, she dedicates this hopeful vision to him in memory, and in words, with the commitment to continue the work he has started:

I can weave from my words histories and songs of love, rhyming sculptures and pictures of every sort! [...] They are no longer vagrant and wandering words. They are tales, Bernard, tellings which the wind will always carry for you. (*Skyline* 170)

Thus, the protagonist's authorial space, and Bernard's painterly space, converge in Schonstein's socially-committed literary paradigm: to create new social collectives which, in life as in art, will welcome both citizen and foreigner, friend and stranger, into a shared humanitarian embrace. While Schonstein's ekphrastic narrative reveals a commitment to fostering a reasonably uncritical, altruistic image of multicultural South Africa, my fourth and final chapter will explore how Ivan Vladislavić's *Curiouser* offers an alternative, and somewhat more dystopian, vision of the national community under construction.

Chapter Five

Revealing and Concealing: Ekphrastic Hauntings of the Post-Apartheid City in Ivan Vladislavić's *The Exploded View*

Metropolitan built forms are themselves a projective extension of the society's archaic or primal fantasies, the global ghost dances and the slave spectacles at its foundation.

Achille Mbembe

(“Aesthetics of Superfluity” 375)

In a monograph written about the local artist, Willem Boshoff, Ivan Vladislavić describes South Africa's national community as one which is still very much “under construction” (8). He writes: “We are in a second interregnum,⁹⁸ a parenthetical era, in which a provisional country asserts itself, but drags its history behind in brackets, like a skin it has not properly sloughed” (8). With reference to the artist's conceptual pieces, but also, more obliquely, to his “own imaginative trajectory” (S. Murray 253), he likens this work of construction to “notions of revealing and concealing; wounding and healing; breaking and restoring to wholeness. [...] The tense play between seeing and touching” (*Willem Boshoff* 8). The final chapter of this dissertation turns to Vladislavić's *Curiouser*. This short ekphrastic piece makes up one of four narrative vignettes of *The Exploded View*, and describes the creative enterprise of an affluent visual artist living in Johannesburg, a rapidly shifting metropolitan space still shot through with “ancient guilts and prejudices” (Morris). By exploring the ekphrastic portrayals of the protagonist's conceptual artworks, composed of disassembled and reassembled curios, the chapter will consider how the narrative plays on these “notions of revealing and concealing; wounding and healing; breaking and restoring to wholeness” (Vladislavić, *Willem Boshoff* 8) to articulate a post-apartheid milieu of South African city-life. Diverging from the altruistic images presented in Schonstein's *Skyline*, it will survey how these fictive artworks reinvigorate an awareness of the marginalised spaces, and lives, rendered invisible within South Africa's increasingly globalised and culturally opaque urban geographies.

Ivan Vladislavić is a South African author who entered the local literary scene in the late 1980s. In his various short stories, novels and non-fiction texts, he has frequently used “the shifting architecture and infrastructure of Johannesburg” (Black 5) as a conduit for scrutinising South Africa's political, cultural, material and ethical transformation. Nuttall has indicated that the city, and Johannesburg in particular, has “emerged as the primary site for the creation of the social imaginary⁹⁹ in much of the newest writing”,

⁹⁸ South Africa's first 'interregnum period' occurred roughly between 1990 and 1994. The term was originally used by Nadine Gordimer to describe the political stage which marked a discontinuity between the apartheid rule and the initiation of the successive multiracial, democratic government (Ibinga 3).

⁹⁹ Kirby Manià writes that “cities do not solely exist as material realities” but also as a “corresponding imaginary space”: “The metaphorical space of a city can be accessed via the various conduits produced by the social imaginary. [This] refers to the ways in which the lived experience of the city is articulated, measured, interpreted, and refracted by

providing a “vivid and explicit template for an entire array of social fears and possibilities” (“City Forms” 760). While Schonstein's *Skyline* is exemplary of a city-text that offers a positive reformulation of urban experience, Vladislavić's fictions present bizarrely “alienating yet familiar” (Goodman, “Space and Place” 46) portrayals of South African city-life and space. However, Ralph Goodman has suggested that these somewhat unusual representations lend themselves particularly well to exploring “the new boundaries constantly being established within South Africa”, and “interrogating some of the hopes and fears that accompany the uneven and unpredictable process of transition from apartheid to democracy” (36).

Although Vladislavić's texts are primarily concerned with representations of the city, they are, like the works of both Mda and Schonstein, also often informed by the visual arts. Sally-Ann Murray describes how his writings are “not merely ... the conduit for 'a story' or 'storytelling'” but act as “forms of sculptural 'installation' which make meaning on the page and in the mind” (255). His more recent works in particular have been commended for their meta-fictional qualities characterised by “the linguistic tensions between abstract meanings and material signs”, whereby “the letters and words” appear to take on “the materiality of Duchamp's readymades” (Clarkson 106).¹⁰⁰ While the discourse of the visual arts has commonly been used to describe Vladislavić's writing, it also frequently permeates the subject-matter of his works in more direct ways. In an interview with the author, Jan Steyn notes that most of Vladislavić's major publications have “appeared, in whole or in part, alongside some form of visual art” (Steyn).¹⁰¹ This connection is not incidental. Vladislavić has openly described how he has become conscious of creatively inhabiting both “the literary world and the art world” (Miller 123)—an “interdisciplinary approach” which has “enabled his imagination to write across the visual and the verbal 'worlds'” (S. Murray 253). Consequently, many of his works have, in fact, been “written in response to visual images” (Vladislavić qtd. in Steyn).

According to Vladislavić, this creative process has often involved “consciously [setting] about working in the light of certain artworks without knowing where the process would lead”, in order to explore how “working in close proximity to another imaginative world” would “reshape and reinvigorate [his] own” (qtd. in Steyn). Although these texts have taken on an “independent life”, he asserts that they continue to “comment on the images”; additionally, he suggests that “this commentary in fiction has some value precisely because it is sympathetically enmeshed with its subject” (qtd. in Steyn).¹⁰² This state of sympathetic enmeshing is illustrated particularly clearly in the ekphrastic form of *Curiouser*. Written in response to a collection created by local artist, Joachim Schönfeldt, *The Exploded View* as a whole is fundamentally

a city's inhabitants” (21).

¹⁰⁰ Both S. Murray's and Clarkson's articles offer more detailed discussions of how Vladislavić's writing reflects the materiality of the visual arts, and conceptual art in particular.

¹⁰¹ Steyn refers specifically to *The Exploded View*, *Portrait with Keys*, *Double Negative*, *The Loss Library* and *The Labour of Moles*.

¹⁰² He explains that the term 'sympathetic', here, “could be understood in a slightly technical way as 'denoting an effect which arises in response to a similar action elsewhere', allowing for a degree of antagonism as well as affinity” (qtd. in Steyn).

influenced by visual art: prior to its creation, Schönfeldt had commissioned Vladislavić to write “a few short, lyrical lines that would lend themselves to display ... presented in a gallery or catalogue” (Miller 120). During this process, however, he was “drawn into a sustained piece of fiction” (120), which became *The Exploded View*, and was subsequently dedicated to Schönfeldt.¹⁰³

Unlike the other three narrative vignettes, *Curiouser* engages directly with visual art and the creative productions of the protagonist, Simeon Majara. As an artistic maverick, Majara primarily creates conceptual art, a formal genre in which “the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work”, and which is therefore “usually free from the dependence on the skill of the artist as a craftsman” (Le Witt 79). Although the narrative is influenced by pre-existing pieces, these textualised artworks remain fictional creations. Much like Schonstein's *Skyline*, then, *Curiouser* describes “imaginary and non-existing” works “as though [they] were factual and existed in reality” (Hollander 87). Additionally, they are frequently narrated in an “inchoate state of creation”, drawing attention to “how [they] came to be made and the circumstances of [their] being created” (87). The latter application is particularly important in *Curiouser*; as Sol Le Witt explains, “when an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art” (79).¹⁰⁴ Sympathetically enmeshed with the text, these ekphrastic art-forms provide a vivid imaginative framework for the narrative, which represents life in post-apartheid Johannesburg as it undergoes the complex processes of urban and national reconstruction.

Before turning to Vladislavić's narrative, and the ekphrastic artworks themselves, it is necessary to provide a critical context for the South African city, and Johannesburg in particular.¹⁰⁵ According to M.J. Murray, Johannesburg can be read as a “city of spectacle and ... of ruin, where the jarring mismatch between extreme wealth and abject poverty has contributed to an enduring sense of unease and discomfort” (xi). Importantly, while it is also being read as a space of increasing heterogeneity, dynamism and renewal in current scholarship,¹⁰⁶ it nevertheless continues to be troubled by this “paradoxical duality of extravagance and annihilation” (Manià 38), where people are often “rendered violently invisible to others not in their 'group’” (Nuttall, “City Forms” 748). Accordingly, Vladislavić himself has emphasised how “the most obvious legacy of apartheid” remains entrenched in its rapidly shifting, yet continuously stratified, socio-spatial geographies: “the most divisive and hostile part of the way Jo'burg has developed”, he contends, “is that you don't ever need to share space with anybody else” (qtd. in Miller 220).

¹⁰³ This process is described in more detail in Vladislavić's *Model Men*.

¹⁰⁴ Among traditionalists and purists, it is often perceived that conceptual art is “produced by those who lack the traditional fine art skills of drawing, painting, and sculpting, substituting for these hard-won disciplinary achievements and sensory pleasures a calculated idea, a tritely 'illustrative' iconoclastic concept” (S. Murray 23).

¹⁰⁵ The city space is being read according to various critical frameworks in current scholarship, the two primary ones being materialist and postmodern readings. While these theories sometimes present conflicting arguments, I will attempt to integrate concepts emerging from both areas in this chapter, to provide a broader interpretation of urban post-apartheid Johannesburg.

¹⁰⁶ This is discussed in Nuttall's *City Forms and Writing the 'Now' in South Africa* (2004).

This primarily 'divisive and hostile' evaluation of Johannesburg is reflected in the narrative structure of *The Exploded View*. The work comprises four separate yet vaguely connected narrative vignettes, which each offer alternative views of the “complex interactions of people, material commodities, and social and physical space” (Graham 50) that shape public city-life.¹⁰⁷ In technical terminology, an 'exploded view' refers to a construction diagram of an object disassembled into its physically separate yet conceptually interlinked parts. In Vladislavić's text, this not only functions as a pictorial description of life in the labyrinthine post-apartheid city, but is also extended as a trope for the national community under construction. Suggesting a yearning for unified stability, the protagonist of *Crocodile Lodge* describes how he longs for “the wholes and the parts [to draw] closer and closer together, infected with purpose, until they [press] up against one another, sometimes, and [fuse]” (EV 189). Frustratingly, however, he remains aware of how “[e]ach part hovered just out of range of the others it was meant to meet, with precise narrow spaces between” (171).

While this trope of an exploded view gestures towards a process of construction, or reconstruction, it also signals a sense of aporia which prevents this vision from materialising in reality—not only in the broader context of national reconstruction, but more acutely, within the city's fragmented socio-spatial geographies. Critically, Goodman highlights that such aporetic readings “[draw] our attention to the underlying social structures which may be more difficult to change than the concrete edifices that embody them”, and “disappoint their promise of a solid foundation for the present” (“A Bricoleur's Guide” 226). As such, he insists that our critical lenses ought to be redirected from what is “visible and represented”, to the “dark silences” (Shields qtd. in Goodman, “A Bricoleur's Guide” 226) which lie repressed beneath the “racial city' in the process of disintegration” (225). These dark silences, or marginal spaces, are rendered particularly elusive in a city like Johannesburg, which has also been read as an urban space dominated by 'surface', or “[t]he obvious, what's there, staring you in the face” (EV 142). According to Kirby Manià, this culture of surface has become a “defining feature of its citiness” (13), encompassing its “mercurial, superficial, materialistic, and excessively violent” (36) temperament, characterised by conspicuous consumption, hypermodern hyperreality, crime, and a pervasive sense of socio-historical amnesia. Despite being set in this aporetic context, however, Vladislavić's narrative may offer a trajectory for reading the city beyond the 'visible and represented'; as Shameem Black highlights, the notion of an exploded view may also contain a wordplay that alludes to “the spectre of ... destruction” (6) looming over the city's social and material realities, which are “always haunted by more than is visible” (23).

¹⁰⁷ *Villa Toscana* deals with a statistician gathering information for the new National Census; *Afritude Sauce* features a sanitary engineer involved in a housing programme in an informal settlement; *Curiouser* represents the creative enterprise of an affluent installation artist, and *Crocodile Lodge* tells the story of Gordon Duffy, who erects signs and billboards at urban construction sites. The third vignette will be the central focus of this chapter.

Haunting the Post-Apartheid City

This notion of spectrality, or hauntedness, provides a compelling template not only for reading contemporary Johannesburg, but also for exploring how Vladislavić's text engages with its culture of “jarring mismatch” (M.J. Murray xi). In their article “The Underground, the Surface and the Edges: A Hauntology of Johannesburg” (2011), Anthea Buys and Leora Farber explore how the city has been, and continues to be, construed as an “interstitial realm” that exists in “constant oscillation between that which lies beneath the visible landscape, the metropolis's surface, and that which is concealed or embedded in other orders of visibility” (63). This reading is based on the physical interconnectedness of Johannesburg's surface, underground, and peripheral spaces; however, it is also informed by the city's historical origins as a mining town, and has subsequently become a vivid metaphor for the social, economic and political structures that have shaped the lives of its inhabitants both past and present.

According to Mbembe, Johannesburg was one of the first African locations “where capital, labour and industry came together”, becoming a “central site not only for the birth of the modern in Africa, but for the entanglement of the modern and the African—the African modern” (“Aesthetics” 373). Historically, it is notorious for its rapid, capricious and avaricious development following the discovery of its gold reef in 1886. Providing “early mining magnates with means and a reason to build a modern city above ground”, its “acquisition of the aesthetic markers of a metropolis was almost instantaneous” (Buys and Farber, “Hauntology” 62). However, as Buys and Farber indicate, while the connection between its thriving metropolitan surface and wealth-deriving underground spaces developed on geographical and economic terms, it also played out in more sinister (bio)political terms that would be sustained in its construction as a racial city:

The mining industry, with its traversal of the subterranean and the economy that plays out on the surface, saw the inception of the politics of racial inequality and segregation that were institutionally upheld in the city under apartheid. (62)

Johannesburg's original establishment as a colonial town, or “white suburban city”, entailed purging it of “undesirable” racial identities, whilst concurrently “subjecting them to the reality of exploitation” (70). Despite being indispensable to its booming economy, labourers who were identified as 'non-white' were relegated to the “invisible, temporary or threatening spatial environments”¹⁰⁸ of the city, or the “edges' of mainstream cultural, social and political life” (63). Thus, they were “part of the urban form”, “[p]arallel formations” perpetually “intertwined with the city” (Mbembe, “Aesthetics” 392), and yet remained

¹⁰⁸ These areas included miners' barracks, hostels, squatter camps, and often the underground spaces of the mines themselves.

segregated from it.¹⁰⁹ From colonialism to apartheid, Johannesburg was therefore driven by “the needs of capital”, and “its topography was profoundly marked by the violent imperatives ... that formally restricted where individuals could live and how they could move about the metropolis” (Black 12). Subsequently, its “underground” space not only referred to its subterranean infrastructures, but also became a metaphor for the “underworld” of its 'edge' communities, “the lower classes, the trash heap of the world above” (Nuttall and Mbembe 22). Beneath Johannesburg's visible, spectacular, glittering “capitalist dream”, a “trove of oppression and exploitation” (Buys and Farber, “Hauntology” 64) remained concealed. Accordingly, David Bunn explains that,

[w]hat distinguishes Johannesburg from the metropolitan norm ... is that the rhetoric of the surface has been implicated in an act of historical repression: in an inability to come to terms with the real origin of surplus value, in apartheid labour practices, and especially in the buried life of the black body, instrumentalised and bent into contact with the coal face, or ore seam, in the stopes far below. (135)

This relationship between Johannesburg's surface and 'edge' or underground spaces informs Buys and Farber's reading of the city as an interstitial, liminal or 'haunted' realm, which has, from its inception, played out “in-between the strata of surface (the stratum of life, goodness, health and visibility)” and the invisible “underground (a catacomb where the dead, the corrupt and the ailed are hidden)” (“Hauntology” 67). However, while this formulation emerges from Johannesburg's historical context, it persists as an apt description of the “paradoxical duality of extravagance and annihilation” (Manià 38) which continues to shape its contemporary socio-spatial landscape. Although physical movement through the city is no longer formally restricted, Vladislavić's earlier comment has indicated how modes of “inhabiting” or “being-in-Johannesburg” still seem to take place between these “liminal spaces”, which require “constant mediation” (Buys and Farber, “Interstices” 89).

Since the beginning of democracy, Johannesburg and South Africa at large have indubitably experienced some profound changes. However, it is, according to Louise Green, “impossible to ignore ... that many of the most visible transformations are occurring not as a result of the dismantling of apartheid, but as a result of the reintegration of South Africa into global world markets” (174). Following the nation's consolidation of a neoliberal identity, material commodities in particular became “signs within the new South African democracy of life, freedom, mobility, status and identity” (176). This new “global language”, “corporate, consumerist, cultural, or otherwise” (Manià 61), has been most prominently embodied in contemporary Johannesburg; as the country's burgeoning economic epicentre, it has provided “entry points” or “instant access”, for many, to “the essence of the new South African dream” and all the “glittering aspiration lures of

¹⁰⁹ Buys and Farber elaborate that “white middle-to-upper-class citizens occupied legitimate living quarters in the central and northern suburbs, and enjoyed a comparatively unrestricted urban lifestyle” (“Interstices” 89).

postmodern/global consumer culture” (Bremner qtd. in Graham 54).

Elaborating on Johannesburg's injurious economic and (bio)political history, however, Mbembe describes how the city continues to be marred by the juxtaposed realities of “bare life (mass poverty), the global logic of commodities, and the formation of a consumer public” (“Aesthetics” 373). The disintegrated racial city is, now, marked by uneven capitalist development, “massive unemployment, a widening gap between rich and poor, and a severe segregation of social space, albeit along class rather than race lines” (Graham 50).¹¹⁰ Under these conditions, life in the city has persisted in similarly liminal terms. Today, its 'hauntedness' has come to connote “that which is repressed, or lies beneath the surface of consciousness” (Buys and Farber, “Hauntology” 63) in everyday urban experience, particularly public “traumas and anxieties” and a pervasive “amnesia [of] social marginalisation” (62).

As Manià explains, life on the city's prosperous 'surface' is not only characterised by a glut of material and sensory pleasures, but also by a “conspicuous lack of intimacy between objects and people, and people with other people” (123). In particular, its denigration as “a crime city, or a security obsessed dystopia” (Nuttall and Mbembe 25) has resulted in an “encased' mode of living”, whereby its inhabitants negotiate the city space in a somewhat “fractured and dehumanised way” (Manià 123). This endemic sense of insecurity, fear and hostility is signposted especially in the myriad gated security enclaves “barricaded” against the underprivileged, “homeless and immigrant populations”,¹¹¹ who occupy the abandoned infrastructures and “sprawling informal settlements” (Buys and Farber, “Interstices” 98) at the city's fringes. These repressive modes of living gesture towards an autogenous perception of being 'haunted' by a threatening, faceless morass stalking the edges of its 'capitalist dream'.¹¹²

As a result of these informal socio-spatial stratifications, interpersonal contact between these communities plays out in similarly 'liminal' terms, against the backdrop of the city's visible public domain. Bunn describes how the city's 'edge' or 'underground' communities appear to inhabit a “loose citizenship”, a “mode of living lightly on ... [the] surface” (156), as they move between these juxtaposed realms. This occurs primarily in the “horizontal affiliations” of cheap labour, upon which “Johannesburg's rapid expansion is [still] dependent (156). Here, the defunct racial city leaves its trace not only in the form of socio-spatial divisions and socio-economic inequalities, but also in what Martha Nussbaum calls the affective incapacity “to see one another as fully human, as more than 'dreams or dots’”, “aided and abetted by economic materialism” (xiii).

¹¹⁰ Neil Smith explains that this is a typical symptom of the uneven development which is a “strategic and integral part” of global capitalist expansion: “Capital, rather than using the underdeveloped world as a source of markets, has instead used the Third World as a source of cheap labour, thus preventing its full integration into the world market” (qtd. in Graham 51).

¹¹¹ Black notes how after apartheid ended, Johannesburg, like South Africa at large, “became a mecca for migrants from other parts of Africa who sought to make a living in both its formal and informal economic sectors” (12). Thus, it “figures prominently as a node in a transnational economy of wealth and bodies” (12).

¹¹² Gerald Gaylard writes that the “thousand derelict buildings crammed with immigrants ... haunt [Johannesburg] like its unconscious”, reminding us of “the cost of 'progress’” (*Marginal Spaces* 16).

Although life in post-apartheid Johannesburg is undeniably marked by an increase of heterogeneity, dynamism and flux, these readings have revealed how it nevertheless continues to play out in “constant oscillation between that which lies beneath the visible landscape, the metropolis's surface, and that which is concealed or embedded in other orders of visibility” (Buys and Farber, “Hauntology” 63). As a city that has been defined, from its inception, by a superfluity of wealth, materialism, spectacle, violence and an enduring sense of repression, Johannesburg can therefore be read as a continuously 'haunted' space, where “the present acts of being encounter the older urban footprint very indirectly ... bedded down on the recent past, showing vague outlines” (Bunn 156). Rather direly, Lindsay Bremner has subsequently suggested that,

[m]aybe, at the end of the day, we are still just a mining town after all. Where most people live out-of-sight lives in appalling conditions so that some of the people can get rich quick. [...] Perhaps, despite all attempts to reconfigure our economy, our politics and our society, it is this unconscious history of self-interested indifference that will continue to shape Johannesburg's future. (“A Quick Tour” 68)

Curating the Haunted City

As the “epitome” of the “African modern” (Nuttall and Mbembe 17), Johannesburg presents a challenge to authors portraying the shifting social, cultural and ethical climate within its continuously stratified and increasingly globalised sphere. Although its delineation as a liminal or haunted space offers one of many potential ways of reading the metropolis, it lends itself particularly well to dialoguing with the 'dark silences', or concealed depths, of post-apartheid urban experience. In turn, it provides a valuable critical framework for exploring Vladislavić's ekphrastic city-text. Buys and Farber have reviewed the recent work of local artists who have represented everyday aspects of the city in strange, unfamiliar or even disturbing ways, in order to elicit an awareness of these habitually invisible spaces.¹¹³ They suggest that by destabilising the 'visible and represented', these portrayals may catalyse a conscious process of “working through, and bringing to the surface” (“Interstices” 99) the repressive modes of urban life. In this way, they might lend themselves to engaging with the city's marginal spaces, or the “invisible-yet-present traces of a traumatic or troubled past, and the disquieting figure of the other” (Venn qtd. in Buys and Farber, “Interstices” 99).

¹¹³ Some of these works include: William Kentridge's *Mine*, Johan Thom's *Challenging Mud*, Anthea Moys' *Gautrain Series: Ophelia*, Minette Vári's *Quake*, Theresa Collins' and Mocke Jansen van Veuren's *Minutes*, and Steven Cohen's *Chandelier*.

Such artistic approaches can be understood in light of Viktor Shklovsky's notion of defamiliarisation,¹¹⁴ Sigmund Freud's theory of the uncanny,¹¹⁵ and Berthold Brecht's estrangement or alienation effect.¹¹⁶ All of these constitute forms of 'strange making', and involve presenting familiar content in new and unusual ways, in order to “remove the automatism of perception” (Shklovsky 22), “[enable] an encounter” with the hidden or “repressed” (Freud qtd. in Buys and Farber, “Hauntology” 67), and strip the “familiar ... of its inconspicuousness” (Brecht qtd. in Manià 110). These representational strategies are also central to Vladislavić's works, which are commonly imbued with a desire to defamiliarise the visible and represented, and thus disrupt ordinary, familiar aspects of the everyday. Thus, his city-texts tend to highlight “the pointillistically particular, idiosyncratic and marginal” (Gaylard, “Death” 64), or the “aspects ... that exist on the margins ... left unseen and unnoticed”, infusing them with “fresh life, awareness and relevance” (Manià 17). Often, they achieve this by making “the ordinary seem bizarre” or, alternatively, “refract[ing] the odd and peculiar through the portal of the familiar” (17). Manià suggests that as these defamiliarised representations dislodge “habitual markers”, they unsettle “accustomed ways of seeing, reading and writing the city”, and allow “urban rediscovery to ensue” (4).

This, I suggest, is illustrated particularly vividly in the ekphrastic form of *Curiouser*. Like the author himself, the artist-protagonist transmogrifies familiar urban content into something strange, “uncanny” or even “spooky” (*EV* 137); as the narrator notes, he “had chanced upon a talent for frightening people, for giving them goosebumps by doing violence to their ordinary clutter” (120). Through these defamiliarising strategies, Simeon Majara's conceptual artworks disrupt quotidian aspects of city-life, and generate an oscillatory tension between “[t]he obvious, what's there, staring you in the face”, and what is habitually hidden “behind things” (142). Ironically, these effects also often double back on the artist himself, parodying his “serious business of making art” (104) within the commodified context of the city. In the sections that

¹¹⁴ Shklovsky's theory of defamiliarisation or 'Ostranenie' posits that presenting otherwise 'ordinary' objects in unfamiliar ways can undermine the “habitualisation” (20) of 'everyday' experience. Elicited via “material ... created to remove the automatism of perception” (22), defamiliarisation transforms objects and images from their familiar or 'habitual' appearance into something seemingly new and unusual, as though they are being encountered for the first time.

¹¹⁵ As a descriptive term connoting that which “ought to remain secret and hidden but has come to light” (Schelling qtd. in Buys and Farber, “Interstices” 88), the 'uncanny' unsettles the ordinarily 'Heimish'—homely or familiar—by re-presenting it as something unfamiliar, disturbing, and even frightening. For Freud, the uncanny is not “new or alien”, but something that is “familiar and old-established in the mind” and has “become alienated” through “the process of repression” (qtd. in Buys and Farber, “Interstices” 88). In this sense, it only appears “aberrant” because of “its closeness or resemblance to, or origins in, that which is familiar” (88). Thus, it may “symbolically [enable] an encounter” with what has become “split off”, “repressed” (88), or hidden.

¹¹⁶ Brecht's 'Verfremdungseffekt' involves making familiar incidents “appear strange to the public”, in order to raise them “above the level of the obvious or automatic” (qtd. in Manià 110). The value of this is to be able to “criticise them from a constructive point of view”:

The A-effect consists in turning the object of which one is to be made aware ... from something ordinary, familiar, immediately accessible, into something peculiar, striking and unexpected. What is obvious is in a certain sense made incomprehensible, but this is in order that it may then be made all the easier to comprehend. Before familiarity can turn into awareness the familiar must be stripped of its inconspicuousness; we must give up assuming that the object in question needs no explanation. (110)

follow, I explore how these fictional artworks might engage with the 'dark silences' haunting post-apartheid urban experience, and potentially catalyse a 'depth' narrative¹¹⁷ that moves beyond the city's visible and represented 'surface'.

Curiouser

Curiouser introduces its protagonist, “S. Majara” (101), in the space of his studio, where he is animatedly engaged in the work of artistic creation. For his latest project, which the narrative takes as its namesake, the conceptual artist, “indulging a whim”, constructs sculptural installation pieces by violently disassembling and then reassembling wooden curios “of the kind displayed for sale to tourists by hawkers all over the city” (101). Like the other affluent protagonists featured in *The Exploded View*, Majara's lifestyle appears to be shallowly rooted in the urban culture of 'surface', “aglow with prosperity and happiness” (175). However, unlike the others, who are white middle-class individuals struggling to negotiate the city's socio-cultural “multiplicity”, Majara is uncomfortably aware of “his own position of privilege” (Graham 57). As an example of Johannesburg's thriving black middle class, he negotiates the slippery slope of what it means to be an “authentic African ... never mind the private school accent” (*EV* 106), and have access to the enticements of global consumer culture, such as his grand property complete with swimming pool, “a liquid lozenge of California in the crust of Gauteng” (108). Throughout the narrative, this often reluctant state of self-consciousness fosters an enduring sense of how Majara both tries to create meaningful work that challenges the habitual modes of urban life, and yet continually succumbs to its repressive influences, as “something glamorous and electric that produce[s] a current of longing with no definite object” (109).

The artworks created by Majara provide a valuable point of departure for exploring how Vladislavić represents the marginal or haunted spaces of contemporary city-life in his text. As objects which connote the commodified and (in)conspicuously modern “face of Africa” (101), the curios appropriated as 'raw materials' for Majara's art emerge as familiar, yet complex, signs within the post-apartheid city, and the social imaginary of the new, globalised South Africa. As the narrator notes, “[e]verywhere you [go] in Johannesburg, wooden faces [look] up at you from the pavements at the hawker's stalls” (103). While these 'local' crafts acquire their aesthetic and social values within the structures of global consumer culture, there is still a clear sense in which they are linked, on a purely material level, to the socio-economically marginal communities who typically produce them. As objects which symbolically straddle these two juxtaposed domains, curios therefore occupy a precariously liminal position in public city-life

This sense of duality is similarly contained in conceptual art such as Majara's. Through its appropriation of everyday, readymade objects, it is an art-form with “liberat[ing] potential to move from the gallery into the

¹¹⁷ Manià defines a depth narrative as a reading which “reveals lesser known and previously unseen elements”, exposing the “bizarre and 'othered', the previously submerged, the fecund reservoirs that lie beneath the surface” (13). In this sense, it both serves to make the surface strange, and to uncover a hidden depth.

world, or to bring the world in all its strange and numbing simultaneity into conventionally austere, precious space” (S. Murray 257). The implicit porosity and mobility of the curio, as well as Majara's conceptual art, I suggest, allows Vladislavić's text to draw together the otherwise 'exploded' spaces of urban experience.¹¹⁸ These ideas will be unpacked with reference to the ekphrastic dimension of *Curiouser*; firstly, by exploring how the curio lends itself to reading the city's culture of 'surface', and secondly, how it might open up a narrative of 'depth', by engaging with the 'dark silences', or marginal spaces, of the post-apartheid city.

In order to explore how Majara appropriates these familiar urban objects for his art, it is necessary to provide a critical framework for the curio within the contemporary South African context; this, in turn, will add density to an ekphrastic reading of Vladislavić's narrative. Mbembe's article entitled “Aesthetics of Superfluity” (2004) lends itself particularly well to this discussion. Although it is concerned largely with Johannesburg's architectural configuration, it also offers a broader reading of the city as a domain dominated by 'surface'. According to Mbembe, Johannesburg's culture of surface is embodied perhaps most evidently in its “aesthetics of superfluity” (393). Here, superfluity refers to “the aesthetics of surfaces and quantities”, “the capacity of things to hypnotise, overexcite and paralyse the senses”, and the “indispensability and expendability of both labour and life, people and things” (374). For Mbembe, this is identifiable particularly in Johannesburg's “waste of affluence” (393), or its fixation on wealth, sensationalism, spectacle and the ephemeral: “More than ever”, he writes, “Johannesburg's city space is a product that is marked, measured, marketed, and transacted ... a commodity. And as such, its representational form has become ever more stylised” (393).

Mbembe describes how, after the racial city disintegrated, it adopted a globalised language informed largely by a “tradition of mimicry” (376). As the metropolis began to reconstruct itself, it assimilated “heterogeneous fragments ... of images, memories, citations, and allusions drawn from splintered histories” (399) into its material form. In so doing, its spheres of architecture, design, fashion, entertainment, and more came to embody a simulated “calico world”, made up of “copies and distortions ripped out of time and jumbled together in a dramatic geographical and temporal arbitrariness” (400).¹¹⁹ Contributing as much to a sense of improvisation and resilience as to a condition of volatility and decay, the city has become notoriously elusive due to “the multiplicity of registers in which it is African (or perhaps not at all, or not enough); European (or perhaps not, or no longer), or even American (by virtue of its embeddedness in commodity exchange and its culture of consumption)” (Nuttall and Mbembe 367). However, according to Mbembe, this kaleidoscopic process of fragmentation and recombination is not unique to Johannesburg; rather, it signposts the “global homogenisation of urban space” (“Aesthetics” 393) that has taken place in the twentieth century. In many

¹¹⁸ This refers both to the social and material realities of the city.

¹¹⁹ According to Gaylard, the “aspects of globalisation are nowhere more apparent than in [Johannesburg's] architecture of space”, and specifically the “cosmopolitan anonymity of chain restaurants, cafés, hotels, malls, stores, Tuscan villages” which “summon that peculiar dissociative feeling of being everywhere and nowhere at once” (*Marginal Spaces* 7).

ways, then, Johannesburg also “resembles other African cities in the aftermath of decolonisation” (400).

In this sense, the culture of superfluity is not merely about affluence; instead, Mbembe argues that it reveals how quantities are converted into qualities, signalling “a mode of psychic experience” in which “the distinction between things, and thus the things themselves” are rendered increasingly meaningless:

Since things have neither singularity nor originality except through their quantification and their equation with money, their core can be hollowed out, their peculiarities erased, and their uniqueness decoloured. As a result, the ultimate form of superfluity is the one that derives from the transitoriness of things, their floating with the same specific gravity in the constantly moving stream of money. (398-399)

Additionally, however, he argues that Johannesburg's tradition of mimicry attempts to “return to the 'archaic' as a way of freezing rapid changes in the temporal and political structures of the surrounding world” (400). Following the collapse of the racial city, and thus the “sudden estrangement from the familiar”, this pastiche of contextually disembedded styles has indicated an “attachment to a lost object that used to provide comfort” (403). He elaborates:

'Exotic' local and faraway styles are theatrically restaged in simulated environments, where they contribute to the paradoxical reconciliation of place and ephemerality.¹²⁰ [...] They are marketed by private developers and property owners in contrast to an unravelling, chaotic city centre besieged by swarming and inchoate crowds, incessant shouting and peddling, and a failure to contain disease, crime and pestilence. (401)

As artificial simulations of other spatial and temporal locations, these superfluous aesthetics are not objects and images made merely for consumption, then; they also lend themselves to the “production of lifestyles” by “organis[ing] desires and provok[ing] fantasies” (401). More saliently, this means that they can become “an active screen between the subject and the external world that filters out unwanted realities” (403). For Mbembe, the city's superfluous character therefore gestures towards a sense of amnesia, or repression, which is “motivated not by the social obligation to remember, but by the commercial imperative to forget” (Bremner, “A Quick Tour” 67). In the wake of the disintegrated racial city, this state of repression has particularly injurious implications for the social imaginary, as well as for the process of constructing the new national community. As Manià explains, it potentially “divorce[s] ... an ethical awareness” from the present, as well as from “South Africa's brutal past” (63). In so doing, it may also prevent the post-apartheid city from “embedding itself within a sociologically grounded and contextually relevant narrative for the future” (63).

¹²⁰ Melrose Arch and Montecasino are cited as two salient examples of this.

Characterised by materialism, hypermodernity and socio-historical amnesia, Johannesburg's aesthetics of superfluity reinforces the city's delineation as a domain dominated by 'surface', concealing both the recesses of the past and the habitually invisible spaces of the present. This brings us back to the original point of departure, namely, the familiar 'local' curio. Positioned within this 'calico world', the curio can, I suggest, be read as a vivid and self-referential sign of the city's culture of depthlessness and spatio-temporal disjunct. Green has highlighted how, in a globalised, neoliberal context defined by “industrialisation and mass production”, the category of “handmade” acquires its value by emerging as “a sign of singularity and ... resistance to the reification inherent in the capitalist forces and relations of production” (177). In other words, it is regarded as a signifier of uniqueness or authenticity. Thus, the handmade object appeals to modern consumers by offering them the opportunity to buy into a perceived cultural, historical or aesthetic richness, “something discrete, separate from the everyday world of the city” (179). This is particularly pertinent to the 'local' curio: catering to consumerist fantasies via its ostensibly traditional, indigenous or tribal character, it masquerades as a “relic or souvenir of unalienated black labour, an imagined pre-colonial, pre-capitalist social organisation before the enforced commodification of black labour by successive colonial and apartheid governments” (182).

By portraying this image of South Africa, and indeed Africa, as “essentially pre-modern and traditional in character”, the curio implicitly reaffirms rather than contests “the hegemonic, utopian construction of Africa as a refuge from modernity” (180). As Green explains, it subsequently becomes assimilated into a modern discourse in which 'culture' is the commodity, and the object itself is a convenient “representative”, a “portable, separable element of that culture” (179); however, what that culture actually is, remains elusive. Hidden behind these vague disguises of 'tradition', the cultural and historical disembeddedness of 'local' curios therefore betrays their inherent inauthenticity: they are, in fact, fundamentally 'superfluous' in nature, as “ersatz, synthetic, and enclosed totalities that invite the consumption of objects and images” (Manià 62).

While this analysis seems more directly applicable to the global market, its implications within the local context are equally relevant, and especially troublesome. Divorced from a contextually-grounded understanding of South Africa's past and present realities, the curio's fabricated claim to authenticity or tradition gestures towards an identity which is, like contemporary Johannesburg, not only culturally and aesthetically discontinuous, but also socio-historically amnesiac, or repressive. Moreover, like the old mining town, the curio is also embroiled in an injurious past. During the apartheid era in particular, a growing interest in the “enterprise of craft” led to the “penetration of private sector commercial enterprises”: “The lure of profits from organising the production and marketing of so-termed 'authentically African'¹²¹ products to affluent consumers both in South Africa and abroad prompted a number of white-owned private sector enterprises to initiate craft enterprises” (Rogerson 196). The subsequent appropriation of non-white labour

¹²¹ C.M. Rogerson emphasises that these were, of course, “more curious and less authentically African in character” (196).

from the periphery of commercial urban centres was often, like the mining industry, inherently exploitative and divisive. Thus, most of the socio-economically marginalised producers “existed at bare survival on low incomes”, while “considerable benefits and wealth were being enjoyed by the retailers and wholesalers of craft goods” (197). Now deeply enmeshed in South Africa's commodified global culture, however, the curio's vague recollection of the racial city disappears under the weight of superfluity, or surface, as it becomes a self-referential sign of amnesia, and spatio-temporal disjointedness.

Mbembe has emphasised that while the city's “sphere of superfluity” is characterised by “luxury, rarity ... vanity, futility and caprice”, it simultaneously serves to reinforce, or indeed construct, an “area of daily life located beyond the sphere of poverty and necessity (“Aesthetics” 378). Ironically, although handmade curios are, from a cultural and historical perspective, purely 'depthless' images, they continue to be socially, economically and materially linked to this 'sphere of poverty and necessity', or the marginal domains of city-life. In the post-apartheid context, the producers and sellers of these crafts have been “seen as integrated into and potentially enjoying spin-offs from growth taking place in ... the South African economy, most important tourism” (Rogerson 198). Contrary to this liberating suggestion, however, most of them still occupy the underprivileged areas surrounding urban commercial centres, as members of the country's lower class and its informal sector.¹²² This is indicated in *Toscana Lodge*, when the protagonist, who is a statistician, links local “curio sellers and their wares” to the “informal sector”; according to him, this accounts for “[e]very street corner in Johannesburg ... turning into a flea market” (*EV* 4).

Linked to these marginal urban spaces, curios also become signifiers of the city's increasing socio-cultural plurality, or hybridity. Of course, they are no longer produced exclusively by South African locals, but also frequently infiltrate public space via the influx of immigrants into the expanding 'edge' communities. Often, this occurs alongside “multiple forms of illegal activity” and through “the operations of a decidedly informal economy” (Black 23). While curios and their often opaque geographical origins signal a condition of transculturation, and therefore flux, dynamism and renewal, this sense of unpredictability and illegality is, as *Skyline* has illustrated, also a growing source of insecurity, anxiety, hostility and division in the city.

As this critical reading has conveyed, the curio can be read as a vivid, self-referential symbol not only of socio-historical amnesia, but also of a continually repressive present. Despite being assimilated into the increasingly globalised, commodified context of post-apartheid city-life, it is indelibly linked to the “unwanted realities” (Mbembe, “Aesthetics” 403) of structural inequality, and thus to the “fully human” (Nussbaum xiii) lives that remain concealed from the depthless domain for which it was created. Thus, as it straddles the boundaries between these juxtaposed realms, it both gestures towards the city's marginal spaces,

¹²² The informal sector, or “second economy”, refers to “labour activities that fall outside the formal economy and which are mostly not regulated by government” (Van der Vyfer 1). Examples include hawking, domestic work, small-scale farming and even the production of clothing. Accounting for around 30 percent of all jobs in South Africa, the “activities within this sector generate 30 percent of the GDP” (Mannak qtd. in Van der Vyfer 2).

and affirms their erasure from its visible domain. Much like Johannesburg itself, then, the curio embodies an “ontology haunted by disjunct” (Venn qtd. in Buys and Farber, “Interstices” 99): it is an object thoroughly implicated in the urban culture of 'surface', whilst containing traces of a hidden 'depth'. How, then, might Vladislavić's ekphrastic representations of this familiar commodity engage with these divisive urban structures, as South Africa undergoes the work of national reconstruction?

In the Exhibition Space

Simeon Majara's *Curiouser* exhibition emerges, somewhat indirectly, as an effort to redeem his career from a reputation of ghoulish superficiality and commercialism. Although his last project “on the theme of genocide” succeeded in making “everyone sit up and take notice ... mak[ing] [them] painfully aware that [they] were corporeal and mortal” (*EV* 104), it garnered criticism for reducing gross human atrocity to pure spectacle, used as 'raw material' for the “price list” (117) of another wealthy art gallery. Majara is, however, not entirely unaware of how the city's visible domain is haunted by more than what is immediately discernible. For him, “invisible and unacknowledged” life remains habitually concealed behind the depthless surfaces of “everything he touched and tasted and saw, the man-made world” (148). Yet, this awareness is also continually troubled by the disorientating and repressive state of superfluity that shapes his perception of urban life:

Things were either visible or not, their qualities were either shouting from the surface or silent. This silence, the lull behind the noisy surface of objects, was difficult and dangerous. You never knew what it held, if anything. How were you to judge whether the voice you heard was a deeper meaning, whispering its secrets, or merely the distorted echo of your own babble? (123-124)

Considering the artist's own oscillatory state of awareness, the ekphrastic artworks offer an interesting point of departure for exploring how Vladislavić's text might elicit a view of these repressed 'silences', or marginal spaces. The curios used for Majara's *Curiouser* exhibition lend themselves particularly well to this endeavour, as quotidian urban commodities “made familiar by ethnographic museums and galleries of modern art, B-grade movies and souvenir shops” (103). Majara's latest creative approach is characteristically postmodern: appropriating the curios as 'readymade' materials, he uses techniques of deconstruction, bricolage and pastiche to transform them into new, unusual and often improvisational forms. Utilising a variety of saws, he subjects them to a violent disassembling and reassembling process, “graft[ing] the parts ... into new species... exquisite corpses, many-headed monsters for a contemporary bestiary” (137).

As this process is described, the ekphrastic narrations employ the language of surface and depth. Embarking, quite playfully at first, on a spontaneous artistic approach, Majara finds himself “cutting [the curios] into pieces” with “a sort of professional curiosity” (136). Although he perceives that this “impulse had come from

nowhere”, he frames the experience as a need to “see what it looked like inside, what it consisted of under the varnish ... to cut down through the solid substance until his muscles ached” (136). Diverging from the morose spectacle of his *Genocide Series*, these new creative materials and techniques give rise to “witty pieces” (103), described as follows:

The pieces were presented in glass display cases with mock scientific seriousness, as if they were taxidermic specimens. [...] [T]he studio was turned into a museum of unnatural history. In his three 'Baloney' sculptures ... the cross-sections were spread out flat like pieces from a puzzle, in sequence. [...] 'Crazy Paving', the centrepiece of the *Curiouser* show, was laid out on the gallery floor. It contained cross-sections of twenty different species and covered a surface of nearly fifty square metres. It looked like an aerial photograph of a newly discovered planet. (138)

Presented in these defamiliarised forms, the disfigured curios unsettle familiar aspects, or habitual interpretations, of everyday urban encounters: in this exhibition, there is an immediate sense in which the artworks disrupt the city's culture of 'surface' by pillorying its 'aesthetics of superfluity'. By mimicking indigenous relics, displayed “with mock scientific seriousness” in a “museum of unnatural history” (138), the deconstructed curios parody the pre-colonial sensibilities that are ordinarily invested in their form. Reinforced by the title of the *Baloney* sculptures, this sardonic self-reflexivity reveals how they are fundamentally iconoclastic in nature. Thus, as the artworks humorously destabilise the curio's masquerade of authenticity—in this case a 'traditional African' one—they also signpost its cultural, historical and aesthetic disembeddedness within the post-apartheid context. Dislodged from this conspicuously modern appropriation of 'African' culture, the curios register their own depthlessness, as spectacularised commodities designed for life on the globalised, superfluous 'surface'.

These disruptive effects are also staged in the responses of Majara's audience members, who describe the curios using registers of defamiliarisation. Emphasising their transience as “ersatz, synthetic, and enclosed totalities” (Manià 62), the disfigured curios are playfully likened to “[a]bstract images constantly jittering off the surface, straining towards a figurative existence in three dimensions” (EV 138). However, as their simulated authenticity is defused, the ordinarily familiar forms begin to provoke an unexpected sense of uncertainty, becoming abruptly strange, “uncanny” and even “spooky” (137). For some viewers, they seem “like distorted reflections in a hall of mirrors”, with “certain parts of their bodies ... unnaturally elongated or thickened” (137), resisting a sense of stability.¹²³ This is further reinforced by the wordplay contained in the exhibition title, which can be read either as 'Curiouser' or 'Curio-User'.¹²⁴ Recalling the kaleidoscopic world of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, 'Curiouser' obliquely evokes the spatial and temporal disjointedness

¹²³ Goodman also underscores that this “decentring and instability of meanings” is typical of a “postmodern aesthetic” (“A Bricoleur's Guide” 226).

¹²⁴ Majara encourages this dual meaning: “This was a game he played. Whatever pronunciation someone chose, he corrected them to its opposite” (142).

of the city's material forms. Simultaneously, 'Curio-User' links these deceptive, depthless forms to the exploitative structures of consumerism. In registering their own embodiment of amnesia and spatio-temporal disjunct, the defamiliarised curios subsequently unsettle the repressive modes that shape habitual urban experience; thus, Majara's viewers find themselves unexpectedly asking: "What is this thing? I'm looking at it and thinking: What am I looking at? What is it?" (125).

As the disassembled urban readymades disrupt the clearly demarcated registers of the everyday, Majara's creative approach can be read as an act of both literally and symbolically cutting into, and overturning, the "noisy surface of objects" (123), and thus the superfluous modes of city-life to which they belong. Yet, while this subversive artistic process does momentarily disturb this recalcitrant 'surface', it does not quite manage to reveal an 'underneath' that answers for the "difficult and dangerous" "silence", "the lull behind [it]" (123). While Majara's exhibition seems to suggest that this 'silence' is, ultimately, a sheer lack of depth devoid of stability or meaning, the narrative's ekphrastic dimension reveals how the artworks supersede this reading, and thus even the intentions of their creator. Indeed, the somewhat contentious category of conceptual art such as Majara's is one which, in a notoriously postmodern fashion, often repudiates intention. This is also conveyed in the randomness of his approach, which lacks a clearly defined plan. However, this disjuncture between concept and intention lends itself particularly well to Vladislavić's text; by maintaining a narrative distance between the artist and his creations, the ekphrastic artworks unexpectedly open up a view of what this perilous 'lull', or depth, might contain.

At Bra Zama's African Eatery

Outside of the carefully orchestrated exhibition space, Majara's curios continue to provoke a sense of defamiliarisation, or estrangement, from the quotidian aspects of urban life; however, here, they foster a more affective awareness of how the city and its histories of economic materialism have rendered its inhabitants "violently invisible to others" (Nuttall, "City Forms" 748), troubling an ability "to see one another as fully human" (Nussbaum xiii). One example of this occurs in the preceding narrative vignette, *Afritude Sauce*, when the affluent protagonist, Egan, attends "Bra Zama's African Eatery" (EV 106).¹²⁵ The narrator explains that this is "a touristy place on the edge of Germiston where people could pretend they were in a shebeen" (106), and for which Simeon Majara had recently designed interior décor. "Seiz[ing] on the obvious trappings of the tourist experience" (106), Majara turns to a deliberately hyperbolic use of pastiche, covering the interior walls entirely with readymade wooden tribal masks. Like his *Curiouser* exhibition, he hopes that this facetious self-reflexivity will "turn them inside out, double them back on

¹²⁵ Egan is a sanitary engineer who has been hired by the government to build permanent houses for the residents of an informal settlement in Johannesburg. Graham writes that Egan is "proud of the contribution he is making to the country's transformation" (55-56). However, his "lack of empathy for the plight of the people who must live in the houses he helps build is symptomatic of the mindset that regards the country's housing shortage as an abstract policy problem to be addressed by bureaucratic social engineering, with scarcely more regard for the needs of residents than was shown by the apartheid policies that created the housing crisis in the first place" (56).

themselves, so that they [mean] something else” (106-107). Once again, this suggests that Majara hopes for his art to highlight the conspicuously modern Afro-chic shebeen's disembeddedness from a “sociologically grounded and contextually relevant narrative” (Manià 63) of South African reality; however, what it reveals about this narrative beyond a cursory deconstruction of its superfluity is left indeterminate.

Much like Majara's *Curiouser* exhibition, the whimsical effects of this pastiche induce a moment of defamiliarisation in Egan. As the overwhelming repetition of form emphasises the “flawless” and “always completely symmetrical” features of the wooden masks, Egan begins to perceive them, like Bra Zama's itself, as “relentlessly typical” (*EV* 89)—depthless imitations of a pre-colonial 'tradition', manufactured for spectacle:

These wooden masks everywhere, with their poppy eyes and round surprised mouths that were just made to hold a blowpipe, their bulging foreheads and scarred cheeks. They gave him the peculiar sense of being watched, as if a crowd of hungry tribesmen were staring at him while he tried to eat, gawking as if they had never seen a white man before. [...] They were faces that had never been lived in. (89)

Yet, as the defamiliarising effects destabilise this simulated image of South African 'authenticity', the curios invite a fresh appraisal of their form, drawing Egan's attention to unexpected idiosyncrasies:

The masks were nearly identical, yet each one had something individual about it, in addition to its ritual mutilations, as if they were all finally related ... members of one intricate, impossibly extended family. (89)

However, while the masks elicit an awareness of these traces of individuality—initially hidden behind the almost flawless repetition of form—Egan also becomes conscious of his inability to place these individual features in a meaningful way: “No matter how hard the artist worked at giving each an identity ... they ended up resembling one another” (89). Thus, the idiosyncratic and marginal is continually extinguished within relentless excess and transience. Significantly, this is registered as an unnervingly familiar description of Egan's everyday encounters in the city. As the overwhelming superfluity of the masks causes them all to appear to wear “the same interchangeable features” (89), it not only recalls the centralising forces of global culture, but also evokes Egan's view of the communities occupying the city's peripheral spaces. Here, “hundreds of eyes and noses and mouths”, like those of the masks, blur into indistinct, perilous images of “gangsters ... identikit portraits ... heist suspects or hijackers (89). Illustrating how the individual, and marginal, becomes extinguished in this morass of faceless forms, the curios make Egan feel suddenly “surrounded”: “There seemed to be more and more of them. Multipliers” (91).

As the ekphrastic narration catalyses this vision of Egan's everyday experience, it registers his inability to navigate the increasingly transcultural landscape of the post-apartheid city. More affectively, though, it becomes a haunting enactment of divisive city-life, where a seemingly faceless, threatening multitude lurks at the margins of its visible, prosperous domain. In this sense, the curios offer more than a parodic deconstruction of the urban culture of 'surface'; instead, they also reveal its unseen depth, by eliciting a disquieting view of the peripheral communities which remain habitually concealed beneath its "capitalist dream" (Buys and Farber, "Hauntology" 64). As Egan's response conveys, this space of structural poverty, exploitation, violence and crime is a source of increasing anxiety, hostility and division. Envisioned behind the carved wooden surfaces of the masks, these marginalised social collectives seem to oscillate between unique corporeality and abstracted spectrality, both rousing a visceral awareness of the human lives ordinarily "embedded in other orders of visibility" (63), and affirming their erasure from the city's visible domain. Here, the ekphrastic forms both unsettle the repressive modes of urban experience, and reinscribe the registers of everyday life within a liminal, fragmented, oscillatory space, which troubles the capacity "to see one another as fully human" (Nussbaum xiii).

In the Studio

This simultaneous affirmation and erasure of individual, marginal human life is also enacted in the space of Majara's studio. In moments of dramatic irony, the ekphrastic narrations expose how deeply endemic these repressive tendencies can become. Although Majara's artworks endeavour to deconstruct the spectacularised and materially-driven culture of the city, there is an acute sense in which his own enterprise is inherently reliant upon its exploitative structures. After acquiring the cheap 'readymade' crafts from an economically disadvantaged curio-seller, he converts them into artistic commodities for the world of 'high art', and thus for the purchase of wealthy curators.¹²⁶ Additionally, Majara is fundamentally uninterested in the real origins of the curios, and consciously dismisses the histories of the objects and their producers.¹²⁷ This knowledge, it

¹²⁶ It is worth briefly explaining what differentiates an artwork from a curio. Robert Shepherd writes that ethnic objects become 'art' only when they meet certain criteria, which include "possessing an aura of permanence and aesthetic beauty, along with both exchange and exhibitory value" (78). These criteria are used to draw a distinction between "art objects and the souvenir, which, lacking these qualities, functions as kitsch" (78). He elaborates:

Objects created for a consuming audience ... are ... assumed to be less authentically valid than objects created for the sake of the creative act itself ... or ... for supposedly non-market usage. A presumed lack of 'purity' (of motive, purpose, and hence design) came to function throughout most of the twentieth century as a seemingly self-evident barometer of authenticity, despite the fact that ... art, artefact and souvenir markets have coexisted. Indeed, this coexistence was not a matter of coincidence ... but ... was (and is) required for the categories of 'art' or 'ethnic' objects to have any meaning, since defining a particular object as 'art' is an act that requires the naming of that which is not art and therefore 'only' a souvenir or curio. (78)

¹²⁷ Majara finds the curios in Bruma, a peripheral Johannesburg suburb known for its flea markets and handicraft trades, as well as for its high volumes of violent crime and illicit economic activities, "passing mainly through back doors and legal loopholes" (*EV* 127). Here, he buys them for a suspiciously low price from a man claiming to be a Malawian immigrant and selling them on behalf of his friend, who had recently been murdered in Berea. When Majara conveys this to his friends, however, they are sceptical of this story; to them, it seems clear that "the stuff's obviously fallen off the back of a truck", and that he is actually "dealing in stolen property" (130). Majara consciously dismisses both of

seems, might impinge upon a guilt-free acquisition of the commodities that ultimately enable his own “stock-in-trade” (*EV* 103) and “[erase] another line between his art and his livelihood” (106)—an “excess” or “accumulation” which “he need[s] to feel ... to measure” (135).

As the artworks are described in their inchoate state, as well as during their creation, the ekphrastic narrations ironically double back on Majara, exposing his own inability to attach value to the human lives behind the handmade objects. While the text itself registers the defamiliarising and estranging effects of the curios, Majara remains bizarrely unaware of the corporeal forms that seem to manifest beneath their surfaces. As he unpacks his new purchase from the layers of foreign newspaper, for instance, he unwittingly likens the masks to “astonished stowaways”, “gazing up” (108) at him. This uncanny suggestion of human life emerges even more viscerally as he arranges the “chosen ones” in “little families and teams”, and “sets about them with saws and drills, roughing them up, scarifying them, shearing off the tips of noses and ears, lopping and gouging” (134):

He put two masks together with their temples touching and aligned the holes he had drilled in their ears. Then he pushed the end of a length of wire through a pierced lobe, bent it sharply and pushed it back through the ear of its neighbour, and twisted the ends together with a pair of pliers. [...] As he pushed the [drill] bit against its forehead, he studied its expression. You could imagine that it was gritting its teeth—but that was just the effect of the drill. If you took the bit out of the picture, the grimace turned to a grin ... The lantern was finished: a head with four faces. (102)

Even as Majara's creative process becomes an act of overturning the “noisy surface of objects” (123), it exposes his troubling incapacity to see the perilous realm of its 'underneath', and thus the marginalised lives that it hides. Instead, these are repeatedly submerged beneath his own 'capitalist dream', becoming reduced, again, to the quiet “lull” (123) of abstract, spectral forms. Moreover, this undeniably colonial imagery contains a faint trace of the city's (bio)political history; here, “both the techniques of power and profit were ... centred on the body: the individual body of the ... worker and the racial body of the populace”, which “were serialised and subjected to various forms of spatial distribution and apparatuses of capture” (Mbembe, “Aesthetics” 392). Testifying to the enduring state of socio-historical amnesia which echoes through the city's superfluous sphere, the narrator sardonically comments that “[o]n a large enough scale, with sufficient repetition, everything became conceptual, whether you were talking about art or murder” (*EV* 134). This idea is magnified in the disengaged, haphazard violence of Majara's technique, where a “single gesture ... replicated a thousand times” begins to feel like “nothing but a mechanical compulsion, a tirelessly repeated dismemberment” (137). Consequently, the ekphrastically rendered curios both recall the distant memory of the racial city, and signal an enduring incapacity to attach meaning to the individual and marginal within a

these possibilities, and thus the histories of the curios and their makers: “Simeon did not want to know the details, thank you very much” (128). Rather, he chooses to believe that his acquisition happened “by chance ... a lucky find [that] had changed his artistic course” (106).

culture of excess.

At the Closing Party

As the ekphrastic narrative exposes Majara's detachment from his creative process, there is an implicit sense in which Vladislavić also “lampoon[s] ... the pretentiousness and snobbery that attaches to much 'installation art' and the art world which pays exorbitant prices for flimsy gimmicks” (Gaylard, “Death” 71). While both the handmade curios and the conceptual artworks have illustrated how post-apartheid city-life continues to be shaped by a history of “self-interested indifference” (Bremner, “A Quick Tour” 68), this satirical inflection plays an equally important role in informing *Curiouser's* ekphrastic dimension. Likewise, it not only works towards unsettling the recalcitrant 'surface' of the metropolis, but also elicits an unexpected view of its concealed depth. By maintaining a satirical distance between the artist and his creations, the ekphrastic passages reveal how the artworks inconveniently disturb Majara's own repressive tendencies.

After the *Curiouser* exhibition, Majara hosts a 'closing party' at his home, self-indulgently decorated with some of his curio-lanterns, which are intended to resemble a “jokey African Halloween no scarier than a gutted pumpkin” (*EV* 120). However, as his macabre creations are encountered in this irregular context, they catalyse uncanny moments of defamiliarisation: subverting Majara's “merely amusing” and “self-consciously kitsch” purposes, the disfigured “mask-heads, streaming light from their eyes, mouths and noses” become distinctly “chilling” (120). Through this haunting evocation of corporeality, they begin to “[feel] like heads, all of a sudden, swinging from his fists” (114). These disturbing effects become amplified throughout the course of the evening, as the artworks even begin to “spook the guests” (103):

The lanterns cast an unexpected shadow over the company. Usually their friends needed little help to be rowdy. [...] But tonight the mood was sombre and guarded. People were talking quietly in little groups, hunched against the night, as if they were afraid of being eavesdropped upon by these glowing heads with candlelight spilling around in them like drunken thoughts. (124).

As the curios disrupt Majara's pretentious purposes, they not only satirically foreground his complicity in the urban culture of economic materialism, but also reveal an unseen depth. Much like Egan, who finds himself 'surrounded' by the figures that emerge behind the wooden masks, Majara suddenly perceives the habitual aspects of daily, affluent city-life as liminal; specifically, the curios rouse a visceral awareness of the lives that are ordinarily rendered invisible, and are consciously repressed, from his everyday experience.

Although the ekphrastic curios elicit this sense of liminality, they do not only provoke anxiety in *Curiouser*; rather, their haunting evocation of corporeality also invites unexpected moments of empathetic identification. This is demonstrated when one of Majara's guests, Amy, encounters a pastiche of wooden masks covering an

interior wall of his house. Like Egan, she feels overwhelmed by their relentless excess. The kaleidoscopic repetition of form makes her feel “off-balance and uncertain”, and disturbed by their “frightening” ability to simulate a “crowd”: “The sheer profusion was disconcerting ... like a pavement display standing up on end. It made you feel that the room had toppled over on its side” (141-140). Yet, unlike Majara's completed sculptural pieces, these masks have not yet been disassembled. Thus, as she encounters them in their former state, as if for the first time, she is confronted anew with the unique traces of human agency evidenced in their hand-carved surfaces. By implication, however, this pristine state also draws attention to the violence of Majara's deconstructive process. Combined with the curios' ability to reinvigorate an awareness of the human lives hidden behind their seemingly depthless exteriors, these artistic mutilations implicitly evoke the rupture of corporeal surfaces that are as vulnerable as the viewer's.

It is perhaps for this reason that Amy responds to the haunting and yet vulnerable¹²⁸ corporeality that emerges from the curios “as if it were her [own] reflection in the varnished surface (142). Majara also registers her unusually tender response to one of the masks, describing how it “looked as if she was going to stoop and kiss its rough-hewn lips” (143). Interestingly, Vladislavić has asserted that “[t]he skin is capable of drawing finer distinctions than the eye and acting as a 'bridging tool to help mend the social chasms of the past’” (*Willem Boshoff* 62).¹²⁹ Thus, he argues that “social distance is closed by the intimate touch” (62). In this sense, Amy's empathetic response to the masks seems to suggest a longing to close the social distances between herself and the marginal spaces, and human lives, which sometimes seem quite literally unreachable within the city's 'exploded' socio-spatial geographies.

Likewise, it is here that Majara's own incapacity to see beyond the surface of everyday life is abrogated. Through Amy's imaginative enactment of 'intimate touch', the curios begin to expose the invisible depths of urban experience that Majara has been unable, or indeed unwilling, to acknowledge: “In this tender gesture a human being became visible, a man with a chisel and mallet” (*EV* 144). As this proximity of human life becomes, in his mind, as tangibly corporeal as Amy herself, Majara also experiences a yearning to bridge the social distances that ordinarily obscure his vision. The narrator describes how it feels suddenly necessary to “run his finger along the living flesh of her cheek, the way she was running hers over this dead wood ... Wasn't that its purpose, to invite a touch? Not a talking point but a touching point, a point of contact” (145). Once again, these imagined points of contact signal a need to mend the social chasms which not only leave the urban community fractured, but also prevent the construction of a robust national community at large.

However, although the ekphrastic dimension of *Curiouser* momentarily gestures towards this intimate picture of national life, it also indicates that this remains an imagined, utopian vision, which elides the reality of division that continues to shape the socio-spatial landscape. Thus, Amy is unable to acknowledge the lives

¹²⁸ Vulnerability, here, denotes mortality, rather than victimhood.

¹²⁹ Nuttall has also discussed how visual representations of wounded bodies have, in the post-apartheid context, “render[ed] increasingly complex both the wounds that won't heal, and which erupt into public life” (“Wound” 418).

behind the handmade masks without considering the exploitative structures that perpetuate their invisibility. Linking the curios back to the city's marginal 'edge' communities, she highlights how Majara's artistic enterprise has been imperceptibly enabled by the ongoing structural inequalities that continue to haunt the post-apartheid city:

'I wonder what they would make of you. Seeing their things sawn into pieces and reassembled as monsters. [...] I think they would care very much about the prices you're getting. It's unfair, isn't it? You carve up a cheap curio and put it in a gallery, and suddenly it's worth a packet. [...] I can't help being aware of the balance of power, the imbalance, one should say. The way you live here, the way people who made these masks live.' (145-146)

Once again, the defamiliarising effects of the curios are ironically doubled back on Majara; here, he is not only confronted with a haunting view of “the makers, the hands and eyes behind these things” (144), but also the disquieting awareness of his own repressive tendencies. Faced with his complicity in perpetuating this socio-economic divide, he concedes that he has “become used to thinking of [the curios] as ... raw material”, “mass-produced ... like soccer balls or running shoes”, because “it suited him” (143-144). This admission reveals how a meaningful acknowledgement of these human lives is not only intolerable because it brings to the surface the repressed realities of poverty, illness, violence and crime, but also because it impinges upon a guilt-free position of privilege, and the “unconscious history of self-interested indifference” (Bremner, “A Quick Tour” 68) by which it is undergirded.

Critically, Vladislavić's text suggests that Majara is merely a synecdoche for the myriad urban dwellers inhabiting this “stratum of life, goodness, health and visibility” (Buys and Farber, “Hauntology” 67). For example, Amy perceives the exploitative undercurrent of his art as a valuable self-referential exercise, which links to “a question of awareness, of being conscious and *staying* conscious of how things are, even if you can't change them” (*EV* 147, emphasis in original). As *Curiouser* has indicated, maintaining this state of awareness is particularly onerous in the divisive, superfluous post-apartheid city, where there is “a radical loss of differentiation between the real world as historical and geographical referent, and representations of the real world” (Goodman, “A Bricoleur's Guide” 226), and where “you don't ever need to share space with anybody else” (Vladislavić qtd. in Miller 220). Additionally, though, it highlights how an awareness of these seemingly incommensurable socio-economic distances is also troubled by a sense of powerlessness, hopelessness and despair. Consciousness, or even guilt, are insufficient measures against these harsh realities; as Majara sarcastically suggests, it merely causes people to “[gaze] upon exploitation and oppression through their Police sunglasses ... making manifest the impossibility of change” (*EV* 149).

Crime Scene I, II, III

This rather dystopian vision culminates in the narrative's final ekphrastic work entitled *Crime Scene I, II and III*. This macabre installation piece represents the imagined victims of violent urban crime. Narrated in its inchoate state, it is imagined by Majara as “a room full of death masks, dangling from the ceiling on fishing line”:

'Crime Scene I': a charred mask, gouged and gaping, made to gape more chillingly. The wound in the forehead, an exit wound, drilled with the Black & Decker. The pale wood chipped away around the hole is white as bone.

'Crime Scene II': another mask, more severely scorched, with bullet holes in the left temple and the jaw. Protruding from the wounds, to mark the trajectories of the shots, two long wooden dowels in luminous colours. [...]

'Crime Scene III': the real loser. Burnt beyond recognition but gleaming white everywhere, as if the fire has pared the wood down to the skull. This victim has a little flag fluttering from his broken skull. (154)

At first glance, the preliminary title and vision for Majara's installation piece appear to affirm the familiar description of Johannesburg as a “crime city”, “security-obsessed dystopia”, or a “cesspool of vice” marked by “an experience of the pathological or abnormal” (Nuttall and Mbembe 354). As a characteristic which commonly reinforces its 'surface' reading, Bremner indicates how,

[n]ot just crime, but the elaborate defence against it ... [has become] the base of the new social economy of the city; after-dinner talk ... newspaper columns, political rhetoric turn with the predictable repetition around crime, its victims, its culprits, its consequences. Public interaction is marked by caution and suspicion. Social divisions are deepening, social circles narrowing. (“Crime” 62)

Somewhat unexpectedly, Majara's installation piece disrupts this familiar urban rhetoric, by inverting the privileged and myopic registers in which it is framed. Manià writes that while Vladislavić's texts do indeed “extensively [consider] the impact of crime on everyday urban practices”, they often “function as a Rorschach test, revealing more about the paranoid interpreter's mind than the totality of textual-urban experience” (56). Accordingly, Majara's idea is inspired by a disturbing fantasy in which he imagines the threat of violent crime entering the familiar space of his suburban home. However, the source of terror does not emerge from the city's looming peripheral spaces; instead, Majara is himself the perpetrator, with “a pistol dangling from his hand” (*EV* 153). In addition, his imagined victims are not the typical urban dwellers who are “awakened from [their] slumber, yet again, by distant gunshots” in their “built-up” security

enclaves; rather, he imagines targeting one of his mutilated wooden masks, “a terrified face looking blindly out” (153).

Here, the “predictable repetition around crime, its victims, its culprits, its consequences” (Bremner, “Crime” 62) becomes dislodged from the habitual registers of the city's visible and represented 'surface'. In this instance, Majara's death masks specifically represent the marginalised victims of violence and crime, whose stories are featured less prominently in the media despite making up the vast majority of cases. As such, the masks elicit a haunting view of the unseen experiences, bodies, and lives at the city's periphery, which remain concealed behind the pathological anxiety and sensationalism engendered in its visible domain. As Black emphasises, these 'edge' communities have experienced the “post-apartheid spike in crime”, “multiple forms of illegal economic activity” and “the compromises of political reconciliation” (22-23) most acutely. Facilitating an imaginative shift from myopic spectatorship to empathetic identification, Majara envisions hanging each mask at the height of the average man and woman, “so that the height alone invites you to press your face into the smoky hollow” (*EV* 154). This implies that as his imagined, affluent viewers inhabit the symbolic site of violence and death, their perception shifts from seeing the city's marginalised spaces as pathological threats occupied by faceless forms, to ones which are inhabited by real, corporeal, vulnerable human life.

Once again, the imagined points of contact that arise here suggest a need to close the fractures, and mend the wounds, that leave their mark on the city's divisive socio-spatial geographies. By staging an experience of “intimate touch”, the ekphrastic installation functions as an imaginative “bridging tool” that narrows the “social chasms” (Vladislavić, *Willem Boshoff* 62) of post-apartheid life and space. This experience of empathetic identification, which acknowledges a mutual state of corporeal vulnerability, is intrinsic to seeing others as 'fully human', and thus fostering a sense of community. As Terry Eagleton has articulated:

Flesh and blood is the degree zero of humanity, at once monstrous in its anonymity and the medium of our most cherished contact. It is because the mortal afflicted body lies at the root of all culture that the local and the universal are not ultimately at odds. [...] [T]he body is ... the principle which binds us into unity with bodies of our kind. (320)

However, Majara's installation is not limited to aiding isolated moments of empathetic identification; more critically, it serves to draw attention to the persistent inequalities that fragment the post-apartheid city, and the national community at large. From within the death masks, whose “eyes are shaped like keyholes and television screens”, Majara's imagined viewers will face a screen featuring television footage of the so-called “peacemakers ... negotiators ... mediators”, such as those of democracy and its reconciliatory goals:

On the screen, black men in pale suits are getting out of limousines, passing through revolving doors, crossing lobbies, harried by reporters and cameramen, walking backwards, thrusting their notepads and furry microphones into the frame, as if the tools of the trade are the real subject of news. [...] Whenever they face the camera, their bodyguards, tall men with short blond hair and dark glasses, the only white people you see, appear in the background, looking alertly over their shoulders, gazing into the invisible corners where danger always lurks, off-screen, cloaked in the everyday. (*EV* 154-155)

Thus, as the viewers symbolically inhabit the marginalised spaces of structural inequality, or the “invisible corners where danger always lurks ... cloaked in the everyday” (155), they are also compelled to consider the shortcomings of the 'new' nation, and the failed promises of democracy. From within the mutilated masks—stabbed, shot and burnt—the vision of a robust national community seems direly absurd. This is illustrated perhaps most poignantly by the third mask: here, the victim, “the real loser” (154), has been burnt to death, possibly in another township fire or in a bout of xenophobic violence, and is sardonically accompanied by a flag—a symbol of freedom, visibility and life in the new nation.

Commenting on the themes of violence that saturate much of Vladislavić's writing, Goodman highlights how these often indicate a “self-destructive violence” that “lies at the heart of the city”, whether “the literal violence of crime” or the “less apparent violence of change which threatens to turn the epistemological certainties of the city into unavoidable ontological uncertainties” (“A Bricoleur's Guide” 223). Both of these elements are engendered in Majara's *Crime Scene* series. While the literal application emerges more explicitly, the latter reading is suggested in the self-referential element of the work, whereby the artist also confronts his own repressed feelings of guilt, powerlessness and despair. Both the title of the installation, as well as Majara's violent fantasy, suggest a catharsis or confession: as the notional death masks allow him to imaginatively inhabit the position of a real, marginalised victim of violence, the artwork laments the exploitative, oppressive and 'exploded' structures which have both aided his own 'capitalist dream', and prevented him from acknowledging the fully human lives concealed beneath its recalcitrant surface.

This final ekphrastic piece offers a tentative vision of reconstruction, by bringing into visceral contact the various social identities that are implicated in the process of building the new national community. However, it also provides a frustratingly ironic conclusion to the narrative. Almost as soon as the process of a conscious 'working through' has begun, Majara returns to an aporetic state of amnesia. Testifying to the seemingly endemic inability to overcome the repressive tendencies of urban life and space, the possibility of healing the wounds of the past dissipates beneath the city's noisy, superfluous surface, as fully human, marginalised life is reduced, again, to an abstract, faceless morass behind depthless material forms:

The smells of the studio were comforting. Damp plaster, sawdust, creosote, glue. He sat in the neon

glare while the work folded from his brain, one piece out of another, sequences and series, objects and their names, stamped with Roman numerals like the descendants of a single forebear. (*EV* 155)

Conclusion

With reference to the built structures of post-apartheid city-space, Vladislavić has voiced the challenges currently facing South African writers as follows:

[T]he ... physical structures of apartheid are going to be difficult, if not impossible, to erase ... we're going to be living within those structures for a very long time. On the one hand, there is the pressure to be part of a proposed Renaissance, to present positive images that might help to reconstruct our culture. On the other hand, there is an incredible stress at the moment on memory ... a sense that writers need to remember, that one of the things writers can do is keep the past alive. (qtd. in Warnes 278-279)

Through the ekphrastic form of *Curiouser*, Vladislavić has conveyed how these imperatives of keeping the past alive and constructing an uninhabited future can result in often paradoxical and disorientating experiences of post-apartheid life and space. In particular, Majara's creative process of disassembling and reassembling becomes a vivid enactment of the author's description of the national community, where the work of rebuilding is likened to encounters of "revealing and concealing; wounding and healing; breaking and restoring to wholeness. [...] The tense play between seeing and touching" (*Willem Boshoff* 8). By eliciting moments of defamiliarisation, the artworks illustrate how contemporary urban space, and modes of being, play out in "constant oscillation between that which lies beneath the visible landscape, the metropolis's surface, and that which is concealed or embedded in other orders of invisibility" (Buys and Farber, "Hauntology" 63). By facilitating this 'exploded view' of the increasingly globalised and modernised city, the ekphrastic pieces reinvigorate an awareness of the dark silences, marginal spaces, and fully human lives that haunt post-apartheid South Africa, as it undergoes the complex processes of urban and national reconstruction.

In this sense, Vladislavić's ekphrastic narrative paints a picture of South African life that is complex, chaotic and often contradictory. As such, it also reveals a clear distinction from the works of both Mda and Schonstein. Rather than productively envisaging the new society, his ekphrastic narrations work in a deliberately disruptive capacity; instead of creating restorative images, these notional art-forms conversely affirm the failures of democracy, offering a bleak and despondent view of both the present and the uninhabited future. Eliding a hopeful vision of a robust, cohesive and coherent national community, *Curiouser* evokes the sense of uncertainty expressed by Claudia Braude as follows:

I am left wondering if our creative African lives in a reviving, nonracial ... city are on the brink, collectively and individually, of a new, meaningful, and engaged urban experience, our spirits freed, or whether we will continue to be threatened by a hollowed-out experience, trapped in a copying and consuming relation to our environment and each other. (qtd. in Black 25)

Curiouser does not attempt to provide an answer to this question, but rather, shows how it has become endemic to the post-apartheid condition, where the work of rebuilding evades wide-ranging solutions. Yet, as Majara's oscillatory state of self-consciousness shows, there is an important sense in which the process of "reinvention or refiguring" is also "shadowed by a recalcitrant and disorientating memory of space and place that must be worked through for newness to emerge" (Venn qtd. in Buys and Farber, "Interstices" 99). As such, the ekphrastic narrative foregrounds the imperative of working through the repressive modes of post-apartheid life, whilst also resisting simplistic rubrics that overshadow past and present difficulties. Although Majara's conceptual pieces are primarily deconstructive, then, they also implicitly engage with this notion of "reconstruction ... putting things together in new ways" (*EV* 125), or "breaking and restoring to wholeness" (Vladislavić, *Willem Boshoff* 8). In so doing, Vladislavić's text quite self-referentially portrays the tensions of inhabiting the contemporary moment, as the nation moves from past, to present, and beyond.

Chapter Six

Conclusion

This dissertation has explored how local authors have drawn on the visual arts in the process of shaping their literary projects, and providing vivid portrayals of the 'new' South Africa as it moves, rather precariously, from the injustices of apartheid, towards the embodiment of a unified national identity. At the outset of this study, Peter Wagner described how, in ekphrastic narration, “neither image nor text is free from the other”; rather, “they are mutually interdependent in the ways they establish meaning” (qtd. in Jacobs, “Picturing” 111). Although this interdisciplinary approach to writing is as old as the Classical antiquity, its more recent emergence in post-1994 South African texts has revealed how ekphrasis remains a relevant and compelling narrative mode, capable of signposting the “dynamic of transformative influences and new social forms” (Ibinga 2) that has come to distinguish the transitional stage of South African literature and art alike.

My ekphrastic readings of the selected narratives have each foregrounded how this synthesis of literary and visual art is able to both speak to and reflect the complexities of the post-apartheid condition. The study commenced with an exploration of how *The Madonna of Excelsior* incorporates *actual* ekphrasis; turning to pre-existing artworks created by the Flemish Expressionist painter-priest, Frans Claerhout, Mda re-appropriates both the subject-matter and arrangement, and form and function, of the pieces, to rewrite apartheid's traumatic past, and engage with the broader context of national reinvention. The first chapter highlighted how the textualisation of Claerhout's protest paintings enables Mda's narrative to iconoclastically re-present the black women both demonised and violated under apartheid's Immortality Act. By accentuating the heterogeneous, variable and indeterminate nature of the subject-matter, the ekphrastic pieces contest colonialism's iconologically-charged inscriptions of black femininity and, additionally, resist integration into the homogenising discourses of the national redemptive agenda. In this way, the re-appropriated visual forms become critical to Mda's narrative project of recovery, restoration and remembrance; here, text and image work in collaboration to create new myths, symbols, political structures and consciousness, by reinscribing both past and present subjectivities with a capacity for “self-making, self-reference and self-expression” (Mbembe qtd. in Mongin, Lempereur and Schlegel).

While the subject-matter and arrangement of Claerhout's artworks are employed for Mda's famously performative approach to rewriting history, their more elusive form and function also provide rich imaginative templates that enable the text to challenge the social fractures and dissonances of the transitional moment. While Popi's story illustrates how South African society risks remaining trapped in the insular epistemologies of apartheid, the transliteration of Claerhout's evocative artistic vision unsettles preconceived ways of seeing and being. By offering an expressionistic vision of reality, “rather than a mere representation of reality, one which is felt rather than only seen” (Strydom 10), these sensuous, playful and sometimes

ecstatic art-forms give rise to new modes of perception which, in turn, model the conditions for psychic and social transformation in Mda's narrative. Moreover, by foregrounding the hybridised nature of the artist's formal aesthetic, the text also emphasises a need for malleability, improvisation and renewal, in order to reconfigure the available categories of South African identity, and the broader socio-cultural landscape. Aligned with the writer's role in stimulating "new thoughts, new worlds" (Ndebele, "Thoughts" 17), Mda's ekphrastic approach to narration, here, affirms the need to foster a vision of the new society in the individual and collective imagination, before it can be inhabited in the space of material reality.

A similar approach emerges in Schonstein's narrative, which incorporates *notional* ekphrasis in the process of representing South Africa's increasingly transcultural landscape. Highlighting the role of the socially-committed writer, *Skyline* addresses the xenophobic tensions that have arisen between South African citizens and the unwelcome 'outsiders' who have infiltrated public life since 1994. Here, the fictional paintings specifically serve to envision the new social order, based on the philosophy of Ubuntu and its principles of interconnectedness, hospitality, and inclusivity. Often citing classical 'Western' masterpieces—created by displaced nineteenth- and twentieth-century painters—as the protagonist's artistic point of reference, the ekphrastic narrations trouble homogeneous paradigms of nationality. As products of migrants and migration, both the existing classical pieces and Bernard's imaginary ones reveal fractured and varied histories; this, in turn, enables the narrative to re-imagine an intimate national home-space shaped by hybrid mutualities and shared dependencies, where the boundaries between 'host and guest', 'citizen and foreigner', are rendered increasingly opaque. In the process of addressing the broader problem of cultural difference, text and image collaboratively serve to endorse the role of the artist, or writer, in accommodating the stories of the displaced and marginalised, and thus advocating an inclusive, multicultural redefinition of South African society.

The ekphrastic forms of Mda's and Schonstein's novels, specifically as outlined in the third and fourth chapters, both contain tentatively utopian inflections. From this perspective, ekphrasis foregrounds both the strengths and limitations of the representational approaches taken by the authors: in both cases, ekphrasis is employed to promote progressive and even efficacious images of South Africa and its new social imaginary; however, its frequent deviation from, and contrast to, the realist modes presented in the external narratives, also shows how these images specifically inhabit the space of the imagination and, by implication, fail to adequately reflect the current lived experiences of many of South Africa's inhabitants. In this sense, the explicitly performative role afforded to these text-images affirms that they work in a primarily productive capacity: rather than portraying the nation's existing, problematic material conditions, these ekphrastic pieces—whether *actual* or *notional*—reflect the imperative to write the new society into being, and thus to produce it through acts of representation. In this way, they work towards modelling an alternative social reality, which is not singularly defined by the atrocities of the apartheid past, nor by the evident shortcomings of the democratic present.

This disjuncture between the productive and sometimes utopian space of the imagination and the material conditions of reality is, conversely, magnified in Vladislavić's narrative. Much like Schonstein, Vladislavić incorporates *notional* ekphrasis throughout his fictional piece. Deviating from the positive inflections of Schonstein's and Mda's works, though, *Curiouser* presents a despairing image of South African life, and highlights the shortcomings of the 'new' nation under construction. Here, the protagonist's conceptual artworks, composed of disassembled and reassembled curios, serve as ironic reminders of how the injurious structures of the past continue to shape the present in often unconscious ways. Thus, the ekphrastic narrations draw our attention to the failures of democracy, by creating a renewed and often uncomfortable awareness of the marginalised lives that remain habitually unseen, or unacknowledged, within the country's increasingly globalised urban spaces. However, the disruptive nature of Vladislavić's ekphrastic text is not only contained in its refusal to present a restorative image of South Africa, but also in its deliberate satirising of the privileged artist-protagonist. In this sense, it quite self-referentially signposts the limitations of art, and the imagination, in bridging the chasms of post-apartheid life in an enduring way.

This notion of self-referentiality is noteworthy, particularly in considering the different ways in which the authors have used ekphrasis to represent the 'new' South Africa in their works. As a mode of narration whereby visual forms are employed to achieve meaning in collaboration with the broader textual frameworks in which they appear, ekphrasis can tentatively be read as a meta-fictional marker of each author's approach to representation. In other words, by explicitly referring to and assimilating other representational forms in their works, the authors may, deliberately or unconsciously, also be providing commentaries on their own creative practices.

As these readings have shown, both Mda's and Schonstein's use of ekphrasis stresses the productive, promise-filled potential of art to stimulate a rejuvenated image of national life; Vladislavić, on the other hand, employs these creative forms to spotlight the dire social and material conditions of reality. Consequently, the text-images employed by Mda and Schonstein suggest that change, transformation and renewal might be achieved, or at least nurtured, through art and acts of representation. This seems to affirm the idea that in the context of social transition, the creative's role is to imagine, and model, alternative social realities in which a cohesive national body can come to fruition—not only in the space of the imagination, but also, one day, in reality. In contradistinction, Vladislavić uses ekphrasis to parody the privileged artist's attempts to produce meaningful work; by taking this somewhat more deconstructive approach to representation, the author not only offers a rather despondent vision of both the present and the uninhabited future, but also seems to signal the tenuous limits of his own creative practice as a means of reconfiguring society and culture. Thus, while Mda's and Schonstein's texts adhere to the “proposed Renaissance” by “present[ing] positive images that might help to reconstruct our culture”, Vladislavić's expresses the imperative to “remember” the often invisible traces of our past that are “going to be difficult, if not impossible, to erase” (Vladislavić qtd. in Warnes 279). Importantly, as outlined in Chapter Two, Mda's

ekphrastic approach to representation also stages these tensions, by illustrating how “rather than being collapsed together, past and present must be made to interact in dynamic ways ... in order to make these rituals meaningful” (Goyal 49).

Despite the different approaches taken by the authors, it is clear that the inclusion of visual art has played a key role in shaping each of the narratives. As this dissertation has shown, ekphrasis has lent itself, in various shapes and forms, to articulating the injustices of the apartheid past, addressing the often ambivalent transitional present, and imagining a still uncertain national future. In so doing, it has functioned as a means of opening new or alternative dialogues, critical and imaginative frameworks, and self-reflective spaces in these fictions, and indeed, within the present historical moment. Thus, it is not merely a cosmetic feature of the narratives, but can be seen as a conduit for reading the transformative influences that have come to shape contemporary South African art, culture and society alike.

Because the selected texts are not only literatures of the transition, but are also exemplary of literature *in* transition, this specifically intermedial approach to representation is noteworthy from a final perspective. As we find ourselves in a historical moment that endeavours to transcend the rigid binaries of apartheid, our social collectives, cultures and arts are becoming increasingly characterised by heterogeneity, hybridity, dynamism and flux, as they respond to the stimuli of transformation and change. Nuttall reminds us that post-apartheid literature¹³⁰ in particular “offers a fruitful site for understanding ... [the] concentration of people, things, institutions ... the heterogeneity of lives juxtaposed in close proximity ... the ways in which they gather, mix, remix, separate, conceal”, as South African life “becomes the irreducible product of mixture, each ... moment sparking performative improvisations” (“City Forms” 740).

Both speaking to and reflecting this dynamic, improvisational and sometimes ambivalent character, ekphrasis, as a hybridised narrative form, “break[s] down the barriers” traditionally dividing “texts and images as 'sister-arts” (Jacobs, “Picturing” 111). As a specifically collaborative mode of representation, it therefore necessitates the coming together of two forms traditionally defined by their differences, in order to produce new meanings. From this perspective, the process of formal convergence demonstrated in the ekphrastic works may itself be read as an apt pictorial description of what democracy has sought to achieve; as the selected texts have illustrated, this process of coming together, whether in art or in society, can be filled with evocative and expressive potentials, ambiguities, uncertainties, or even fears. In this way, the ekphrastic pieces lend themselves as vivid illustrations of the post-apartheid condition—not only through their content, but also, in their very form. Despite being “one of literature's oldest and longest-lasting effects and practices” (Cunningham 57), then, ekphrasis has become a pertinent and seemingly novel means of picturing post-apartheid South Africa, as its arts and citizens alike engage with what it means to become

¹³⁰ Although Nuttall is specifically referring to city-texts here, this description is also extended to the broader context of South Africa's cultural and artistic production. This is outlined in more detail in her article, as well as in *Entanglement*.

“mutually interdependent in the ways they establish meaning” (Wagner qtd. in Jacobs, “Picturing” 111).

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