

Swart Poes as Black Honey?
Miscegenation and (Mis)Representation in Zakes Mda's *The Madonna of Excelsior*

The survival of the Afrikaner is not dependent on the [Immorality] Act [...]
After all Moses had a mixed marriage.
--P.W. Botha in *His Own Words* 131

Six years to the day after Nelson Mandela's historic inaugural speech as President of the Democratic Republic of South Africa at the Union Buildings in Pretoria, award-winning dramatist and novelist Zakes Mda visited the Belgian-born artist-priest Father Frans Claerhout. The dedication of *The Madonna of Excelsior*, Mda's 2002 magic realist novel (Jacobs 191) that explores the "Madonna-whore complex" in a South African setting (*Publishers Weekly*), evokes this visit:

On 10 May 2000, together with a phalanx of my daughters, I visited Father Frans Claerhout at his studio in Tweespruit, Free State. I had always wanted to meet him. He had mentored some artist friends of mine [...] Claerhout presented me with a book on his work¹ [...] But first he painted a golden bird on the black flyleaf and signed his name. I dedicate this novel to the bird.

What this bird in Mda's frivolous, fantastic dedication might represent and the significance of the juxtaposition by Claerhout of gold with black in his illustration is unclear. No less provocative is the short disclaimer published on the page preceding it, which rehearses the fine line between part and whole, inspiration and information. It skirts the private and public, the invented and factual.

Part of this novel is informed by actual events that took place in and around *Excelsior*, and which are in the public record. The characters are fictitious, except for the few public figures who bear their real names.

Framed by the miscegenation scandal known as the "Excelsior case" (Milton 508) that had occurred in South Africa's Orange Free State, Mda's "journalistic-literary genre-crossing" work (Hemer 4) subtly melds official with fictional histories (Courau 107) while problematizing the complexities of (inter)racial relations, indeed of representation itself in South Africa past and present.

Amended in 1950, the Immorality Act which prohibited "interracial sexual relations" (Milton) looms large in the novel. It brought South Africa "embarrassing publicity abroad," destroyed lives, and aroused "intense political opposition at home" ("South African Court Drops"). According to Mr. P.C. Pelsler, the Minister of Justice quoted in one of the many newspaper reports that pepper Mda's narrative, the police had acted in *Excelsior*, the "best-known town in the world" (71), because of

¹ *Claerhout: Kunstenaar en Priester, Artist and Priest* by Dirk and Dominique Schwager (Maseru: Visual Publications, 1984).

complaints by both Whites and non-Whites: too many “half-caste children,” it seems, were walking in the streets (*Madonna* 98).

The Excelsior trials were to have been South Africa’s “longest and most sensational” (*Times of London*, 27 January 1971). The plight of the defendants had caused “widespread consternation” (*New York Times*, “A South African Court Drops”). But at the end of January 1971, *The New York Times* and newspapers around the world reported that the case had been dismissed:

Seven white men—including several politicians—and 14 black women were charged under the act. One man was freed at a preliminary hearing; a second, the town butcher, shot and killed himself, while free on bail; the wife of a third left him; all were ostracized by their 700 fellow townspeople. But preparations for the trials went ahead. The Free State Supreme Court set aside three weeks and moved 60 miles from the state capital of Bloemfontein to hear the case in Excelsior. A score of South African and foreign reporters converged on the town.

Then, minutes before the trials were to begin [...] the state Attorney General withdrew the charges. The reason: Too much publicity had intimidated the state’s witnesses. (“Case Dismissed”)

Because of the Nationalist government’s strategy of censorship and its fear that the “devil’s own box” (Mzamane) might undermine its efforts, television service was only made available in South Africa in 1975. Thus the townspeople of Excelsior, emblematic of all South Africans, were not privy to the broadcasts beamed “directly to the living rooms of England and America” (70), for example. They relied on the printed press for their news, as we see in this early scene conjoining histrionics and the making of history. After “[doing her] thing” (52) with the white butcher Stephanus Cronje in the sunflower fields and on his wife Madam Cornelia’s own down duvet, black African and “rare flower in the middle of the desert” (15) Niki has given birth to a daughter who ostensibly exhibits “traces of whiteness.” A farm school teacher produces a newspaper clipping from her bosom in which it is revealed that the “sex ring” (66) of which Niki and Stephanus have been part has been exposed by one of the accused:

It was a cutting from *The Friend* newspaper. She shifted closer to the toilet bucket where there was better light. She read with histrionic panache:

AFRICAN WOMAN TOLD POLICE ABOUT AFFAIR

[...] On 21 October [a police officer] had called a Bantu woman, Mmampo Ledimo, to the charge office and had questioned her. She had admitted that she had had relations with a certain White man. She had, however, added that she had not been the only non-White woman who had done this, and had mentioned a number of others. As a result of this information seven Whites and fourteen non-Whites had been arrested.

“I refuse to believe this nonsense!” said Niki, clearly unable to convince herself that she unreservedly disbelieved the report.

“It’s right here in the newspaper in black and white,” said the farm schoolmistress.

“A newspaper cannot lie,” added Maria.

“The bitch!” cried Niki. (67)

Frequently sympathetic to blacks and those of mixed race (“Guide”), *The Friend* is revealing and apparently also recyclable. It is passed around first for the information it reports and then for the marijuana it might envelop. Reports of the “feast of miscegenation” and the “wonderful upheavals” that it has caused titillate the collective imagination and are a feast for the eyes:

Those sins that we did not see with our own eyes, or that we did not hear about in places where we gathered to celebrate our lives, we read about in *The Friend* newspaper [...] Tlotlo le wele makgwabane, the people said. A free-for-all. Open season. [...] Rumours of war followed the discharge of the women. We heard of white people who were fighting amongst themselves in Cape Town. Hurling words of anger at one another in their Parliament. Scuttling around in damage control efforts at the Union Building in Pretoria. All because of the black women of little Excelsior, so far away. We bought newspapers every day. *Die Volksblad. The Friend.* We ravished every page that had to do with immorality and miscegenation. Each issue circulated from one homestead to the next. Until it was tattered. Until smokers used the pieces to roll their zols of tobacco or dagga. (87, 98)

These authentic reports of the “shame of Excelsior” (70), of the “Golden Age of Immorality in the Free State” (91) inform Mda’s novel and expose a key part of apartheid’s legal machine as broken. They moreover serve as a foil for the tension in his work between “lust and loathing” (85), between miscegenation and misrepresentation. While the Afrikaner magistrates are perhaps able to conceal their “painful erections under their black magisterial gowns” (92), the “wholesale miscegenation in the Free State platteland” (87) ultimately proves the Immorality Act, “pillar of South Africa’s race laws” (“Case Dismissed”) and designed to keep blacks from whites to be hypocritical, unworkable, and a colossal sham.

Although it was officially illegal and therefore not something to advertise, in Afrikaner circles the so-called “immorality” represented by interracial sexual relations was actually a “pastime” (91). As Miki Flockemann observes, rampant sexuality disrupted the apartheid master narrative of power (“Traumas” 256). Afrikaner men indulged in the “stolen” (72) and “wicked pleasures” (76) of eating their “black honey on the sly” (53). According to tradition, the devirgination rites of young Afrikaner males actually required capturing, testing, and consuming what their fathers had surreptitiously been enjoying. They were to reveal—then revel in—the “forbidden quarry” lurking beneath the pink overalls of their nannies:

They went out on hunting expeditions for what they called swart poes. In the fields. In the veld. In the byways of one-street towns. In the farm villages. And in the kitchens of their very homes, where maids and nannies cooked them their dinners. (92)

As a result, for the Afrikaner men in the South African farming communities of the Orange Free State to the north metaphor—*swart poes* as black honey, miscegenation as immorality—invites illegality. It is however important to recognize that interracial sexual relations had been commonplace in the land ever since European settlers set anchor there in the mid-1600s starting at the Cape of Good Hope in the south. The notion that whites and blacks could somehow be kept apart, that God had “*willed into being separate nations, colours and languages*” (30), as Prime Minister J.G. Strydom had in the 1950s told his people, and that Afrikaners were the spokespeople of some purer culture was simply untrue:

[Immorality] had always been popular even before laws were enacted in Parliament to curb it. It became a pastime the very first day explorers’ ships weighed anchor at the Cape Peninsula [...] and saw the yellow body parts of the Khoikhoi women. (91)

According to Afrikaner novelist André Brink, the blood of the Afrikaners is actually some 71 percent “non-white” (*Reinventing* 77). They were the “offspring of an inevitable intermixing between colonized people and colonizers, of liaisons between Europeans, slaves, Khoi and subordinated blacks” (Kennelly 10). And for one of the “most mixed and mixed-up tribes of history” (Breytenbach, *Judas Eye* 115) to label the progeny of interracial couplings “coloured” was a misnomer, nothing less than the color-blind misrepresentation of their own bastard volk.

Yet since 1948, the Afrikaners were under their Nationalist government somehow able to impose their myth of racial purity on South Africa. Through a “frenzy of frontier tracing,” and “tribe-bound blindness” (Breytenbach, *End Papers* 77), millions of lives were ruined.

Before her bastard daughter Popi is taken away, Niki wonders how it is possible for a doctor in Bloemfontein to confirm as mixed the blood of her “light-skinned” child. “Mixed with what?” she asks herself, “Was it not all red?” (63) Popi remains pink, even though Niki has shaved clean her daughter’s head with a Minora razor blade. So Niki takes the brazier from the back of her shack, carefully places dry grass and twigs at its base, piles dry cow-dung on the twigs, ignites the grass, and holds her naked Popi above the fire. In a scene as pathetic as it is unbelievable, Niki unsuccessfully attempts to smoke the pinkness out of her:

The baby whooped, then yelled, as the heat of the brazier roasted her little body and the smoke stung her eyes and nostrils [...] She sang a lullaby as she swung her over the fire. Rocking her from side to side. Turning her round and round so that she would be browned on all sides. Evenly [...] five days [...] spent [...] hovering over a smoky brazier, browning her little girl. Singing lullabies and hoping the baby would get used to the heat and would stop crying so. Singing lullabies until the baby became red instead of brown. Until her baby’s skin began to

peel from her chest right up to her neck. Until the baby became truly coloured, with red and blue blotches all over. (65)

Some fourteen forlornful years later, when Popi looks at herself in the hated mirror all she can see reflected back at her are the “structural violence and violations of apartheid” (Flockemann 253), the pain of not belonging, those parts of her face, for instance, that identify her as other and therefore unseemly:

[...] she hated the mirror. It exposed her to herself for what she really was. A boesman girl. A hotnot girl. Morwa towel! You bushman you! Or when the good neighbours wanted to be polite, a coloured girl. She had broken quite a few mirrors in her time. A mirror was an intrusive invention. An invention that pried into the pain of her face. Yet she looked at her freckled face in the morning, at midday and at night. Every day. She prayed that her freckles would join up, so that she could look like other black children of Mahlatswetsa Location. (110-1)

For her parents have slept outside their own races and have in the offspring they have produced and according to the “fallacious” logic (Breytenbach, *Judas Eye* 115) of apartheid thereby misrepresented both the white and the black races. Under the myopic, distorting lens of apartheid’s Office for Race Classification, Popi is part of neither.

Only through relating to the “beautiful madness” (218) of works having “nothing to do with the outside world of miscegenation” (92) is the illicit, liminal, and out of place Popi able truly to heal. Through art, she can negotiate the reconciliatory journey with self that she and all victims of apartheid must undertake. She can move beyond the angst, self-loathing, and crippling oppression of institutionalized racism. She can bypass the jockeying for position and the political infighting that followed apartheid’s demise. Popi has served with her mother as a model for the madonna series of Father Frans Claerhout. Niki has been given pause by the resulting confusion of identity in Claerhout’s artwork: “brown madonnas with big breasts,” a naked madonna lying on a bed of white flowers, eyes closed, lips twisted, voluptuous thighs wide open and “ready to receive drops of rain” but “bearing no resemblance to Popi-and-Niki of the flesh” (12) or a blue madonna, “radiant [a]nd serene” who together with her child looks only like Popi. What gives the trinity the right to misrepresent his models, Popi also wonders, “to change things at the dictates of his whims,” “invent his own truths,” “re-create what had already been created” (105)? Upon further reflection, Popi understands that the earlier Flemish Expressionist-inspired “Chagall-like” (Goodman 7) works of Claerhout derive their emotive force from the distortion that drives them. After reading about European art in the “oversized glossy books” at the Excelsior municipal library, she is better able to comprehend Claerhout’s critical imperative:

[...] she was no longer bothered by the fact that [his figures] were distorted. In fact, when she came across books with figures that were not distorted, that captured life as people saw it with their eyes, she was not moved. Such works, she felt, were lacking in emotion. (200)

At the same time as the Excelsior town councilors argue over linguistic representation and the true nature of Afrikanerdom in the new and officially multilingual South Africa, Popi becomes sympathetic to unfamiliar configurations of relationships: hybridity, open-endedness, destabilization, fragmentation, muddling, and satirical unpredictability. In their multi-huedness, their muddling of human categories (Goodman 7), and while they foreground the unpredictable complexity of identity, Claerhout's works reduce the power of the conventional 1970s apartheid-era white/black South African dichotomy to "nil" (Steele 259). Near the end of the novel Popi catches a minibus taxi to Claerhout's studio, twenty-nine kilometers from Excelsior, on the pretext that she will ask him to donate a painting for the municipal library. As a result of misrepresenting her own purpose, she realizes that the power of Claerhout's works is not representational but cathartic. Evocation, alternative ways of seeing, being, and healing trump meaning:

[...] questions were in Popi's eyes as she moved from one canvas to another. *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 meant? Why should it mean anything at all? Is it not enough that it evokes? Should it now also mean? [...]*

The works exuded an energy that enveloped her, draining her of all negative feelings. She felt weak at the knees. Tears ran down her cheeks. She did not know why she was crying. She had to go. She walked out of the living room, and out of the mission station, without even saying goodbye. She had not uttered a word to the trinity throughout her visit. Yet she felt she had been healed of a deadly ailment she could not really describe.

In the taxi back home, weakness was replaced by a great feeling of exhilaration. There was no room for anger and bitterness in her anymore. Yet an emptiness remained in what she imagined to be her heart. Anger had dissipated and left a void.

How was she to fill the void? (227, 229)

The new relationships rehearsed in and across the trinity's oeuvre drain Popi of her negative feelings, cure her of her "deadly ailment." By revealing other modes of experience, they provide "coherence and shape to her own confusing sense of identity" (Flockemann 254). For her part, Niki whose own body had harbored the "black honey" forbidden by apartheid's Immorality Act, transcends history, retreating into a private world of solitude and serenity (Courau 114). She comes ultimately to understand, appreciate and thrive from the cross-pollinating logic of honey bees and the hybridity they enable in the veld. When swarming bees invade the Stadstaal and the Excelsior townspeople are afraid

to go inside the building, with her daughter Niki captures the queen with “the golden legs.” Both women take the queen and her “black-legged subjects” (176) home to the hives they have built in their back yard. In the past Niki might have “shunned fellowship with the men and women of her community” (116). Yet now she shifts her role to “Bee Woman” (239) overlooking her hives:

Serenity now descended upon [her]. She spent her mornings collecting cow-dung. And her afternoons sitting on a grass mat, watching worker bees fly in and out of the [...] hives that she had constructed [...] [she] lives with the bees [...] is immersed in them [...] in serenity [...] listening to [their] buzzing [...] Watching the worker bees doing their work. Sitting still even as some of [them] danced around her, communicating calming messages to her through their airborne hormones. It was as if she shared the same pheromones with [them]. (200, 209, 220)

Adam de Vries, the former mayor of Excelsior who was to have represented the accused Afrikaner men in court tries to convince Niki to convert her bee-keeping activities into a “viable business” by joining the newly formed Excelsior Development Trust. But she shows no interest. If she and the other women of the Excelsior 19 had had little recourse against those who had stolen from them sexually, Niki now remains confident that her bees will look after her, that she has the power to make them mortally sting intruders and that nobody dare steal from her apiary:

We believed that she had a way of talking with the bees, and that she had the power to make them sting unwelcome intruders to death. Even though we knew that bees normally became dazed and foolish in the darkness of the night, the Bee Woman’s bees had powers that were beyond the understanding of any human, save the Bee Woman herself. (241)

The bees not only take care of Niki but fill the gaping hole in her daughter Popi’s heart. They finally calm her too, erasing her “permanent frown” (162) but not before she is summonsed to the hospital deathbed of Tjaart Cronje, learns that she is his half-brother and that she is truly a “beautiful lady” despite having been denounced over the years for being “a boesman” (254), a “coloured brat” (144). Popi makes up for lost time and celebrates her beauty. For the mirror that in the apartheid days aggravated her liminality now showcases her difference. Reflected before her is no longer a hotnot misrepresenting the races of her parents but a self-empowered, self-respecting posterchild for the “Rainbow Nation” (234) in which hybridity and “multiple belongings,” as Zoë Wicomb puts it (“Shame” 94), hold remarkable possibilities for the future:

She did not only admire her hair and her eyes. She loved her yellow-coloured face and her long neck that had the spot where the skin continued to peel off. She loved her body and everything about it. She had taken to wearing the isigqebhezana, the micro-miniskirt of the new millennium, displaying her long yellow-coloured legs that bristled with golden-yellow hair [...] She would not shave her hairy legs. Her hairy arms. Even her armpits. She rejoiced in her hair and her hairiness.

She enjoyed her own beauty and celebrated it. (256)

Now if self-respect is key to psychic transformation, to a positive sense of self-worth, it is important not to overdo it. Niki therefore cautions her daughter not to spend all day preening herself in front of the mirror. The two of them then leave to spend an afternoon among the multicolored bee hives. When the bees begin to swarm, buzzing away from one of the hives in a black ball around the queen, forming a big black cloud, Niki and Popi walk under it. The thirty plus years represented in Mda's novel ultimately resolve in open-endedness, in a question pregnant with possibilities. Were Niki and Popi following the bees or were the bees following them?

We did not know. We just saw the women and the bees all moving in the same direction. Until they disappeared into a cluster of bluegum trees a distance away.

We know that the bees had succeeded in filling the gaping hole in Popi's heart. Popi, who had been ruled by anger, had finally been calmed by the bees. The bees had finally completed the healing work that had been begun by the creations of the trinity.

Yet the trinity never knew all these things. His work was to paint the subjects, and not to poke his nose into their lives beyond the canvas. (258)

To paint, indeed. To represent otherwise and in the process to destabilize the hegemonic and totalizing colonial discourse of identity. To blur the boundary between magical and objective reality (Williams 5-6). And to bring things full circle. From golden honey to golden-yellow hair. For if the "sins of our mothers"—the birds and the bees of illicit sexuality—are that from which all things flow, as the novel's first and last sentences suggest, is it really to distort the truth to see now in the golden bird of the dedication the golden bee, crucial for agricultural production, source for and of the honey that heals, cross-pollinator, agent of hybridity par excellence? Or even Niki, post-racial, post-reconciliatory South African icon. For if we can believe what is said, that honey not only tempts but—on wounds as deep as those in South Africa—can kill all germs (152), this seems aptly evocative.

Brian Gordon Kennelly

California Polytechnic State University

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