

Oblique Figures: Imagining Islam in South African Art

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Oblique, ad. - Having a slanting direction or position

The obliquities of Eastern negotiation. 1818. Hence obliquatous, a. morally or mentally perverse

Amuck a. and adv. Also amock, amok, 1663. [ad. Malay] A frenzied Malay.

To run amuck, to run viciously, frenzied for blood. Wild, or wildly.

- *The Oxford Universal Dictionary.*

The power of dominant media images of Islam in the 21st century, consisting of a recurring and largely unvarying set of portrayals, makes it useful to examine the varied ways in which Islam has been perceived in different national settings and historical periods. In this article I bring a gaze to bear on the vision of Islam that has developed in South African art. I hope to address the questions: what strategies bring Islam into view in South Africa? Through what *types* of representations is Islam rendered explicable? What are their founding beliefs and fantasies? How have such images changed over time? By showing the development of a specific vision of Islam in South Africa that varies significantly from dominant contemporary visions of Islam in the West, the article demonstrates the constructedness of all images.

The Oblique and the Centre: Placing Muslims in the Painted Landscape

A vocabulary about Islam in South Africa arose and developed a powerful explanatory force in the context of slavery and colonialism. However, as I explore further below, this discourse was marked by consistent difficulties. Through a survey of selected texts, from 19th Century writings, prints and paintings to art in the contemporary era, I explore how this vision came to *make sense*. I argue that the view evident in the 19th century eventually evolved into the lexicon of apartheid.

Muslims have an *ambiguous visibility* in contemporary South African media. By this I mean that relative to the size of the Muslim population in South Africa (2% in the most recent census), at various times they have been significantly visible. However,

traditionally they have been visible through a circumscribed set of visual and verbal tropes. In colonial-era texts there was a habitual *construction* and *placement* of images of Islam in texts. I term this placement of Islam an *oblique* positioning, and explore this notion in paintings and conceptual art.

Landscape in Colonial-Era Representations

In order to provide a context for my readings of selected texts, I undertook a series of surveys of images in prominent sources of 19th century South African art. What is striking about these various 19th century paintings is that ‘Malay’ figures appear in them in two distinct ways: there are numerous studies in which ‘Malays’ form the central subject of the paintings, yet perhaps more intriguingly, landscapes and panoramas of Cape Town and its outskirts consistently feature ‘Malay’ figures placed near the edges of the paintings, near the frame. In the 20th century Du Plessis and Irma Stern are two notable producers of images of Islam, Du Plessis in books like *Tales from the Malay Quarter* and Irma Stern in paintings like ‘Malay Grape Picker’, ‘Malay Wedding’ and numerous works with the Malay Quarter as subject. The illustrations in *Tales from the Malay Quarter* are of a crude tone. Du Plessis’ text includes drawings of bare-breasted women in harem pants.

The texts I consulted make clear the importance of terminology. The remarkable use of the word ‘Kafir’ in South African English alerts us to the peculiar position of Muslims in the racial imaginary of colonial and, later, apartheid South Africa. The word is an Arabic one denoting non-believers in Islam. It connotes those outside the fold of the faith. In South African English, the word came to have a derogatory, racist meaning, which, at times *included* Muslims. The *South African English Dictionary on Historical Principles* notes that the word is comprehensively offensive, ‘in all senses and combinations’ (p. 342). The dictionary tracks the trajectory of its use in South Africa, noting that at one point it was used as a classificatory term, ‘[o]riginally simply descriptive of an ethnic group’ (p. 342). Nonetheless, there is an indication that the word was known to be offensive by the 19th century. An 1812 entry reads ‘The tribe ... call themselves Koosas, or Kaussas. ... These people are exceeding offended at being called Caffres.’ (p. 342).

The term 'Malay' is another one of enduring interest in South African history, partly because of its use as one of a medley of terms through which the apartheid machinery attempted to craft a division between 'Coloured' and African people, and partly because the firm claim asserted by the name actually referred to a complex, changing reality. Far from describing accurately the geographical origin of the people so termed, the word more accurately referred to the use of Bahasa Melayu as a lingua franca of the Indian Ocean region (including East Africa, Malagasy, India and South East Asia) from which most slaves came. The name 'Malay' was used synonymously with 'Muslim', and with the high rate of conversion through which Islam grew in the Cape, the word 'Malay' covered a shifting, Creole reality.

The Picturesque

In my research, it was clear that two genres provide the most interesting images: figures and landscapes. Both participate in the tradition of painting called the picturesque. This European tradition, which composes the natural world into a scape to be viewed and *possessed*, is implicated in the workings of power. Transplanted to the colonies, the picturesque plays an important role in rendering the colonial landscape possessable. In his landmark analysis of the role of landscape in South African English literature J. M. Coetzee (1988) wrote of the need reflected in this literature of the settler's desire to structure, and thereby find a place in the landscape. Coetzee detects in this need and its recurring textual effects evidence of an anxiety in the 'belated' European gaze at the South African territories. Finding the territory occupied, these peculiarly 'unsettled settlers' (1988, 4) need to construct the landscape as empty, and therefore as ownable. Their belatedness requires a declaration of precedence, of authority. In an acute reading Coetzee analyses one of the textual strategies through which this is achieved – through the construction of 'the native' as 'idle'. The 'idleness of the natives' in relation to the 'productive' and 'rich' land creates a rhetorical effect of disproportion and disparity, with the effect that 'the idle natives' begin to lose the legitimacy of their prior right to the land. Their 'laziness' is a sign of unworthiness, and makes the resolute and hardworking intent of the colonists a justification for the displacement of the 'idle natives'.

I follow this reading by examining the role Muslims played in the rendering of the South African landscape. And here the notion of desire meets the 'unsettled' and

anxious tone of settlers' relation to the land. In contrast to the figure of the 'idle native', the figure of the 'Malay' appears repeatedly in the making of the colonial landscape in paintings from the 18th and 19th centuries, especially in Cape landscape paintings and panoramas. These 'Malay' figures are striking for one specific feature. They are *labouring* figures. As water-carriers, fruit-sellers, fishermen, washerwomen, the figures demonstrate their labour in visible ways. In fact, *it is by their labour that they are known to be 'Malay'*. This is significant for two reasons: the contrast with the 'natives' whom J. M. Coetzee asserted were repeatedly shown as 'idle'. Also, because in the 19th century paintings these labouring 'Malay' figures also contrast interestingly with the leisured figures of the colonists. However, the colonists' absence of labour is different to the 'natives'. The former are at leisure, rather than 'idle'. Their absence of labour in these images signifies the certainty and ease of their assertion of possession. Despite their labour, the 'Malay' figures, particularly the pieces by George Angas, are markedly appealing. They are over-determined as hardworking and, even more importantly, as *obedient* and *submissive*. I would argue that in the project to render the colonial landscape possessable, this construction of the 'Malay' figure proved a useful discursive tool. In contrast to the 'idle natives', the picturesque labour of the Malay, brought to the colony by European settlers, discursively helps to secure the right to the land for the colonists. Not only does this construction certify the right of the colonists to the land, but the figures appear to do so willingly. This vision of Islam is disarming and reassuring. Shamil Jeppie explains the relation of the two types of 'native' figures in his analysis of the work of I. D. du Plessis in the mid 20th century: for Du Plessis the 'Malays' are the 'good natives', contrasted by implication with 'bad natives' (1988, p. 2). Jeppie also showed Du Plessis' project formed part of the apartheid vision of separate 'races' arranged in a hierarchy, with 'Malay' poised between white and Black.

Knowable figures:

The tradition of the picturesque refers not only to the natural world, often coded as being empty of people, but can refer to people as well. How are 'Malays' constructed as picturesque? There is a clear tradition, demonstrated in cartoons and caricatures in the visual archives of the South African National Library, of *classifying* 'Malay' figures. These drawings participate in the intensive cataloguing, categorizing and typology typical of this period of empire, and suggested by Angas' cumbersome title:

The Kafirs Illustrated in a Series of Drawings Taken among The Amazulu, Amaponda, and Amakosa Tribes, Also, Portraits of the Hottentot, Malay, Fingo, and Other Races Inhabiting Southern Africa Together with Sketches of Landscape scenery in the Zulu Country, Natal and the Cape Colony. The drawings and paintings of ‘Malay types’ try to create a characteristic classification of ‘Malays’ – they attempt to list the different ‘types’ of ‘Malays’, to fix and explain them through clothing, pose and occupations. A typical example is a painting by George Duff titled ‘Malay types’ (Volume 2, Kennedy Catalogues, D399, p. 238). These figures are shown in anthropological detail - their clothing enjoys particular attention, for instance, the pointed or ‘toering’ hat of the men, the long and often lush dresses of women, and the occupations of both sexes – fishermen, fruitsellers, tailors, washerwomen. As a result, in landscapes and panoramas the figures of men with toering hats and the matronly, well-dressed women with elaborate hairstyles are *identifiable* as ‘Malay’.

Setting Bounds: the Muslim Figure and Landscape in South Africa

Examining the landscapes, I concluded from my survey that there are two types in which Muslims typically feature in the 19th century: these are of the city of Cape Town, and of the ‘Malay Quarter’. What is striking about the former, which are often panoramas of the city, is that they almost always feature a figure standing to the side, near the edge of the frame, engaged in one of the identifiable pursuits described above. In these paintings and prints, ‘Malays’ become visible in a peculiarly structured way – standing slightly aside, they are *oblique* figures. This type of figure – placed to the side near the edge of the frame, evidently showing signs of labour - is such a regular feature of the 19th cityscape that it is as though the city is not complete without it.

What logic governs this vision?

What do these figures do? ‘Malays’ appear to play a crucial role in paintings of the 19th century colonial city. They are figures that appear near the edge of the frame, and therefore may be seen as *framing* the landscape. In so doing, they signal the bounds of the knowable landscape. Placed on the edges of the landscape, so they declare its boundaries. Certifying the edge of the picture, they discursively *secure the bounds* of the tamed landscape. They render the landscape visible and tamed. Their immediately recognizable bodies perform the picturesque by framing where the

bounded scape starts, and ends, because beyond them lies something which cannot be included in the domesticated space of the colony. The landscape which is 'wild' when it contains 'native' human beings, is rendered tame through the figures of the slaves. What lies beyond them cannot safely be included in the *settled* vista that lies before the eye. As picturesque figures, they secure the bounded territory over which authority is claimed.

What lies beyond the figure of the 'Malay'?

What these landscapes do not do is speak of slavery, or insurrection, or trouble, the violence of the founding and the maintaining of the colony. The pictures seek by over-determining the meaning of the figures of the slaves or 'Malays' to elicit their discursive collusion in a certain vision of the world. The slaves and 'Malays' are discursively recruited as figures that secure the territory, just as free Muslim 'Mardijker's' were employed as soldiers to secure the first Dutch settlement. This local vision of the 'Malay' modulates the inferiority of the 'Oriental' known from classical Orientalist discourse, as the figure of the 'Malay' is interspersed between the colonists and the 'bad natives' in the Cape Colony, and helps the colonists negotiate the terror of the volatile landscape.

Picturesque Labour

In the type of painting where Muslims are in the edges, just within the frame, they are picturesquely portrayed figures of labour. They therefore pose a contrast to the leisured colonial settler figures, but also show a view of labour which is not insurrectionary or troublesome, labour which is disarming, reassuring, visually appealing. In fact, these paintings suppress all elements to the contrary - the runaway, struggling, resisting or rebellious labourer are not their subject. Neither are slaves who melt into the landscape, who run away to the mountains, and form insurrectionary groups or communities outside of the official settler economy. It is not possible to represent such knowledge in the kinds of paintings and prints I cite here, but nonetheless it is a ghostly negative to these images. There remains an insurrectionary possibility despite the over-determined, appealing labouring figures in the landscape of Cape Town. Occasionally, the sly history of the 'Malay' will erupt and the usually 'passive Malay' runs 'amok' with all their previous, cunning, perversely resistant meanings. Therefore, this appealing surface and its rhetorical

purpose of securing the possessability and domesticity of the landscape, is never entirely secure.

In later South African paintings, the pattern of the picturesque, enthralling 'Malay' figures continues. This can be seen in the work of Irma Stern, Gregoire Boonzaier, Ruth Prowse, Nita Spilhaus and others, which shows a continuing fascination with the figure of the 'Malay' and the 'Malay Quarter', hovering on the edge of the city.

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