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'I have always known shipwreck': whiteness in Sheila Fugard's *The Castaways*

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Despite winning two prestigious literary awards in the year of its publication – the Olive Schreiner Prize and the CNA Literary Award – Sheila Fugard's novel *The Castaways* has suffered a history of critical neglect. While the work has been mentioned by scholars in passing, there has been no sustained analysis of its account of white South African identity. We might posit any number of reasons for this oversight. Published in 1972 (and in paperback in 1974), when South Africa was on the verge of a widespread insurrection that would culminate in the civil war of the 1980s, this agonised interior monologue of a white patient confined in the 'Port Berkley Mental Hospital' probably seemed little more than settler solipsism, another self-involved exploration of colonial guilt, alienation and fear for the future of white South Africans. The 1970s and 1980s, as various debates and manifestoes of the time attest, [1] saw increased demands for 'committed' writing in a social realist mode, which, it was generally held, was best suited to contribute directly to the project of political liberation. *The Castaways* presents, in its modernist experimentation, a colonial allegory in different voices, its fractured surface expressing the unresolved antinomies of white South African identity. Political action requires a commitment to a particular representation of moral certainty with strategic implications. The indeterminacy of *The Castaways* precludes any such possibility. The text did not, in other words, relate to the *Zeitgeist* of a society undergoing a radical transition.

The political in South Africa has, in some senses at least, been resolved. This resolution has made it possible for us to return to elided texts such as Fugard's to undertake a more detailed examination of the schema through which South African existence has been interpreted in the literary imagination. We are concerned in this article with *The Castaways* as an example of 'white writing', which is writing, J M Coetzee suggests, 'generated by the concerns of people no longer European, not yet African' (1988:11). The protean settler identity we are concerned to explore is, in Coetzee's logic, *transitional*; it is marked by an interminable instability and, in its being-in-transition, is defined by an unsettled or unhomely lack. It behoves us, since we live post-1994 with the ongoing echoes of white postcolonial vulnerability, to unravel the practices of meaning entailed in this lack. While the subject of our critique, a seemingly marginal novel published more than three decades ago, might seem belated, we would argue that South African whiteness remains significantly under-theorised. As intellectuals set out to unravel the relational complexities of post-apartheid histories and identities, we cannot afford to leave the history of an agonised centrifugal whiteness behind us.

We are unable, given the complexity and excessive dissemination of *The Castaways*, to present a comprehensive account of the novel. We have chosen instead to consider in particular the use of shipwreck in the text as a trope of foundering white identity. This demands that we provide a summary description of the text, which is presented in the first part of the paper. In the second part we situate the novel's representation of the shipwreck of the *Berkley* in the historiography on which it is based: the compulsive retelling of the wreck of the East Indiaman the *Grosvenor* that ran aground on the Pondoland coast of South Africa in 1782. Using the analytical lens of Slavoj Žižek's

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'sublime object of ideology', we suggest in the third part of the paper that the compulsive reiteration of the *Grosvenor* story in South African letters attests to the fact that it represents a 'condensed metaphorical representation' (1989:70) of white alienation. The ideological meaning of the wreck of the *Grosvenor* has, we will argue, always exceeded its 'immediate material dimensions' (1989:70). By considering this excess, the ways in which the wreck has emerged as a Lacanian *point de caption* or 'nodal point' (Žižek 1989:87) of a quilt of ideological meanings, we show at least one set of ways in which the ontological and political are stitched together in white writing. In the fourth and final section of the paper, we consider *The Castaways* as a literary sequel to the *Grosvenor* historiography, arguing that the protagonist's cathexis onto the shipwreck narrative, his compulsive repetition and reinterpretation of the story, is a pathological manifestation of the quilting of the transitional white identity we are concerned to elaborate.

I.

The Castaways comprises four interrelated narrative strands. First, Christiaan Jordan, who constantly imagines himself escaped from the psychiatric institution in which he is confined, compulsively reconstructs the wreck, in the early hours of the morning on 4 November 1770, of an East Indiaman, *The Berkley*, on the Pondoland Coast of the Eastern Cape ('*an unknown region of Caffreland*' p. 3). He narrates the catastrophe and its aftermath, the castaways' stumbling progress towards '*the Dutch settlement of the district of Fort Frederick*' (p. 10), in the voices of the ship's Captain (Christopher George Middleton), an escaped Malay slave (Perels) who encounters but refuses to assist the castaways, the leader of an expedition to find survivors (Richard Rowntree), a missionary (Dr Locke) engaged, some years after the wreck of the *Berkley*, in the attempted conversion of a local 'Caffre' Chief (Mulwena), an English brother-in-law of one of the castaways (Phillip Greene) who also documents his conversion to abolitionism, and a resident of the Cape Colony involved in staging a 'hilarious account of our very own shipwreck' at the Castle (p. 25) thirty-eight years after the event.

While several of these voices continue to be heard intermittently, the figure and voice of Captain Patrick Choma dominates Part 2 of the novel. Jordan encounters Choma, a 'terrorist' who has graduated from 'the Terrorist Training Camp at Dar-es-Salaam' and who has 'occupied' the beach on which the *Berkley* foundered two centuries earlier (p. 43). He has renamed the beach 'Cuba' and announces his intention to plant 'a seed shaped like a bullet' from which 'violent men will grow' (p. 44). Inside the cave in which he hides are scrawled the slogans of the revolution: 'DEATH TO THE WHITES', 'LIBERATION', and 'KILL NOW PRAY LATER'. They ring increasingly hollow as the novel proceeds. Choma is isolated; he is cut off from the insurgent network of which he was once a member. No commands come from headquarters and he is left, himself an absurd castaway figure in a liminal and shifting beach landscape, desperately signifying revolution. He has made, in Jordan's view, 'the beach his image of madness' (p. 51). A postcolonial Friday, he walks back and forth across his territory, leaving footprints until 'it looks as if 20 people had crossed and recrossed [it]'. 'There is no pattern to the sand, [Jordan tells us] only a confused rising and falling of mounds of sand, footprints surmounting footprints, for this is what Choma wanted to achieve, the slogging of a mythical army' (p. 52).

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The third level of narrative is the drug and electro-shock induced opacity of Jordan's actual situation: his ongoing treatment at the hands of Dr Mercer in the Port Berkley Mental Hospital. We have fragmentary accounts of therapy sessions and the effects of the psychotropic drugs that are being administered, and surreal descriptions of other patients and the hospital orderlies (who slip into and out of the identities of the *Berkley* castaways and Choma). The coercive regime of the institution is in constant counterpoint to Jordan's fantasies, eventually, as we will see, silencing his polyphony of inner voices.

The fourth, and final, narrative element is 'The Buddhist'. He is saffron-robed figure who appears to Jordan, as if out of a mirror (p. 2), with the promise of guiding him towards some version of Zen *satori* or enlightenment. The monk offers Jordan the possibility of transcendence from the pathological web of narrative in which he is caught. While each of the cast of characters contends for his allegiance, the Buddhist offers the ideological possibility of a mystical resolution of contending forces: 'that I will overcome the opposites, see the flower that contains all experience, beyond the spoken word' (p. 27). As we will see, though, Jordan is unable to escape the worldly trap of representation in the Buddhist turn from the ego; he cannot, despite his wish to 'leave [his] portrait behind' (p. 2) smash the multi-faceted mirror in which he sees his schizophrenic self. Despite an abiding desire, he is unable simply to 'follow the Buddhist' (p. 35). The Buddha, then, does not resolve the situation for Jordan, who remains caught in the historical trap of settler history and ontology.

Given the heteroglossic, dialogical and fragmented nature of the text, it is difficult to summarise. We discuss instead just selected matters thematised by the contending voices it comprises. The first is Jordan's excessive identification with the characters of the drama of the *Berkley*. When he meets Choma he asks, 'Do you know who I am?' (p. 42). His answer is:

> Middleton! Perels! Rowntree! Call me by any of these names. I live in a white bed in a room called a ward where I began a journey. Then there was a shipwreck and I became a castaway. (p. 42-43)

Later Choma will once again demand, 'who are you! That's what I want to know, white man. Who are you?' (p. 56). Jordan has already given the only answer he can: 'Choma, I am Middleton, Dr Locke, Richard Rowntree. Call me by any name. I am all of them' (p. 54), and he later reiterates, '*I speak with many voices*' (p. 56).

In his magisterial study of Portuguese shipwreck narratives, *Manifest Perdition: Shipwreck Narrative and the Disruption of Empire* (2002), Josiah Blackmore suggests that ships commonly signify 'a unit of form over formlessness, an artifice or construct over that which cannot be contained or structured' (2002:2). Shipwreck, it follows, is the irruption of formlessness, whether that irruption is expressed as spiritual tribulation in the Christian (Pauline) tradition, as a 'disruptive chapter in [the] expansionist historiography' of empire (2002:28) or as a more secular misery arising from facing the inchoate and excessive nature of experience. Jordan, like his wrecked castaways, has been thrown into an exilic condition of radical doubt. Exiled from the structures of meaning and selfhood which afforded some assurance of unity and coherence, he flounders among ways of understanding the self and its context. Shipwreck, for Jordan, is the only abiding ontological condition of the settler, the one certainty in a persistent

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state of crisis: 'I have always known shipwreck. Deep inside, I know the foundering of the self and the voices of the castaways of the East Indiamen ... (p. 1).

The castaways in the novel express versions of this unhomely disorientation. Both Captain Middleton and Rowntree, the leader of the relief expedition, experience the shipwreck as catastrophic to their orders of belief. Washed ashore, Middleton speaks of a 'stark atheism' that descends upon him (p. 10) and of a consequent need for self-reliance: 'I knew that I alone could work out our destiny' (p. 18). Rowntree claims that, 'God abandoned me the moment the *Berkley* foundered on the reef' (p. 17). Perels, a character whose assimilation into an Amapondo clan would seem to suggest a less alienated condition, states, 'all my life, I was to remain a stranger' (p. 8). We have, in these various expressions of unhomelieness, an incremental sense of Jordan's loss of dependable representation, a version of centrifugal being cast out of its place and, in the process, deprived of all certainty.

The landscape, the *terra incognita* of Africa, in various acts of psychical projection, comes to resemble this bewildered interiority. Rowntree asserts, 'I think we Englishmen are uncomfortable in Africa' (p. 29) and, during his expedition, he sets about mapping a part of the continent in an obvious attempt to make it knowable (see p. 18). This cartographic urge manifests in Jordan's therapy. He seeks to chart the terrain of the past and the present in order to locate himself within it.

> I drew the map in therapy. Wattling held the cartridge paper flat against the trestle table. The stretched canvas sail of the sailing ship.
> I draw. The patch of the castaways, the colour of death. An X marks the spot of shipwreck. Circles are stones marking the hut of the runaway slave, Perels. A dark skull shows the burial place of Captain Middleton. Squares are the Great Place of the Caffre Chief, Mulwena. A blue stroke marks the mission station of Dr James Locke.'
> 'Good! Good!' applauds Dr Mercer. 'I can sense a new co-ordinating pattern in your thought processes.' (p. 1)

We might consider this contiguous cartography of history and the individual, this folding of the past into the being of the narrator, a process of involution.[2] Jordan's fraught interiority, the dissolution which has left him stranded in the psychiatric institution, is represented and explained through his heteroglossic account of the shipwreck; the tensions between his various fears and desires by the relations among its allegorical cast of 'historical'[3] characters (Chief Mulwena, Captain Middleton, Richard Rowntree, Locke and Perels). This incorporation of history is represented elsewhere in the novel as parasitic: as a 'map growing inside me like a geographical tapeworm proliferating paths in all directions, radiating from the one dynamic centre of shipwreck' (p. 2). Jordan, in his narcissistic figural logic, is inhabited by a history of crisis, catastrophe and displacement, by the very failure of form (the ship) to withstand formlessness, and the consequences of this failure (the purgatorial fate of the castaways). 'The wilderness,' Jordan tells us, 'is inside' (p. 89), and later, that he must 'draw illumination' from the castaways and Choma 'who move across [his] inner landscape' (p. 100).

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To map is, in some way, to own the landscape; to render the world is to make it conform to a practice of representation and therefore to exert a measure of control over its otherwise excessive alterity. In Part 2 of the novel, on encountering Choma, Jordan attempts to explain himself by drawing a map of the wreck of the *Berkley* in charcoal on the cave wall, but Choma erases it saying: 'You have no map. You are a prisoner. The territory is all mine' (p. 65). Jordan, facing the passage of history, counters: 'Don't you understand that your territory is only a 'new' Caffreland' (p. 65). The implication, to which we return in the final part of this paper, is that Choma's map denies that history necessitates relational being. We cannot separate territories, just as we cannot separate selves, in that the history of colonialism is the history of overlapping and interconnected experience. As much as Choma seeks a defiant separation of his territory, 'Cuba', all he does is become complicit in a naïve historiography that seeks, in a mode not dissimilar to apartheid, a land of one's own, supposedly untainted by the inescapable history of coexistence.

In addition to maps, Jordan is preoccupied with astrolabes, compasses and the history and practices of navigation. On imagining his escape from the hospital he lists as first among his needs a compass, and for much of the narrative clasps a smooth pebble as a substitute (p. 3). Following Middleton's account of the aftermath of the wreck, the survivors' disdainful treatment at the hands of the 'Caffres', and their aimless meandering (p. 10–14), Jordan exclaims: 'Christopher George Middleton, I see our compass lying in the sand. I run to pick it up, and find only a piece of twisted driftwood' (p. 14). Later Jordan summons to mind the figure of '*Prince Henry the Navigator at his school of navigation at Sagres*' drawing the map of Africa and Diaz, who, 'When he stood upon his ship, […] was like a God' but who, on land, 'dropped to the stature of a man' (p. 66). Not only do these references indicate the inaugurating moments of imperial expansion, the so-called journeys of discovery, they also suggest the limits of European competence. Diaz, we are told, could not have ventured into the interior (p. 66). While he possesses nautical knowledge, can touch on the beaches of the continent to plant his stone crosses, the land itself is beyond his navigational competence. Jordan, condemned as he is to find his way within the continent, is similarly powerless, and endlessly searches for devices that will help him orientate himself and steer a course through an uncanny and illegible landscape.

But Jordan's inner journey, from the catastrophe of shipwreck to an eventual existential resignation (the 'knowledge of the void' p. 108), is centrally a history of racial politics in South Africa. In a moment of lucidity, he asserts his singular identity: 'I know who I am. I am Christiaan Jordan, a white man' (p. 99). His imaginary journey is across what Mary Louise Pratt calls a 'contact zone': a 'social space where disparate cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination' (1992:4). Shipwreck and the contingencies of survival have, in the case of the *Berkley*, demoted the colonisers. Rather than embodying the asymmetrical imperial power of Europe, they are defined by their vulnerability.

This inversion is apparent in the survivors' encounters with the black clans along the Pondoland coast. Following his failure to convince Perels, the escaped Malay slave, to guide the survivors of the wreck towards the Dutch settlement, Captain Middleton also fails in his somewhat half-hearted attempt to protect the women and children from 'the Caffres'.

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> They pelted us with stones. Smythe fell to the ground with blood spurting from a head wound, and Miss Welsh fainted as one of the warriors waltzed off with her charge, the boy Clive. The boy, imitating in terror the exaggerated steps of the warriors, waltzed off with them to the Great Place of the Chief. Talbot, myself and the three other seamen staggered on, not knowing why, only that our legs carried us further. (p. 13)

Jordan will use these violent encounters to interpret both the 'savagery' of Mulwena, the chief in whose territory the ship is wrecked, and his contemporary embodiment, Choma. When Choma cries out, '*White man, what are you doing here?*' (p. 101), he is asking the question inherent in the stones thrown by the 'Caffres' at the *Berkley* castaways, in the petty violence of cutting the buttons from their tunics and the eventual extremity of murder and abduction. In their perdition, these (pre-colonial) survivors of shipwreck embody what Jordan sees, as the narrative proceeds, as the vulnerability of postcolonial South African whiteness. When he suggests that he is 'making a journey into [his] own life that sometimes reaches back into the past and then stretches ahead into the future' (p. 82), he implies just this arc: a distant history, preceding the imperial reification of race and the settling of cultural difference, is his only way of imagining a postcolonial South Africa. And, in his pathological, even paranoid, historiography, he is far from reassured.

II.

In her important article, 'The *Grosvenor* and its Literary Heritage' (1981:117–137), Jean Marquard points out that Christie, Hutchings and Maclennan (1980:164), in their rather cursory description of Fugard's *The Castaways*, are incorrect in assuming that Middleton, Mulwena, Rowntree, Locke, Perels and Greene are 'historical figures'. Marquard correctly identifies Jordan's heteroglossic account of the wreck as a fictional improvisation on the wreck of the *Grosvenor* on the Pondoland Coast in 1782. The tale of the *Grosvenor* survivors has been endlessly reworked in both English and South African literature. We will consider this literary tradition, albeit briefly, later in this section of the paper in order to contextualize Fugard's version. First, though, we need to consider the wreck itself.

Literary critics and historians writing about the significance of the *Grosvenor* are inclined to attempt full accounts of the wreck and the disastrous journey of the survivors. The events, it seems, are so compelling that their narration usually outweighs comment or analysis. Two definitive histories exist: the first, *The True Story of the* Grosvenor *East Indiaman*, written by the South African musicologist and composer, Percival Kirby (published in 1960) remains the most meticulously researched chronicle, and, the second, a bravely speculative and engaging account indebted to Kirby's work, *The Caliban Shore: The Fate of the* Grosvenor *Castaways* (2004), written recently by the English journalist Stephen Taylor. We can add nothing to these histories. For the purposes of our discussion, though, we present a cursory summary that simply identifies the key events.

On the 4 August 1782 the East Indiaman, en route from Calcutta, foundered on the Pondoland Coast. The third mate, Beale, had famously ignored the lookout's warning

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that fires could be seen burning inland, writing off the strange luminescence to some atmospheric phenomenon.

Following the destruction of the jolly boat and a hastily improvised raft, the crew, under the rather ineffective command of Captain John Coxon, attempted to secure a hawser to connect the wreck to the shore. A few crew members made it onto the beach, to find themselves surrounded by Amapondo clansmen who had already begun salvaging iron from pieces of the ship washed ashore. The clansmen proved, much to the surprise of the crew and passengers, indifferent to their fate.

Fortuitously, various eighteenth-century writers argued 'providentially', when the ship eventually split in two, the stern section, in which most of those on board had gathered, washed into shallow waters and all but two crew members were able to disembark, battered but safe.

Thus began the trek that has become legend in the South African imagination. It is estimated that 123 castaways began the journey from Lambasi Bay towards the Dutch settlement at Swellendam. Captain Coxon estimated that the journey would take fourteen days. One hundred and eighteen days later, having walked over 650 kilometers, the first six crewmen reached safety. In total only fourteen people, among them European sailors, lascars and two Indian maids (*ayahs*) are known to have survived.

Various narrative kernels recur in retelling the story: the refusal by Trout, an escaped Malay slave, to assist the castaways in finding their way to Swellendam; the increasing hostility of the Amapondo (who threw stones at the castaways, refused them food or assistance, and probably killed at least two of the crew); the possible assimilation into the Amapondo of two survivors who decided against attempting the trek; the splitting of the castaway party when the more robust sailors, under the command of the first mate, Shaw, left Captain Coxon, several other gentry and the women and children to their fate; the death of Master Law; the 1790–1791 *Grosvenor* expedition (the narrative of which, by Jacob van Reenen, was published) to find any survivors given the mounting fear that one or more of the girl children might have, in the language of the press at the time, been forced by the Amapondo into 'the vilest brutish prostitution' (see Taylor 2004:180–191); the disappearance, without trace, of Coxon's entire party; and, the eventual discovery of the six crewmen.

The *Grosvenor* narrative seized the imagination of countless European and South African authors and readers. Not only was the first published account, George Carter's *A Narrative of the Loss of the Grosvenor* (1791, reissued by the VRS in 1927), based on interviews with one of the surviving sailors, John Hynes, a bestseller by eighteenth-century standards (Kirby 1960:159–160), but the narrative was, over the next century, to find its way into a significant number of anthologies of 'famous' shipwrecks. Among others, works such as George Winslow Barrington's *Remarkable Voyages and Shipwrecks, being A Popular Collection of Extraordinary and Authentic Sea Narratives Relating to All Ports of the Globe* (1882) and R Thomas's *Interesting and Authentic Narratives of the Most Remarkable Shipwrecks, Fires, Famines, Calamities, Providential Deliverances, and Lamentable Disasters on the Sea, in Most Parts of the World* (1850) included versions of the wreck of the *Grosvenor*. Its 'melancholy catalogue of human woes' (Thomas 1850:5) seems to have made the tale of the

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Grosvenor one of the most regularly abridged and adapted in a genre, the shipwreck anthology, that was counted among the popular literature of its day. These somewhat lurid and mawkish versions of Carter's more sober document would probably have been the most widely read accounts of the wreck throughout the nineteenth century.

In addition to the rich tradition of popular shipwreck narrative, the *Grosvenor* was to be the basis, in one form or another, of a long line of literary texts. Kirby (1960:159–180) Marquard (1981) and Glenn (1995) have each described aspects this heritage, extending from the three-volume novel, *Hannah Hewit; or the Female Crusoe*, written by the lyricist of sailors' songs, Charles Dibdin, and published in 1792, to Fugard's *The Castaways*. A list of notable works, which is by no means exhaustive, would include: Captain Frederick Marryat's imperial adventure romance, *The Mission, or Scenes in Africa* (1845), Charles Dicken's study 'The Long Voyage', which originally appeared in *Household Words* of 31 December 1853; W C Scully's epic verse drama, 'The Wreck of the Grosvenor' published by Lovedale in 1886 and his short story, 'Gquma; or, The White Waif' that appeared in *The White Hecatomb* (1897); the Johannesburg writer, Jonathan Lee's remarkable fictional reconstruction of the events, *The Wreck of the Grosvenor* (1937), and her rather speculative sequel that tells of the fate of Coxon's party, *Mama the Tiger* (1942); and, Mike Kirkwood's poem, 'Henry Fynn and the Blacksmith of the *Grosvenor* (1975). In addition to these undoubted inheritors of Carter's narrative bequest, Glenn mentions any number of other possibilities: the threat of cannibalism in the *Grosvenor* narrative may have influenced Byron's account in *Don Juan* and others (1995:4); Harriet Ward's *Fifteen Months among the Kafirs* (1895) and *Jasper Lyle* (1852) are both based on the premise of a shipwreck not unlike that of the *Grosvenor*, and the former raises, once again, the spectre of female captivity among the 'natives'; and, André Brink's *An Instant in the Wind* (1976) and Nadine Gordimer's *July's People* (1981), among any number of postcolonial texts, evidence traces of the *Grosvenor* story (Glenn 1995:17).

Why this compulsive return to the event, this seemingly endless chain of representations? The first reason we would suggest is that the story of the *Grosvenor* is proleptic: it anticipates the complexities and dilemmas of a European penetration of an African environment. The second is that it presents, as imperialism proceeds, an allegorical framework for interpreting the changing colonial relationship with the indigenous people. This relationship is a conflictual one, comprising shifting fortunes of domination, subordination, impotence, guilt, self-justification and eventual accommodation. Writers over the ages have not been concerned to 'get the *Grosvenor* story right'; there is much more at stake than historical accuracy. Rather, the epic of the castaways has been endlessly reinterpreted in terms of the prevailing episteme, historical priorities or in the light of particular fears and desires.

III.

In order to account for both this prolepsis and surplus signification of the *Grosvenor* epic, we turn to Slavoj Žižek's discussion of another wreck, his analysis of the concept of the symptom in relation to the *Titanic*. Žižek acknowledges that the *Titanic* disaster is commonly read 'as a symptom in the sense of a knot of meanings' (1989:69). He elaborates this idea in terms of a theory of ideology he derives from reading Marx through Lacan. He suggests, at first, that

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> the wreck of the *Titanic* made such a tremendous impact not because of the immediate material dimensions of the catastrophe but because of its symbolic overdetermination, because of the ideological meaning invested in it: it was read as a 'symbol', as a condensed metaphorical representation of the approaching catastrophe of European civilisation itself. (1989:70)

The wreck of the *Titanic*, in Žižek's view, allowed society to live out a configuration of ideological meaning, the existence of which preceded the wreck. He then sets out to demonstrate this *prior* existence of the ideological (the promise of which is, in a sense, actualised by the material reality of the wreck itself) by considering a seemingly perverse coincidence.

In 1898 Morgan Robertson, a struggling American writer, wrote a novel, *Futility*, which uncannily 'predicted' the sinking of the *Titanic*: it concerned an 'unsinkable' transatlantic liner which was the technological epitome of its day; his fictional vessel was named the *Titan*; its specifications corresponded very closely to those of the liner built by the White Star Line and launched in 1912; Robertson's *Titan* carried an illustrious group of passengers; and, it too sank when it collided at night with an iceberg on its maiden voyage. According to Žižek, the explanation for this coincidence is not difficult to guess. It relates, to the *Zeitgeist*, an important aspect of which was that a certain age was coming to an end.

> [If] there was a phenomenon which, at the turn of the century, embodied the end of this age, it was the great transatlantic liners: floating palaces, wonders of technological progress; incredibly complicated and well-functioning machines, and at the same time the meeting place of the cream of society; a kind of microcosm of the social structure, an image of society not as it really was but seen as a society wanted to be seen in order to appear likeable, as a stable totality with well-defined class distinctions, and so on – in brief: the ego-ideal of society. (1989:70)

The meaning of the wreck, in an inversion of the Marxist logic of the fetish of the commodity, obscures, by exceeding, its material reality. It suffers from, what Žižek calls, an overdetermination (1989:71) because the ground for its significance has been so thoroughly prepared in advance of the event itself. This is not to imply that the event, the sinking of the unsinkable ship, simply literalises what is already known. Rather, the wreck has such an impact on the 'social imaginary' (1989:69) because it allows society to live out the complex knot of meanings already associated with a period of rapid, what must have seemed, catastrophic social and political change.

However, despite this overdetermination, this excess of symbolic meaning, the Real (in the Lacanian sense) is never fully domesticated in any account. Žižek, remembering the photographs of the wreck of the *Titanic* taken by underwater cameras, suggests the 'terrifying impact' of the Real. The body of the wreck, he argues, 'persists as a surplus and returns through all attempts to domesticate it, to gentrify it […] to dissolve it by means of explication, of putting-into-words its meaning. (1989:69). It is a Lacanian Thing, a 'sublime object' (1989:71), that drives those who encounter it to attempt to control its blunt presence through the powers of symbolisation. In its excessive being,

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though, the Thing itself obscures its meaning (1989:71) because it reveals the limited nature of attempts to capture or contain that meaning.

We have, then, in Žižek's analysis of the *Titanic* as symptom, a complex explanation of compulsive symbolisation in the attempt to control the excessive presence of the Real. Excess and lack, the symptom and its narration, are inseparable in his account. The wreck is preceded and overdetermined by its multiple meanings, but the Thing is never subdued or expended in any account: *it* exceeds narrative and figuration and constantly marks their lack.

We would argue that, as its endless textual reiteration suggests, the wreck of the *Grosvenor* is similarly a symptom. It expresses a 'knot of meanings', in this case linked in a ramshackle logic to an emerging imperial order and the new social and political configurations on which that order was to depend. It seems clear that, from its earliest versions, the story of the fate of the castaways has turned on a particular practice of 'representation'. Each of the cast of characters is taken to 'represent' a range of participants in the emerging drama of European expansionism, together the castaways represent a microcosm of British society, the wreck is considered to reveal the arrogance of imperial aspiration, the clashes with the Amopondo to signify the contested boundaries of European civilisation, and so on. This allegorical turn, this metaphoric density of the elements of the narrative, is only accentuated by time; looking back at the wreck through the lens of an imperial history, its meanings become increasingly overdetermined.

These meanings, like those of the *Titanic*, are detached from the circumstances and consequences of the wreck itself: they both preceded the wreck (accounting for its immediate and obsessive absorption into European letters) and have overwritten the event itself (it is taken endlessly to mean more than it logically could). For this reason, we should consider the *Grosvenor* narrative in terms of its participation in, what Žižek describes as 'ideological space'.

> Ideological space is made of non-bound, non-tied elements, 'floating signifiers', whose very identity is 'open', overdetermined by their articulation in a chain with other elements – that is, their literal signification depends on their metaphorical surplus-signification. (1989:87)

In the case of the *Grosvenor*, the compulsive reiteration of the account following its introduction into the European imagination by George Carter attests to its 'metaphorical surplus-signification'. Reduced consistently to an 'open' account of a first encounter between Europeans and Africans, the story plays into and across the white social imaginary. It presents the elements of the *Zeitgeist* of early imperialism and, in its reiteration, permits an array of writers to experiment with combinations of the 'non-bound, non-tied elements' of meaning from which the space of imperial ideology is comprised. The story, in some sense, is a testing ground for imperial possibilities and the limits of the white imagination.

At the same time, though, the events themselves (that writers of all sorts cannot resist retelling) persist as excessive. The *Grosvenor* story is founded on a unique colonial horror: the violent inversion of the power relations on which Europe's self-

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representation, its ego-self, depends. It presents as a rupture in the colonial symbolic, as the irruption of the Real. The rocks on which the *Grosvenor* is wrecked dash to pieces, as it were, the very forms of meaning on which the European imperial project depends and the only way to address this formlessness is to write frantically, to contain, in versions of public and private discourse, the horror of the wreck itself. This 'frantic writing' can be explained in terms of, what Žižek (1989:87) calls 'quilting'. Faced with a crisis in the social imaginary, it becomes imperative to stitch together free-floating elements of ideological meaning so that they become parts of a structured and coherent network of meaning. These 'quilts' require a 'nodal point' or 'nodal points' that confer stability on otherwise fluid ideological assemblages.

At one level the *Grosvenor* itself is a 'nodal point': its wreck ruptures an ideological framework of meaning (the pride of European expansionism) and casts its passengers and crew into a contact zone in which they come to stand for the possibilities and limits of whiteness. But at another, each actor in this drama of imperialism comes to represent, in him or herself, a quilting of different ideological possibilities. Captain Coxon, for instance, comes to stand for the frailty of political authority beyond the protection of the state, the Amapondo for the violent return of the repressed, the white female captives for the failure of empire to control the libidinal energies arrayed against it, the death of Master Law for the loss of European innocence, and so on. Any number of interpretations is possible, and most have been proffered at some point in the textual history of the *Grosvenor*. Our point is not the accuracy of any one of them, but their sheer proliferation as the fate of the castaways is endlessly rewritten. It is precisely the inexhaustible range of meanings that suggests the surplus metaphorical signification that defines the symptom. The *Grosvenor* and the elements comprising its narrative, function, then, as *points de caption*: the story of the castaways is retold to stitch together, and render coherent, a shifting pattern of ideological meanings.

IV.

It is obvious from countless correspondences that Jordan's *Berkley* narrative is based in this historiography. The wreck itself, narrated in the voice of Perels, the fictional Trout, resembles in every detail that of the *Grosvenor*:

> *It was dawn and already the Caffres were on the beach, dragging in the pieces of wreckage that had splintered off and been dashed against the shore by tremendous waves.* […] *The people on the wreck threw out lines, hoping to secure them to the rocks, Some of these did become secured, and the first of the castaways swam ashore aided by these lines, while many others drowned in the attempt, and still others on board made a raft and tried to float it, but now the ship had broken into two pieces. A huge wave lifted up one of the dismembered parts of the ship and bore it aloft before hurling it against the beach so that the white people were thrown up against us like some creature expelled from the depths of the sea, and the Caffres did not like this …* (p. 9)

Later Middleton, the fictional and equally blundering Coxon, expresses his desperate hope that a breakaway party, led in the novel by the second mate Lewisham, has '*perhaps reached the Dutch farmers*' (p. 11). Further, Rowntree's expedition, intended

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to '*kill all rumours about the survivors of the* Berkley*, other than the small band that reached Fort Frederick*' (p. 28), resembles in both its motivation and detail the first G*rosvenor* relief expedition. Their discovery of a survivor, William Habberly, employed on a Xhosa farm, finds its equivalent in Fugard's novel in Rowntree's emotional encounter with Able Seaman Hocking (p. 31).

We would go even further, though. Jordan's cathexis onto the epic of the wreck and the castaways is a fictional expression and extension of the *Grosvenor* historiography. It assists us to understand the distinct hold that this historiography has exerted in white writing. Jordan's pathology manifests in his imprisonment in the psychotic metaphorisation of the narrative, his obsessive attempts to use the epic to articulate and stabilise an interminably unstable identity. His is, in this instability that he cannot assuage, a constant quilting of ideological meaning from the *points de caption* of the *Grosvenor* story. As he migrates among voices – the scientific rationalism of Rowntree, the atheism of Middleton, the militancy of Choma, the Christian faith of Locke, the Romanticism of Graham Wallace, the alienation-assimilation of Perels, the hostility of Mulwena – he sutures together ontological maps of the African *terra incognita*. Each map is, though, provisional, and each is, in its turn, placed alongside contrary representations that Jordan can neither discount nor ignore. He is, in other words, trapped in the space of the verb and the caveat: since he can never know conclusively the nature of his transitional being; all he can do is *quilt* meaning in a realist (rather than idealistic) embracing of multiple possibilities. He is condemned to a reluctant process of continual reinterpretation.

Were we to describe this condition in Lacanian terms, we might argue that Jordan's pathology is at once a failure of primary identification (he turns his back, as we saw earlier, on the mirror) and an entrapment in delusional metaphors (the wreck and the castaways) that disrupt any fixed relation between the signifier and the signified. He is, in other words, inhabited by the narrative, rather than inhabiting it. The *points de caption* on which he so desperately depends do not, in their endless slippage, afford stability: they do not, in their proliferation of versions and points of view, anchor meaning and selfhood. We might argue that Jordan is, as a consequence of this slippage, imprisoned in the imaginary.

Sheila Fugard, in a brief autobiographical portrait, 'A Castaway in Africa' (1984:29–31), cites the first paragraph of her novel ('I have always known shipwreck. Deep inside, I know the foundering of the self …') as a 'fictional statement that informs [her] life'. She describes herself as lacking 'identity or affiliation with any race group'. 'The clash of [South African] cultures and the presence of inimical forces remain [she says] to challenge me' (1984:31). Implicit in Fugard's comment is the disavowal of the legacy of colonialism and yet the sense that the promise of postcolonial independence is fundamentally other. This unaffiliated condition, which we might identify as the core of white South African liberalism, reaches pathological proportions in Jordan's monologue.

At a point, Jordan imagines Rowntree saying, 'The price to be paid in Africa is neither involvement or detachment but an *in-between state* that allows for both the joy of discovery and the quiet moment of reflection' (p. 89). Jordan, knowing that he is trapped in representation, is denied both the 'joy of discovery' and 'the quiet moment of reflection' experienced by the rationalist Rowntree or embodied in the Buddha's

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promise of transcendence. He is left, simply, in the *in-between state*, a condition of interminable tension from which there is no escape other than the weary resignation of the novel's conclusion: 'I believe now that there is no need to find him, the Buddhist, that all I must do is progress in the knowledge of the void, the perennial nothingness of the moment' (p. 108). The void he faces is the infinite indeterminacy of interpretation, the Nietzschean condition in which being is never capable of foreclosing on becoming. This 'void', the endless plunge from one interpretation to another, suggests the extreme agonised edge of white transitional identity.

By salvaging marginalised texts such as *The Castaways* we stand to recover a range of schemas through which South African history has been thought in 'white writing'. This might seem, in the face of more pressing demands to address our postcolonial condition, a somewhat marginal critical activity. Writers like Fugard, though, force us to ask complex questions relating to the relationship between authorship and doubt, authority and powerlessness, and the process of literary canonisation. Jordan's inner shipwreck marks, we would conclude, a compelling expression of white South African identity facing a particular and historical crisis of self-representation. Examining his fragmentation, his historical schizophrenia and transitional ontology, affords us insight into an episteme that, like the *Grosvenor* castaways themselves, continues to assert its presence. Questions of settler identity in crisis remain inextricable from their contrary, the emergence of postcolonial relational identities. We cannot hope for insight into these emerging identities unless we, like Jordan himself, are prepared to place them alongside their historical antecedents in the same domain of the imagination.

Notes

[1] The debate regarding Mongane Serote's novel *To Every Birth Its Blood* (1981) is paradigmatic in this regard (see Baboure 1984, Visser 1987, Gagiano 1989, and Sole 1991), as is the debate regarding 'committed literature' (see Albie Sachs 1990 and Njabulo Ndebele 1994).

[2] The word 'involution' has at least three meanings: first, intricacy or complexity, second, to curl inward, and, third, to return to a normal or former condition (*OED*). To use yet another metaphor, Jordan's maps are like a möbius strip where the inside and outside is, deceptively, a single surface.

[3] We later address the fact that these characters are, in no real sense, 'historical.'

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