**Millennial Capitalism’s Vampires: The South African Graphic Novel *Rebirth***

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In the postcolonial South African graphic novel *Rebirth*, the workings of capital are established in the figure of the vampire. But the comic is not derivative; it does not simply offer another instantiation of the monstrous lord draining his victimized serfs of their life source—or, in the case of the postcolonial narrative, the colonial patriarch parasitically feasting off of the colonizers’ land and culture. *Rebirth* does effectively and importantly employ the vampire figure to draw a line from the violently exploitative commercial interests of seventeenth-century charter companies to that of current-day corporate power, which dominates through consumer culture. Intriguingly, though, the graphic novel also features a class of vampires that has only recently begun to be explored, vampires that are victimized and endangered—made mortal through an immune deficiency virus—even as they remain inherently predatory and dangerous. We argue that a distribution of vampires across class, race and gender types illustrates ‘millennial capitalism’ as it has been defined by Jean and John Comaroff—an entangling variation that may only be confronted from a place of complicity. The comic style draws the reader into that complicity as much as the text’s characters.

Keywords: South African literature; African literature; gothic literature; graphic novels; comics; postcolonial literature; vampires.

From its early days, gothic literature has been concerned with the spectrality of capitalism. The violent abuses of the aristocratic class are channeled into characters like James Malcolm Rymer’s Varney the Vampire (1847) and Bram Stoker’s Count Dracula (1897), and the threat to bourgeois control posed by unruly masses is imagined in creatures such as the Morlocks of H. G. Well’s *The Time Machine* (1895). The gothic graphic novel’s distinctive edge in critiquing contemporary capitalism derives, in part, from the underdog status that has historically been conferred upon comics, and, not unrelatedly, from its anti-establishment pedigree (see Mitchell and Spiegelman 2014, 20, 33); *V for Vendetta* comes immediately to mind. But, more pertinently, the genre’s edge may be attributed to its hybrid nature, to its potent mix of verbal and visual elements that, in the words of Hillary Chute and Patrick Jadoda, ‘actively solici[t] … the participant’s role in generating meaning’ (2014, 4). Divided into frames, the comic forces its readers into the gutter, where they become implicated in constructing the narrative but not in a forced or prescribed way. Since, as Chute and Jagoda explain, the relationship between word and image is often ‘disjunct’ (Ibid.), readers face the contradictions of experience as they make meaning. For, in Katalin Orbán’s words, no ‘single mandatory path’ is laid down, but ‘narrative, temporal, spatial, verbal, and visual connections … compete as alternatives’ (2014, 170). In this way, comics are well poised to reveal the contradictions of capitalist culture and to make intimate for readers our complicity in that culture.

In the postcolonial South African graphic novel *Rebirth* (2012), the workings of capital are established in the figure of the vampire. But the comic is not derivative; it does not simply offer another instantiation of the monstrous lord draining his victimized serfs of their life source—or, in the case of the postcolonial narrative, the colonial patriarch parasitically feasting off of the colonizers’ land and culture (see Khair and Hӧglund 2013; Clark 2013). To clarify, *Rebirth* does effectively and importantly employ the vampire figure to draw a line from the violently exploitative commercial interests of seventeenth-century charter companies to that of current-day corporate power, which dominates through consumer culture. Intriguingly, though, the graphic novel also features a class of vampires that has only recently begun to be explored, one that is victimized and endangered even as it remains inherently predatory and dangerous. We will argue that a distribution of vampires across class, race and gender types illustrates ‘millennial capitalism’ as it has been defined by Jean and John Comaroff (2000)—an entangling variation that may only be confronted from a place of complicity. A seemingly unintended consequence is that *Rebirth* also exposes its own complicity in reinforcing certain structures of inequity that it means to critique.

*Rebirth* traces a vampire legacy over 3.5 centuries, emphasizing the imperial control of a small class of transnational bourgeois figureheads. The vampire’s immortality creates a unique lineage between vampires such that history is carried through by individual vampires. From a postcolonial perspective, the vampire’s capacity to manifest the past in the present makes it a unique monster by which to critique global imperialism. When we first meet Lord Lukasz van Eyck in the late-seventeenth century, he orders his inferior, Jan van Riebeeck, to govern the soon-to-be colony of the Dutch East India Company (well-known as the VOC, after the Dutch *Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie*) at South Africa’s Cape. After terrorizing the Dutch settlers by disappearing many of them in the night, van Riebeeck selects one settler girl to turn—Cassia. She is unable to resist her new instinct to consume the blood of humans, but draining a Khoikhoi shaman gives her the energy, and the implement, she needs to finish van Riebeeck: she stakes him through the heart with an eland’s horn that has been ritually empowered to rid the territory of the fatal menace that has landed on the Khoikhoi shore. Cassia’s will to stake herself cannot overcome the force of immortality that comes to defines her, though. The narrative shifts back and forth between this past at the Cape and contemporary Johannesburg, where Cassia—together with a small community of three other vampires, all endangered by an Immune Deficiency Virus (IDV)—remain at the direction and mercy of the Amsterdam élite lords, or at least that of van Eyck, who continues to wield seemingly absolute power, now as a CEO of the same company, but with modern dressing: VOCorp. The continuity of Lord Lukasz’s remote authority across these time frames secures the graphic novel’s critique of corporate power, the life-sucking properties of which are shown to be constant from the seventeenth century to the present. A potential threat to this corporate order arises with the mixed-ethnicity adolescent orphan West, who, after being fully turned by Cassia, carries the cure to the rampaging IDV virus, a cure that could empower South Africa’s underclasses. After saving West’s life, a decision that interrupts a large-scale business deal, Cassia is staked, leaving the potential for revolution in West’s hands.

**Colonial Corporate Vampirism: Dracula Types**

At its outset, *Rebirth* appears to send up a straightforward colonial critique, focusing on the vampiric nature of South Africa’s colonization. From the narrative box of the very first panel (n.p.), we learn that the lead vampire, Lord Lukasz van Eyck, directs the Dutch East India Company, which was the first of the largest seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European charter companies to muscle their way into foreign territories in order to forcibly extract resources for their own corporate (and later, national) profit. Just below that panel, the historical VOC emblem is rendered gothically, establishing an unsettling mood as we are ushered into the Company’s headquarters. The predatory viciousness of van Eyck and his subordinate van Riebeeck is obvious in their sharp opening exchange, in which, as punishment for deviating from command, the latter is ordered to Africa. The nature of their vampiric violence is exposed in a rapid succession of panels that pulls the eye sporadically left to right between the angular faces of the vampires until van Eyck exerts his authority with the text’s first show of fangs. The violence extends over onto a facing splash page—even as the single frame creates a visual pause with the image of Lord van Eyck standing before a mural-sized map of the world (Figure 1). The words, which twist from the top left of the page to the bottom right, effect a wide visual sweep across the page. As with most graphic novels, *Rebirth* only sparsely uses the full-page image, reserving it for dramatic or exceptional moments. Here, the sudden halt of movement asserts a sense of doom. Unlike the precipitated dispute between the vampires, the kind of disturbance that is about to descend upon Africa is going to be indelible. Lord van Eyck’s large shadow, emphasized by the surrounding pastel hues, is superimposed over Africa, not unsubtly suggesting that it was European vampirism that gave Africa its enduring label as the ‘Dark Continent.’ As Lord van Eyck observes his map, so too is the reader-observer meant to contemplate Africa’s fate.

This opening establishes *Rebirth’s* ruminative style, which draws readers into the narrative’s construction. The graphic novel is exceptional for the genre in that the graphics are depicted, almost entirely, as a string of statuesque images, which slows down the process of reading and solicits the reader’s active participation in forming meaning. Scot Bukatman defines stasis as, simply, ‘the absence of movement’ (2014, 105) and suggests that in straying from a cinematic paradigm, stasis draws on the aesthetics of sculptural arts (110), which demand contemplation, and it allows time to unfold infinitely (106). In relying almost completely on this motionless style, *Rebirth* emphasizes the timelessness of the sempiternal forces it wishes to expose. This, however, is not to say that the pace of the text is abated. Even though stasis induces dramatic pauses in the forward flow of the text, speed is heightened by the strategic location of the focal image, and we are often thrown into an erratic whirlwind of fierce action.

The visual grammar of the first scene clearly establishes the malevolence of the European vampires, who conform to the Dracula type. The perfect figure of the malignant colonial patriarch, Dracula is, in Fred Botting’s words, ‘a diabolically evil father’: ‘bloodlust and *sovereign command* of natural and supernatural forces make the Count an archaic father the primal horde, *beyond law* and free to indulge his inhuman and irreligious desires’ (2002, 283, our italics; see also Punter and Byron 2004). Van Riebeek’s expansionist desire for ‘sovereign command’ over the Cape, in southmost Africa, is visually represented in polar opposition to the will of the local Khoikhoi to protect their people and territory as van Riebeeck approaches the Cape. Van Riebeeck, like van Eyck, carries his dominance bodily, in a tall, looming figure with angular features, pallid skin, and blank eyes that convey his soullessness (Figure 2). By contrast, the rounded features and wide, fearful eyes of the shaman, the text’s main representative of the indigenous inhabitants, give an impression of innocence as he prophesizes: ‘From this night a **malevolent spirit** will live with us’ (original emphasis). An unambiguous mapping of moral qualities onto the contrasting figures of Jan van Riebeeck and the shaman initially suggests that this graphic novel will treat these two categories of people—the European colonizer and the South African colonized—in a conventionally Gothic polarized way, with evil white exploiters pitted against good African victims.

As a character based on the historical Jan van Riebeeck, this first Cape vampire easily slides into the role of evil incarnate. Josh Ryba, *Rebirth’s* artist and co-writer, has voiced that intention: ‘Jan Van Riebeeck … always kind of reminded me of Dracula’ (Browde and Ryba [2013]). From the historical van Riebeeck’s own journals, we know that the governor was independently responsible for taking initial and violent control over the southern African territory and people. In her richly historical work *Apartheid’s Festival: Contesting South Africa’s National Pasts* (2003), Leslie Witz recounts how, against the Dutch Crown’s orders, he transformed the Cape from a refreshment station for company men en route to China into a colony. This imposition required dispossessing the local Khoikhoi of their land, attempting to enslave them, and when that failed, importing Central and West African and, later, Indian slaves to develop the VOC’s stolen land and infrastructure. So then, by extracting the life source of various African and Indian territories, in the form of slaves’ labour power, van Riebeeck accumulated wealth for himself and the VOC. This history brings to mind Marx’s line that capital has ‘vampire thirst for the living blood of labour’ (1976, 367). Van Riebeeck set the pattern of dispossession and enslavement for European accumulation that the Dutch and British would continue far into the twentieth century.

Further, Jan van Riebeek is amenable to allegorization for the mythic role he has played in the South African imagination. Witz details how although van Riebeek was initially exclusively lauded as ‘the *volksvader* [father of the Afrikaner nation],’ the British later fashioned van Riebeeck for their own origin narrative, making him ‘the [British] colonial father’ as well (2003, 15, original parentheses). Witz explains that Charles Davidson Bell’s mid-nineteenth-century painting of van Riebeeck’s landing at the Cape is representative of this re-fashioning. Figured in English costume, ‘accompanied by Cromwellian-type soldiers’ (42), and patronizingly facing a group of local Khoi people in rags, this version of van Riebeeck unites the Dutch and British in their assertion of colonial right and might over both the people and the landscape (Figure 3). The front cover image of *Rebirth* recalls this famous painting as the vampiric van Riebeeck takes the shape of Table Mountain from the same angle, but his Dracula-like features and the dark pall of his cloak convey the nefarious status that he gained via anti-Apartheid groups who invested his landing at Table Bay with iconic power, as the starting point of ‘conquest, slavery, and dispossession’ in South Africa (5) (Figure 4). It was a dispossession that was radically exacerbated through the institution of Apartheid by the white supremacist National Party—a government that, notably, successfully erected van Riebeeck as an emblem of white nationhood and the founding father of South Africa (26). If the image of Bell’s painting constitutes ‘the starting point of history that Bell had helped to make,’ as Witz compellingly argues (42), we posit that the cover image of this graphic novel solicits a revision of that history and, with the disparate vampire types within the frame, points to a far more complicated national allegory.

**Millennial Capitalism’s Shades of Vampires**

*Rebirth*’s diversity of vampires reflects the contradictory nature of capitalism as it is detailed in Jean and John Comaroff’s article ‘Millennial Capitalism: First Thoughts on a Second Coming’ (2000)—a variant that continues to be contemporary: a capitalism that presents itself as messianic, promising salvation in consumption, that makes mysterious the global distribution of wealth, that seeks to efface class hierarchy even as it intensifies social and economic insecurity among the masses, that appears ‘to offer up vast, almost instantaneous riches to those who master its spectral technologies—and, simultaneously, to threaten the very existence of those who do not’ (298). Youth, and especially youth from post-revolutionary societies such as those in sub-Saharan Africa, the Comaroffs demonstrate, are distinctly affected by such ‘*experiential* contradictions at the core’ of millennial capitalism (298, original emphasis). As subjects who are implicated in the structures of consumption that define their social value, but who turn to unorthodox means to escape the precarity of their everyday lives, youth come to ‘see themselves as ironic, mutant citizens of a new world order’ (309). *Rebirth* underscores, as the Comaroffs do, that consumption as a central feature of capitalism is not new. However, the graphic novel illustrates its morphology into the millennial moment.

*Rebirth* traces a line of continuity from first colonial conquest to Apartheid to contemporary corporate dispossession through imagistic association. The figure of the vampire is ideal for mapping this constancy in sovereign violence over time, and the visual form facilitates a historicization of the present. For, in Scott McCloud’s words, ‘comics is the only form in which present, past, and future are visible simultaneously’ (2007, n.p.) We get a feel for the ongoing legacy of the past in the present and looking toward the future in one particularly obvious scene in Part 3. There, we finally see Lord van Eyck’ s manifestation in the contemporary period, which we have learned in Part 1 is as the ‘Lord’ of ‘VOCorp’ (Figure 5). He is still stationed in Amsterdam but is available to the Johannesburg vampires (hereafter Joburg vamps) only remotely and at his electronic whim. We meet him directly following an episode with JP Botha, with whom he is visually aligned by the blue pinstripe suit they are both wearing (Figure 6); the lapels of the vampire Lord’s suit almost touch the shoulder of Botha’s on the facing page, in the first, close-up image of the current-day Lord. Botha is introduced in Part 1 as the prison warden of Johannesburg Correctional Services and the ‘former commander in the Apartheid military’ so that there is no mistaking that the character refers to the more nefarious historical figure P. W. Botha, architect of Apartheid and former Prime Minister of South Africa. The endurance of the structures of Apartheid in South Africa’s state institutions is figured plainly through both this allusion and the graphic alliance with the Lord of VOCorp.

Together, the VOCorp Lord and Botha plainly represent the sort of ‘international bourgeoisies’ that Jean and John Comaroff speak of, a class whose ‘exploitation of colonial wealth was indispensable to the development of Western metropoles’ and who now wield global control as a ‘transnationalist capitalist class’ (2000, 303). The Lord vampire is especially exemplary of the remoteness of capital control, which, the Comaroffs emphasize, is central to millennial capitalism and which is defined by ‘decontextualization’:

the distantiation from place and its sociomoral pressures, is an autonomic impulse of capitalism at the millennium; crucial, in fact to its ways and means of discounting labor by abstracting itself from direct confrontation or civic obligation. … bosses live in enclaved communities a world away, beyond political or legal reach. (303-4).

Well out of reach in Amsterdam, the VOCorp Lord is able to manipulate his sources of labour without compunction, as is JP Botha from his operations in the shadow economy of the prison. David McNally applies the Comaroffs’ above theorization to narratives from across sub-Saharan Africa that represent what he calls a ‘capitalist *monsterology*’ (2011, 2, original emphasis), stories that depict a context where ‘the circuits through which capital moves are abstracted ones,’ where ‘the elusive power that grows and multiplies … remains unseen, un-comprehended’ (6). The spectrality of capital is rationalized in narratives of zombies, witches, and vampires, like this one.

That the mysterious nature of capital is something that has always been able to seemingly grow out of nothing is figured in two sequences that are associated by colour. Near the end of Part 1, the seventeenth-century Cape is painted in golden hues that are picked up again after two mostly black pages at the start of Part 2 to present the contemporary cityscape of Johannesburg (Figures 7 and 8). The panel of the shaman looking out from the Cape coastline is importantly ‘disjunctive’ (to pick up Chute and Jagoda’s term again), both Romantic and foreboding. The text narrates Cassia’s perspective as she reflects on ‘[t]his new world,’ which, ‘to her is full of wonder and beauty,’ and since it is the figure of the shaman who is doing the observing, the image suggests that their perspectives are aligned. But her view is naïve while he ruminates on dark clouds that remain on the skyline and the waters that are not yet calm after the storm that accompanied van Riebeeck’s arrival. This disturbance is immediately realized in the subsequent night scene in the Dutch settlement when van Riebeeck descends on Cassia’s home and snaps the neck of her father before turning her. Though the brutality van Riebeeck instigated against the local Khoikhoi and other indigenous peoples is not directly referenced in the text, the sequence of panels that open the next episode and Part 2 speaks to the continuity of exploitation from then until now. When Johannesburg is identified as ‘the city of gold,’ the narration points back to its history as one that ‘started out as a dusty and brutal goldrush town’ but whose ‘character hasn’t changed all that much’: ‘It’s still a place for prospectors and dealmakers’ who are ‘willing to take [their] chances.’ Down through the centuries, South Africa has been an El Dorado, or a site of what Susan Strange has named ‘casino capitalism’ (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000, 295-299). At the same time, the stark lines of the Johannesburg business-district skyscrapers speak to an overarching finance-scape that is cannibalistic, that threatens to ‘chew you up and spit you out,’ as the text box says, if you play wrong.

**Millennial Consumerism**

*Rebirth* signals clearly that the contemporary world it represents runs on consumerism. It depicts a consumer culture that is vampiric, and one in which everyone is complicit such that the categories of monster and human become indistinct. At the start of Part 1, we are introduced to the co-hero of the story, a twenty-one-year-old orphan whose brown-coloured skin but upturned nose and long face mark his biological ‘contamination’ (in the sense used by Kwame Anthony Appiah 2006) as much as his name, Westerford Samuel, speaks to a cultural one. His nickname, West, makes even more blatant the colonial force that has defined him and that has interpellated him into a consumerist culture. His entanglement with that culture is evident in the first exchange we see between West and his best friend Ben, an obese figure with white skin and blue hair, indulging in an ice cream cone. Ben’s orientation to the present is made monstrous in a close-up image of his biting into the cone (Figure 9). The ‘CRUNCH’ as he bites down adds to the violence of the image, where a line of ice cream against his incisors looks, at first glance, like fangs. In a lower panel, his exaggeratedly fat face dripping with ice cream creates an image of excess that makes repulsive his look of self-satisfaction. Ben mocks West’s idea that ‘real life’ is defined by in-person, rather than socially mediated, digital relationships, saying ‘we’re not living in the **1600s** anymore!’ (original emphasis). As Ben glides among virtual platforms (Twitter, Facebook, Whatsapp), it is clear that he has embraced a digitally mandated reality. In case we missed the visual cue of the ice-cream fangs, the date ironically recalls the time frame of the preceding pages, where all idyllic imaginings are violated by the original vampiric consumer, the European colonizer. One type of consumption plainly extends into the other. Fred Botting describes the shift into the 21st-century version, in which ‘all bodies are changed from being simply the victims or the wage slaves of vampiric capitalism to its willing participants’ (2002, 288). Ben may be a caricature of the capitalist consumer with his rounded, shiny, grotesque features, but he also represents a generation of youth who are persuaded that social connectedness is achieved via consumption.

The average person is not the main target of the book’s critique, though, to be sure; that is reserved for the ‘prospector’ class of exploiters who parasitically consume by creating consumers. The point is made central with an image of fast-food—fries, soda, and a partially-eaten burger—that jumps off of a two-page black spread at the start of Part 2, near the middle of the book. The grub, we find out, belongs to Dr Agosto, a Dr. Frankenstein type common in contemporary popular culture: a biotech engineer, fueled by ‘fierce ambition,’ taking life forms into his own hands with DNA experiments that go awry. A leading medical researcher into the Immune Deficiency Virus that is ravaging South Africa, Agosto finds a potential cure in combining the blood of vampires (provided by VOCorp) with that of infected IDV orphans. (It is named IDV throughout, but a small newspaper clipping in one panel identifies the disease as AIDS.) Like Dr. Frankenstein, Dr Agosto operates in a moral grey zone by using physical material of the undead to engineer new life, and yet he attracts our sympathy. His roots in an impoverished southern suburb associate him with other marginalized characters in the text. More than this, he is humanized in his agony at remaining incarcerated for inadvertently killing thirteen study subjects. When a news story reveals that one subject—who turns out to be West—has risen from the seeming dead, we empathize with him as someone who is misunderstood and has possibly been misjudged. His tearful appeal, ‘I can **help**! I can … help,’ brings us on side with him. Agosto's character is particularly disquieting because his ravenous pursuit of ‘glory,’ as it is later termed, looks justifiable because his research could genuinely improve and save human and non-human lives alike, such that his success could be universally beneficial.

But Agosto’s involvement in the pharmaceutical industry, never mind his reliance upon extracting blood from his subject-victims for his self-aggrandizing research, carries him into the ranks of the vampiric as well. His storyline contributes to the contemporary vampire narrative, where, in Fred Botting’s words,

notions of reality and humanity … so important in the development of modern culture, now seem redundant, evacuated of significance by a form of scientific progress which is no longer interested in materially benefiting human life or furthering human communities. The present rush to invest in, patent, and market the results of genetic research acknowledges the predominance of such overt commercial concerns. (2002, 292)

It has become commonplace in modern vampire narratives to enlist the pharmaceutical industry as an inescapable life-sucking entity of the capitalist world.Lorna Piatti-Farnell argues that Scott Mariani’s *Vampire Federation* series, for instance, critiques pharmaceutical companies for wielding control over who can access continued life, for governing people’s ‘biological functions’ and their ‘social relations’ (2013, 46; see also Latham 2001).1 Such a critique of big pharma is unsurprising with reference to South Africa’s AIDS pandemic, which was exacerbated in the early 2000s by pharmaceutical companies’ refusal to lower their inflated pricing for less wealthy nations and by the state’s negligence to subsidize or even endorse anti-retroviral drugs (See Abdool and Abdool 2008; Deegan 2016, ch. 10; Nattrass 2012). While the latter federal choice was absurd, it was not unfounded as pharmaceutical companies had by then already established a history of deadly, illegal experimentation on non-consenting sub-Saharan Africans, subjects out of the purview of ethics monitors.2 Big pharma is an apt exemplar of millennial capitalism’s aims, promising wellness and freedom for the individual and the nation while banking on the over-consumption of its exorbitantly priced products.

**Ordinary Monsters, Rebel Youth**

Taken together, Dr Agosto, Ben and JP Botha illustrate the shading of the human into the vampiric, as much as the Joburg vamps, with Cassia as its originating member, evidence the humanity in the monstrous. It is no longer easy to equate humans with ‘good’ and vampires with ‘evil’ as contemporary vampires have come to resemble and behave more humanly while humans are simultaneously shown to be as, or even more, monstrous than vampires. The humanization of the vampire is, as Michelle J. Smith suggests (referencing Joan Gordon and Veronica Hollinger), ‘a process of “domestication”’ in which vampires display sincere vulnerabilities (2013, 196). The counterpart to this is that because they are not immediately recognizable as evil, vampires cannot simply reinforce the existence of a particular ‘good’ (198). For instance, van Riebeeck, a literal and physical vampire, is killed by a religious symbol—an eland’s horn that the Khoikhoi shaman has ritually invested with power—and Cassia is killed by a crucifix shiv; however, the vampirism that van Riebeeck and Cassia embody, that is, the vampiric nature of imperial expenditures, cannot be vanquished by any single force. ‘Good’ cannot simply overcome ‘evil.’

At the same time, as in other postcolonial Gothic texts, in *Rebirth*, the vampire figure in several instances ‘becomes the recuperated Other,’ to borrow from Gina Wisker (2013, 51). She explains:

For some postcolonial vampire authors, the vampire is the colonizer; for others, the figure is used to indict the selfish, destructive life-threatening behaviours historically seen in the practices of the colonizers and settler invaders. (Ibid.)

One could extend this list to postcolonial imperialists. Though far from the first to imagine vampires’ more human-like characteristics, *Rebirth* stands out in its attempt to portray a vampiric creature whose being is not superior but is almost indistinguishable from that of a human. Whereas, conventionally speaking, the vampire’s only envy is that of humans’ mortality, the Joburg vamps face mortality in an obviously human way by being infected with IDV. The last remaining vampires in Africa, they are abandoned by the VOCorp Lord. Not only are these vampires shunted to the bottom of the vampire hierarchy and made bottom-feeders in the human world, they are also susceptible to the same forces that plague the lowest demographic of South Africa. It is also from this position that the vampire may act as ‘a vehicle for change’ (Ibid.)

Cassia signals a transition between the traditionally recognizable vampire, whose monstrosity is immediately deplorable, such as van Eyck and van Riebeeck, and the vampire that has been ‘rendered ordinary’ (Smith 2013, 196). She is first figured in the contemporary age slouched on the porch of the Joburg vamps’ gothic dwelling on the Ridge in Westcliff (Figure 10). Hunched under an army green bomber jacket, nonchalantly holding a cigarette, she and her careless attitude are the portrait of 1980s grunge. Reminiscent of Joel Schumacher’s 1986 film *The Lost Boys*, this single image of Cassia conveys the cool desirability of the shadowy underworld while confirming the destitution of being condemned to darkness. While Cassia undoubtedly belongs to the tradition of the domesticated vampire, the visual architecture of the graphic novel both aids and inhibits her establishment as a sympathetic vampire.

Cassia adds a level of complexity that is often absent from postcolonial Gothic discourse. The nearly seamless transitions between Cassia’s present and distant past make palpable the current pain of a past that she cannot remember but that haunts her with ‘feeling[s] she cannot explain.’ As a white, Dutch-settler-turned-vampire, Cassia is a misfit in the perpetrator-victim, colonizer-colonized dynamic. In the set of panels of Cassia and the Khoikhoi shaman on the coastline (Figure 7), the golden yellow and warm orange colors of the sun-lit shore are reflected in the eyes of both the shaman and Cassia, creating a harmonious unity between the two. Yet, once van Riebeeck transforms her into his fledgling vampire, forcing her into his shadowy underworld, Cassia's eyes take on the cold chill of ice blue. Unable to resist her new predatory instincts, Cassia drains and kills the shaman. She is painted as animalistically innocent as she cradles him, her first victim—an image that follows directly from one on the preceding page of Cassia similarly embracing West as she turns him into a full vampire. Her actions are not only displayed as instinctual but almost messianic. The image clearly mirrors *La Pietà* (1498-1499) by Michelangelo, but whereas the original white marble statue is bowed in reverence and humility, Cassia is lost in the black folds of her dark cloak. The exceeding violence of the imperial vampirism that Cassia is compelled to carry forward is blatantly represented in West’s agonizing turning in a sequence of panels that follows shortly thereafter: terrifying blood-red and fanged arachnoid parasitic creatures rear up and loom over his helpless body as they execute their ‘total occupation’ (Figures 11, 12). Cassia would have had to have sustained herself on such violations, from a range of racial and gender types, which the remaining Joburg vamps at the Ridge represent. More striking than those vampires’ victimization, though, is that they, just like Cassia, have been made irrepressibly complicit as consuming subjects.

The Joburg vamps make even more apparent the blurring of categories between the monstrous and human. The early polarization of white colonizer and black colonized is visually blown open with the crew at the Ridge: Sleeper, who serves as their leader, bears distinctly Bantu features, with dark skin, a wide nose and full lips; Iggy is recognizably Germanic, tall and brawny, with a strong jaw-line and straight blonde hair, but also with amber eyes that signal ethnic mixing; Tenji is painted as brown-skinned and gender-ambiguous, lean and tall with masculine facial features but otherwise feminine physicality—wearing a breast-enhancing pink, snug, white-fur-collared crop jacket, tight leggings, and tall boots; and Cassia, who we know is Dutch by descent, is well-endowed with feminine curves, in keeping with other female comic super-heroes and vampires. Apart from the case of Cassia, how the humanity of the individual Joburg vamps was violated through the ‘total occupation’ of a foreign force is left untold, but their visual physicality conveys that the complicity in consumption is non-discriminating. For even though the IDV-afflicted vampires have been quarantined to Johannesburg and, by order of VOCorp, prohibited from turning humans, they remain predators compelled to feed on humans, and they do so by operating within the shadow economy of the prison system. They raid secured cash trucks to collect the required funds to pay warden JP Botha for two services: first, their regular feeds on the prisoners he wants to dispose of and, second, limited liberty for Dr Agosto to continue his search for the cure for IDV. To secure their survival, their ongoing capacity to consume, they stay entangled with certain forces of dominance, even as these forces are themselves subject to an intricate hierarchal organization lacking a single chain of command.

The Joburg vamps illustrate the complexity of consumer culture that Rob Latham draws attention to in his discussion of contemporary youth consumption and vampire texts. He suggests that a ‘truly adequate account of consumer culture developed from Marxist premises requires… [a] deeply situated analysis of the complex interplay of global forms of domination with the local complicities and resistances’ (2001, 10). *Rebirth* can be read as allegorically depicting the network of complicities with capitalist power within South Africa, which includes those who seek to defy that power. For if the Joburg vamps are complicit in their dealings with dominant figures who accrue power through exploiting and disposing people, these dealings become acts of resistance against the global corporate power that would dispose of them, too. In taking the executive decision to reject the VOCorp Lord’s orders and to turn West, Sleeper leads the Joburg vamps in a rebellion against that corporate order. At the same time, apart from Cassia, the Joburg vamps remain allied with Dr Agosto, who intends to extract the IDV-cure expected in West’s vampiric blood, and they prepare to dispose his body afterward. Consumption is their only aim.

The singular hope for effective resistance in this book lies with West. It is important that Cassia is the one to turn West as she establishes a direct link between him and van Riebeeck: only West, the last descendant of van Riebeeck, is able to potentially undo what van Riebeeck started. While van Riebeeck stands in for the early European capitalist conqueror, West’s status as an orphan also invites allegorization. In the absence of any details of his parents’ heritage, West’s name and physical body are all he or we have to go by, and they carry the signs of a violent past, bearing witness to the historical imposition of white Europeans on black Africans, where mixing was forced. West represents current-day South African youth, who have been constituted through that violent encounter, and who are rising up to carve out a future other than the bleak one before them. Jean and John Comaroff describe this generation: ‘[t]he young have felt their power, power born partly out of the sheer weight of numbers, partly of a growing inclination and capacity to turn to the use of force, partly of a willingness to hold polite society to ransom’ (2000, 309). The vampire orphan in *Rebirth*,as in other twenty-first-century vampire narratives, is a figure poised to tackle the deep social insecurities of their era. Fred Botting explains: ‘[o]rphans … become emblematic figures of the revolutionary decade, cast adrift in a world bereft of social and familial security. The threats to paternal order disclose an underlying instability, and absence, at the heart of any social or symbolic structure’ (2002, 284). In the episode where West experiences his turning, the narrative reads, ‘within his veins a new consciousness is awakening. An evolutionary revolution.’ Importantly for this text, as an orphan, West is a blank slate on which any future might be written, and his visual hybridity signals national promise: that black and white may unite in their turn against exploitative power. At the same time, the death of Cassia, the vampiric mother to West’s new vampire self maintains his crucial orphan status such that he remains unguided by any particular force or perspective. The contradiction inherent to West’s hybridity is crucial to the way South African identity writ large is conceived by many—as contaminated by structures of racism but hopeful for movement across race categories.

The hope in West is expressed in this violent revolutionary potential but also in his quest for personal connection. At the start of the graphic novel, he is mired down by ennui, as is Cassia; both go listlessly on in their worlds as they attempt to shake off the pasts that haunt them. As West sits looking dead-eyed and zombie-like in his job at Gepettos, a second-hand bookshop, he feels ‘his days and nights seem to blur into one another.’ Like the used books he sells, West has lost any sense of belonging, passed along as he has been between the hands of foster parents and doctors and, later, vampires. The shop’s name, that of Pinocchio’s creator, unmistakably identifies West as a puppet, lifeless unless animated by others, used for their purposes. Significantly, he also suspects that his is a universal feeling: ‘in the end he figures he’s no different from anybody else.’ When Cassia is about to turn him, he meets her threats to his life with boredom: ‘Who wants to walk around half **dead**? Just get it over with. You can’t miss a life you haven’t **lived**’ (original emphasis). West seems to embody the ‘feelings of erasure and loss’ that the Comaroffs find to be ubiquitous among millennial capitalism’s non-elect. It is ‘an erasure in many places of community and family…. a loss of human integrity, experienced in the spreading commodification of person, bodies, cultures, and histories in the substitution of quantity for quality, abstraction for substance’ (2000, 316). As we have seen, West’s best friend Ben is a master of this sort of substitution.

Ironically, although Dr Agosto commodifies West as an experimental subject, through that process, West finds a new sense of self. As, in the Epilogue, he observes his newly grown fangs, he discovers a foreign feeling: ‘now he is whole.’ This wholeness may also have been aided by the kiss from Cassia directly beforehand, which expresses the humanity she yearns to return to and the intimacy West has been longing for. In a pessimistic reading of contemporary consumer culture, Botting observes: ‘[c]ommunities disintegrate, families break up, bodies are surgically altered: the bonds and bases of human culture are unraveled’ (2002, 292). But bucking the trend of the contemporary vampire texts Botting analyzes, this graphic novel seeks to weave back together what has been unraveled. While West takes the form of the mutant Other, his vampiric self is more human than monstrous and, ironically, more alive. He is defined by consumption and yet is full of potential.

There is exciting promise in West’s heroic potential, and at the same time, that prospect is threatened in the book’s very last panel. This graphic novel prohibits imagining that any simple confrontation with millennial capitalist power is possible. Since West’s vampire life spans only two pages in the text’s Epilogue, his heroic capacity remains, at the text’s end, limited to promise rather than anything he has actually accomplished or performed. His unique blood makes him the sole carrier of the cure to IDV; he could be a savior to both the South African vampire community as well as the infected human population. The kind of salvation that West could provide opens out onto limitless possibility for human and vampire achievement and human-monster collaboration. The death of Cassia and the threat of an assault on West’s exclusive bodily make-up at the very end, however, darken that hope. On the final page, West, who has run away from the Joburg vamps, who are seeking his blood—and life—for their cure, stands before his bookshop, where Cassia told him to wait for her. Not knowing that she has been staked by Botha, West turns and calls out her name when he sees the passenger door open on a car that has approached, and Dr Agosto beckons him back into his clutches.

The closing panel reintroduces the menace of the malevolent paternal vampire-type. Dr Agosto, seeking West’s blood, orders him, with a disturbingly pedophilic look, ‘Get in the car, son’ (Figure 13). The paternal address is in no way endearing, and like the original Dr. Frankenstein, Agosto seeks out his young ‘invention’ in an obviously predatory way—not to avenge anything but to aggrandize himself. The sinister nature of Agosto’s intention is reinforced by the image of a half-eaten apple, tossed aside in the front seat of his car. One of several religious objects in the text, the bitten apple undoubtedly signifies a deliberate choice to transgress, darkening the moral grey zone that Dr Agosto occupies, marking his separation from goodness. The image is also one of careless consumption: the wasted apple recalls—and punctuates—Dr Agosto’s reckless appetite for the life-source he would suck from West before discarding his body as a useless remainder. The vampire Lord-turned-CEO may have abandoned the African vampires, dismissing the possibility of a revival, presumably because his vampiric prospects have been enlivened elsewhere, in larger, more global options. Yet, where one corporate consumerist force falls away, another rises in its place. With Agosto, the consolidated power of contemporary speculative trade, the commodification of bodies, and capitalist biopower persists as a formidable threat.

**Cassia’s Complicity: Defending Vampirism**

Another threat to the revolutionary spirit of not just West but of this text as a whole lies in the character of Cassia. For while she and her vampire community reveal the complexities of complicity in millennial capitalism, the text’s defense of her as an Afrikaner-victim is overdone. That is by no means to suggest that all white South Africans ought to be represented as strictly monstrous or even to deny the strain of immediate identification of whiteness with colonial violence for Afrikaners and British-descended South Africans. However, Cassia’s Afrikaner identity is treated as one that is victimized, dispossessed; and her violence, completely out of her control. To start, the early Dutch settlers’ circumstances are depicted as harsh and pitiable; they are forced to provide life-sustaining supplies to crews sailing around the Cape even as they themselves ‘eek out a lean existence, struggling to survive.’ Apart from van Riebeeck and Cassia, the pioneering Afrikaners are absolved of any wrong-doing and are stripped of consumptive properties. Instead, these—rather than the Khoikhoi or other African nations—are the people we are told van Riebeeck is haunting and picking off to satisfy his primal consumptive needs.

A more concerning element of this graphic novel is that Cassia is made a white savior to West, who was on the verge of being stabbed to death by Munro, the prison ring-leader, before Cassia rescued him. (Because the Joburg vamps had erred in draining Munro’s brother when they were not permitted to, JP Botha agreed to give over a vampire to Munro as pay-back.) It seems progressive that Sleeper, the darkest-skinned character in the book, is established as the Joburg vamp head, the one who makes the choice to rebel against the VOCorp Lord. And accordingly, the opportunity to secure the cure to IDV in West should be his to take. But for some inexplicable reason, he passes off this responsibility to Cassia, which sets her up to be the white savior. Though Cassia dies at Botha’s hand for interfering with the warden’s solution for appeasing Munro, she dies a martyr, as someone who is putting history back on course. In the moment when she is stabbed, the narrative reads, ‘300 years of pain leave her body.’ This is the most disquieting point. Though in the process of West’s turning we observe his ‘exquisite agony’ as ‘every part of his body twist[s] with pain,’ this is a short-lived sequence that seems to last only minutes and is immediately relieved by his feelings of ‘wholeness.’ By contrast, Cassia is said to bear three centuries’ worth of pain. The obvious question is why it is only this Afrikaner character, who is largely pardoned of responsibility because she has no choice but to succumb to her violent instinct, who feels the pain of centuries of predation since first-contact-first-exploitation. Even if, in a generous reading, the 300 years of pain referred to her inescapable guilt, the idea that that pain were over, expelled from the predatory white body, is untenable.

**Conclusion**

Ultimately, however, Cassia does have to die, and she does not go on to mentor West. He is left to his own devices. The titular rebirth is West’s, and he stands for a new breed of vampire for the millennial capitalist age—one who could turn things around. Along with the Joburg vamps, he expands and complicates the common postcolonial vampiric allegorization. We have seen that *Rebirth*’s vampire lords—Lord van Eyck and Jan van Riebeeck—function as the first predatory European colonizers who expanded their horizon of power by draining the life-source of the inhabitants and territory of what is now known as South Africa. And in Lord van Eyck’s reappearance as the Lord of VOCorp, the continuity from then until now of corporate capitalist exploitation is made obvious. The vampire lords’ predacious nature is both carried forward and troubled by the figure of Cassia, the Dutch-settler-turned-vampire whose legacy is both violent and sympathetic: she carries the sins of her forefathers while attempting to understand the hereditary wickedness that plagues her existence. Complicity in colonial consumption is in her blood, as it is for the Joburg vamps, who represent her unavoidable violations even as they perform their own. Their irrepressible frenzy to consume makes them monstrous, but no less so than for the text’s human characters—Dr Agosto, JP Botha, Ben—all of whom exhibit how consumptive practices dehumanize, in varying shades of lethality. It is from a position fully entrenched in consumerism that West hails the revolutionary promise in South Africa’s youth—especially marginalized youth—a generation who will seek out new paths to autonomy and vitality. The incessant forces of millennial capitalism may prefer to keep their bodies and labour under global consumerist control, and for that these youths’ rebellion will undoubtedly be deemed monstrous. West is this monster, this youth: complicit, energized, hunted, hopeful.

Endnotes

1. Another important example is the popular movie series *Underworld*, launched in 2003, first directed and written by Len Wiseman, which enlists the pharmaceutical industry to launch the biological progression of both lyncathropes and vampires. It focuses on the genetic properties that can create an apex predator to dominate both the human and supernatural worlds, ultimately in the form of a human-born, vampire-werewolf hybrid.
2. Such corporate-serving medical testing on non-consenting, marginalized subjects was exposed to a broad public with the novel and film *The Constant Gardner* (2001, 2005), loosely based on the forced clinical trials of the Pfizer drug Trovan in Kano, Nigeria.

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