



The Other in Kiluanji Kia Henda: Shakespeare and Camões Revisited

Alice Girotto

INTRODUCTION

Besides being the title of one of the first theoretical works on post-colonial literatures, the ‘empire writing back’ as a reading/writing strategy of subversion of European canons has become a *topos* in this same field of literary studies. As the authors of *The Empire Writes Back* put it,

the subversion of a canon [...] will result not only in the replacement of some texts by others, or the redeployment of some hierarchy of value within them, but equally crucially by the reconstruction of the so-called canonical texts through alternative reading practices. (Ashcroft et al., 2002, pp. 186–7)

The “canonical counter-discourse” (Tiffin, 1987) here alluded to has given rise to innumerable new versions—or answers, re-readings/re-writings, revisions, adaptations, appropriations, citations or allusions, as they have alternatively been named by different critics—of works such as Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* or Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*.

But if the aim of the canonical counter-discourse has almost always been the creation or recreation of independent identities in those regions of the world that freed themselves from the colonial yoke, the most recent evolution of this

A. Girotto (✉)
Università Ca’ Foscari Venezia, Venice, Italy
e-mail: alice.girotto@unive.it

response to colonial discourse is expressed in a ‘reversal of the gaze’¹ of the formerly colonized no longer on their own contexts and realities of origin, but on the former centre and its political, social and cultural dynamics. Today, in our post-imperial² contemporaneity, the historical Other contributes indispensably to the definition and interpretation of Europe’s present.³

Drawing on these premises, the case study I will present here as paradigmatic of such a ‘reversal of the gaze’ shifts from literature to visual arts—being a case, within the broadest field of inter-artistic relations, of literature providing material for the other arts—by taking into account three works by the Angolan artist Kiluanji Kia Henda: *The Merchant of Venice* (2010), *Othello’s Fate* (2013) and *The Isle of Venus* (2018). My analysis, besides confirming that “the engagement between classical and post-colonial texts and contexts is a crucial part of the dynamic of modern creative practice” (Hardwick & Gillespie, 2007, p. 11), will clarify how the three classical, Renaissance literary texts adapted/appropriated by Henda—William Shakespeare’s plays *The Merchant of Venice* (1598) and *Othello* (1603) and the ninth canto of Luís Vaz de Camões’s *The Lusíads* (1572), respectively—echo in the three contemporary artworks, focusing particularly on the reinterpretation of the theme of the ethnic and cultural Other in relation to Europe that they engage with.

Before progressing with my examination, though, I deem it necessary to specify the meaning of terms such as ‘adaptation’ and ‘appropriation’ with reference to Henda’s works on the grounds of their specific relevance in this case. According to Linda Hutcheon’s *A Theory of Adaptation*,

[as] a creative and interpretive transposition of a recognizable other work or works, adaptation is a kind of extended palimpsest and, at the same time, often a transcoding into a different set of conventions. Sometimes but not always, this transcoding entails a change of medium. (Hutcheon, 2013, pp. 33–4)

In the epilogue of the same book, O’Flynn (2013, p. 181) insists on the concept of ‘transcoding’ and considers adaptation as a continuum “that encompasses recreations, remakes, remediations, revisions, parodies, reinventions, reinterpretations, expansions, and extensions”. In these terms, the three artworks may be defined as cross-cultural and transmedial adaptations, in that they are, right from their titles, declared transpositions, or revisitations, implying a change of the cultural context of the origin of the author (from Renaissance England and Portugal to twenty-first-century Angola) and of the medium of expression (from literary texts to photographs and mixed-media installation).

¹The ‘reversal of the gaze’ as a different trope from the ‘empire writing back’, but alike in its meaning of consideration and interpretation of European cultural referents by the formerly colonized, is taken from Luís Kandjimbo’s *Ensaio para inversão do olhar. Da literatura angolana à literatura portuguesa* (2010).

²For a definition of ‘post-imperial’, see Medeiros (2012, 2014a, 2018).

³In this respect, one must think about the surge of so-called Afro-European authors and the interest their works have aroused in the continent’s literary systems over the last two decades.

However, as Sanders (2016, pp. 35–6) states, these same elements of great cultural distance from the source and shift in media would characterize appropriation rather than adaptation. And if, with Desmet and Iyengar (2015, 14), we acknowledge that “appropriation is intrinsic to building a self”, the thread that links these Henda’s works would justify the use of this definition for them.⁴ Indeed, they all happen to belong to the same path of artistic investigation, alternately followed by the artist along his career, which bears the emblematic title of *Self-Portrait as a White Man*. In what appears to be yet just another parodying and questioning wink to European artistic canon,⁵ a process of ‘othering from within’ emerges. This process—which consists of turning visible and tangible the subjects who, for centuries, have been invisibilized because perceived, catalogued and narrated as irredeemably different from the Self (the αὐτός), but also the paradoxical dialectics of attraction and repulsion of a culture that has been celebrating itself as the most developed in terms of humanity—manages to switch the traditional direction of the definitory discourse (who decides who and what is the Other) by exposing its mechanics and denouncing its contradictions. As a result, the aim of Henda’s works seems less to be the building of an ‘alternative Self’ than to declare the unavoidability for post-imperial Europe, at this point, of taking on the responsibility of, as Othello begs at the end of his tragedy, “speak[ing] of me as I am”⁶—that is, abandoning once and for all every phantasmagoria on the Other and finally telling (and considering them for) their truth, their humanity.

THE MERCHANT OF VENICE: ALLEGORY AT PLAY

The work of the Angolan artist Kiluanji Kia Henda has been characterized from the outset by intertextuality, which he uses as a means of conveying the complex entanglement of symbolic and historical tensions that relations between Africa and Europe have always carried with them, not only during the long centuries of colonization, but also in the post-colonial present. These

⁴See also the definition of ‘content appropriation’ by Young (2008, p. 6): “When this sort of appropriation occurs, an artist has made significant reuse of an idea first expressed in the work of an artist from another culture”. The ideas appropriated by Henda for his three works are the exceptionality of the outsider from *The Merchant of Venice*, the interplay between literal and metaphorical blackness from *Othello*, and the existence of a *locus amoenus* as haven for the encounter of cultures from *The Lusitads*.

⁵The *Self-Portrait as a Young Man* is a recurrent subject particularly in Mannerist and Baroque paintings of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: well-known examples are Tintoretto’s (c. 1548), Gian Lorenzo Bernini’s (1623) and Rembrandt’s (1634). Besides the title *Self-Portrait as a White man*, a more direct relationship with European artistic canon can be seen in *The Great Italian Nude* (Fig. 5.1), which cites (with an upside-down figurative turn) the subject of female nudes such as those by, for example, Tiziano Vecellio’s *Venere di Urbino* (1538) and Édouard Manet’s *Olympia* (1863).

⁶For an account of how Othello’s words inspired the American artist Fred Wilson to conceive a work reflecting on the definition of one’s self, see Erickson (2007, pp. 119–50).



Fig. 5.1 Kiluanji Kia Henda, *The great Italian nude*, inkjet print mounted on aluminium, 2010

reflections are crucially informed by the artist's own experience:⁷ in the early years of his career he was selected to participate in several artistic residencies on the European continent and it was during the first one, which took place in the city of Venice in 2010, that he began to create pieces that directly call into question the relationship of Europe with the continent that for centuries it has considered its own Other—a critique carried out from the soil of Europe itself.

The Merchant of Venice (Fig. 5.2) is a photographic portrait made in 2010 during Henda's stay in Venice on the occasion of an artistic residency organized by Fondazione di Venezia and Fondazione Bevilacqua La Masa. The artist himself states, in the volume that the two foundations edited as a testimony to the residencies, that it was the discovery of the history of Venice, especially with regard to the institution of the ghetto in 1516, that allowed him "to think about the kind of emotional map of the city" in which he could "create a bridge between history and the actual situation" (*Art enclosures*, 2012, p. 83).

The Merchant of Venice builds this bridge by depicting full-length, in the sixteenth-century frame of a hall of the Istituto Veneto di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti, a black man dressed in bright colours and carrying designer bags, a kind of object that identifies him as a peddler. What any observer can immediately

⁷As the curator Bruno Leitão points out, "[it] is almost impossible to talk about Kiluanji Kia Henda without linking Kiluanji Kia Henda the artist to Kiluanji Kia Henda the individual" (Leitão, 2018, p. 39)—on a path already traced by Picasso about a "science of man" (Brassaï, 1999, p. 133) that should feed on the global knowledge of the circumstances and the reasons behind artistic creations.



Fig. 5.2 Kiluanji Kia Henda, *The merchant of Venice*, inkjet print mounted on aluminium, 2010

grasp is a clear hiatus in the nexus between the word ‘merchant’ and its visual representation, which does not correspond to the image generally associated to the word of a more or less wealthy European trader of the Lower Middle Ages and Modern Age, but rather appears as an African immigrant in a European country of the twenty-first century whose activity of selling counterfeit goods provides him with precarious living conditions. Thus, we are in front of a figuration that is ironic and allegorical at once: ironic because it visually implies the opposite of what its title says; allegorical because, besides the different interpretation from its declared meaning one must put on it, it engages with a complex

intertextuality between the immediacy of the picture and the literary text its title alludes to.⁸

The ambiguity of the title of the Shakespearean play—misleading in its reference to a merchant who, according to the *dramatis personæ*, is the Christian Antonio, although he is far from being the main character—creates possible parallels both with the latter and with the actual protagonist, the Jew Shylock.⁹ As a matter of fact, the mentioned precariousness of life is the bond that can unite the Senegalese musician, who is the subject of the photographic portrait, and Antonio, because in both cases it is a life held in check by blackmail: in Antonio's case, the pound of his own flesh as forfeit for the loan granted by Shylock; in the case of the subject of the photograph, the circuits of the underground economy and informal work in which the so-called migrants for economic reasons almost always fall upon their arrival on European soil.

But if we consider that Shakespeare's play reflects and represents the cultural crisis of a certain historical-political reality—Elizabethan England—in its relation to foreign subjects,¹⁰ then the interrelation of meanings between the artistic work and the theatrical text is deepened and clarified, and the parallel with Shylock turns more evident. Indeed, such interrelationship does not only take the form, once again, of the dependence of the very survival of the two characters on something material—the materiality of the objects he manages to sell, in the case of the Senegalese migrant, and that of the money he profits from the loans granted, in the case of the Jewish usurer. In the theatrical text, Shylock is called “devil”, “evil soul” and “villain” (by Antonio; Shakespeare, 2010, 1.3.94–96), but also “inexorable dog”, “animal” and “wolf” (by Graziano; iv.1.127–133), a semantic feminization which is a weapon to assert not simply an irreducible diversity, but more specifically the inferiority, at the level of human relations, of the Jew. It is ironic, in this sense, his claim that “[if] we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that” (iii.1.61–62), even if he is “well aware that he is *not at all equal among equals*” (Calimani, 2016, p. 16). John Drakakis (2010, p. 16), too, in his introduction to *The Merchant of Venice*, talks about the “[d]eject, monstrosity and animality” as the “conceptual foundations for the specific figurations and representations of the usurer”, a human ‘type’ distinguished by “inhumanity” and considered as an outsider in

⁸For a definition of allegory and its relationship with irony, see Arduini and Damiani (2010).

⁹In the latest Arden edition of the play, it is stated that “the sense that this [*The Merchant of Venice*] is primarily Shylock's play—indeed, his tragedy—is given added emphasis from the beginning of the eighteenth century onwards in criticism and performance, from Charles Macklin's 1741 stage realization to the present time, and has remained remarkably resilient” (Drakakis, 2010, p. 1) and “interest in the figure of Shylock has taken precedence in any discussion of the play” (2). Speaking of the protagonist role in *The Merchant of Venice*, Calimani (2016, p. 14) also says that “it is Shylock who stands out above all” the other characters, notwithstanding its second position as compared to Portia in terms of the number of speeches and verses spoken in the text. (All translations from Italian in this article are the responsibility of the author.)

¹⁰See also: “It is precisely during this period [the later sixteenth century] that [...] the figure of the ‘stranger’ comes into his own as a challenge to the social fabric of community” (Drakakis, 2010, p. 11).

Elizabethan England—exactly in the same terms as the Jew, not by chance a usurer in the play, is considered a ‘stranger’.¹¹

The reducibility of the Other to animality and, more generally, their dehumanization through other discursive strategies, besides being a common feature between antisemitism and the epistemology of colonialism (Mbembe, 2001, pp. 26–8, 2017, p. 21, and, in relation to “Black Reason”, pp. 30–1), are detectable also in the current discourse on economic migrants—especially when they come from sub-Saharan Africa—in contemporary Europe, where

not only are migrants and asylum seekers increasingly seen as outsiders to the European socio-political community, but [...] they are also considered incompatible with that community, which is defined through precise cultural values that cannot be extended or shared by ‘others’. (Zoppi, 2019, 173)

This transformation of the migrant “into an essential category of difference” (Mbembe, 2017, p. 14) is thus the tangible symptom of the anxiety and confusion that grip a post-imperial Europe in the throes of an identity crisis, one that it reads as a destabilization and disruption of its established social order, threatened by the arrival of the Other on its soil, but which in fact originates from its own amnesia of historical connections and power relationships between Europe itself and Africa, exercised by the first upon the second through military expansionism, slavery, colonialism and racial capitalism.

So, what Kiluanji Kia Henda’s *The Merchant of Venice* reads and contests, with its allegorical figuration, is not so much “the social ‘text’ of colonialism” (Slemon, 1987, p. 11), as traditional post-colonial critique posited, but rather “the powerful narrative of Europe as a colorblind continent” (El-Tayeb, 2011, p. xv) that underlies its contemporary public debate. The statuesque posture and the steady gaze of the portrait subject directly confront the truthfulness of European self-depiction—just like Shylock’s third speech in Shakespeare’s play reveals itself as the index measuring the degree to which Venetian society (and, allegorically, Elizabethan England) adheres to its proclaimed, Christian values:

You have among you many a purchased slave,
Which, like your asses and your dogs and mules,
You use in abject and in slavish parts
Because you bought them. Shall I say to you,
‘Let them be free! Marry them to your heirs!
Why sweat them under burdens? Let their beds
Be made as soft as yours, and let their palates
Be seasoned with such viands?’ You will answer,
‘The slaves are ours.’ So do I answer you.
The pound of flesh which I demand of him

¹¹ Another marker of Shylock’s absolute otherness is the deprivation of individuality that derives from the fact that his enemies never call him by his name, as if in this way “the stranger becomes more controllable, less dangerous” (Calimani, 2016, p. 17).

Is dearly bought, 'tis mine, and I will have it.
 If you deny me, fie upon your law!
 There is no force in the decrees of Venice.
 (Shakespeare, 2010, iv.1.89–101)

OTHELLO'S FATE: THE VISUAL DISPLAY OF A BLACK BODY

Kiluanji Kia Henda's residence in Venice in 2010 was only a starting point for developing reflections on the complex entanglement of both symbolic and historical tensions that relations between Africa and Europe have always carried with them—and transforming such reflections into artistic works. If in *The Merchant of Venice* the motif of the Other as a stranger is presented through a multi-layered and allegorical intertextuality, the photographic series *Othello's Fate* digs deeper within the theme of Otherness to reach and expose the core of its unnameability (Mbembe, 2017, p. 11) through a looser citation mechanism of Shakespeare's tragedy.

The series is composed of five *tableau-vivant*¹² photographs taken in 2013 in Lisbon, in the rooms of Casa do Alentejo. Its title, which in this case is not a literal quotation, stresses the tension between the subject (Othello) and the narrative element he is subordinate to (the 'fate'), suggesting it is only in the completion of the sequence that the whole meaning of the work can be understood.

In the first of the five photographic representations (Fig. 5.3)—whose numerical correspondence with the five acts of the Shakespearean play cannot be considered strictly adherent in terms of narrative content—the subject that we can identify as Othello appears naked, sitting solemnly at the centre of what seems to be a stage, whose colour, like the colour that prevails in the other decorations of the scene, is the same of his skin. This likeness can be interpreted as reflecting the relationship of harmony between the subject and the context he belongs to, which is precisely the situation of Othello at the beginning of the play, when he asserts his noble descent in these terms: "I fetch my life and being / From men of royal siege" (Shakespeare, 2016, 1.2.21–22). Moreover, his strength and ability in war are more praised and needed than anybody else's by the Duke of Venice: "The Turk with a most mighty preparation makes for Cyprus. Othello, the fortitude of the place is best known to you, and, though we have there a substitute of most allowed sufficiency, yet opinion [...] throws a more safer voice on you" (1.3.223–226).

In the second photograph (Fig. 5.4), the subject is portrayed standing off-stage, with the same air of dignified nobility, in the middle of an orderly set of chairs, which could symbolize both the audience of a theatrical performance and the ranks of an army, a reference to the announced (but not realized) war

¹²A photographic genre with a narrative intention that evokes, in the modes of composing the objects and characters on the scene and their gestures, the figurative painting of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Cotton, 2004, p. 49) and which has affinities with the portrait.



Fig. 5.3 Kiluanji Kia Henda, *Othello's Fate (Act I)*, digital print mounted on aluminium, 2013



Fig. 5.4 Kiluanji Kia Henda, *Othello's Fate (Act II)*, digital print mounted on aluminium, 2013

action against the Turks in the background of the second act of the play. The offstage position is significant: while in the picture syntax the subject of the portrait remains at its centre¹³—thus signifying an analogous centrality of his corporeality in semantic terms¹⁴—his distance from the stage signals that a parallel distance from what is actually happening on the scene is unfolding. In the play, Othello only briefly appears in the first and in the third scene of the act, while Iago's scheming is actually put in motion.

The third photograph (Fig. 5.5) is not directly connected with the dramatic action sequence, but it rather allusively represents the love relationship (and sexual desire) that unites the Moor Othello, reclining on what could be a double bed and gazing cheerfully at the painting over the headboard, with his wife Desdemona, an ethereal young woman with ivory-white skin like those in the painting: “my wife is fair, feeds well, loves company / Is free of speech, sings, plays and dances well: / Where virtue is, these are more virtuous” (III.3.187–189). The striking visual contrast between Othello's and (the alluded-to) Desdemona's skin colour reproduces the opposition between white (and ‘fair’) and black, as symbols for purity, on one side, and the demonic sphere, on the other, which is constantly referred to in the play, in an “interplay between the literal and the metaphorical” (Little, 1993, p. 306).¹⁵ Yet, this third picture seems to be as pivotal to the narrative sequence of the series as the third act is to the tragedy since the position of the subject and his consequent relationship with the surrounding context irredeemably changes from now on.

In the last two photographs of the series, the adherence to the plot of the play is, in a way, resumed. In the fourth one (Fig. 5.6) the subject can be seen lying in a prone position on a row of tables, his face turned towards the stage on the opposite side of the room: an Othello no longer master of himself, victim of epileptic seizures and comas, forced to peek from outside the scene at events we know he does not understand. It is the “trance”, the “epilepsy”, the

¹³This central position is another counter-discursive practice used by Henda, inasmuch as the traditional iconography of the African in the European artistic canon reflected the deprived and dehumanizing treatment they were subject to by placing them in a marginal and inferior position within the formal construction of the paintings (Ashcroft et al., 2002, p. 189).

¹⁴For the use of terms such as ‘narrative’, ‘syntax’ and ‘semantic’ in relation to visual artworks, see Segre (2003) and Gianquinto (1998, 2011).

¹⁵Various elements concur to this interplay: first, as Shaul Bassi comments in his notes to an Italian edition of the play, “snow-white beauty [...] befitted a young aristocrat but was not yet a ‘racial’ mark, since the adjective ‘white’ referring to Europeans would only be used from the mid-seventeenth century onwards” (Shakespeare, 2009, p. 319); for a discussion on the progressive racialization of fairness/whiteness in Elizabethan culture and the process through which it became a mark of racial privilege, see Hall (2002). Besides the metaphorical level, which implies the early modern lyric conventions and beauty culture, a correct interpretation of the Shakespearean text must also take into account the theatrical and make-up conventions of the time: “From a theatrical and metaphorical point of view, Desdemona's whiteness is as superficial and overdetermined as Othello's blackness” (Bassi *apud* Shakespeare, 2009, p. 358).



Fig. 5.5 Kiluanji Kia Henda, *Othello's Fate (Act III)*, digital print mounted on aluminium, 2013

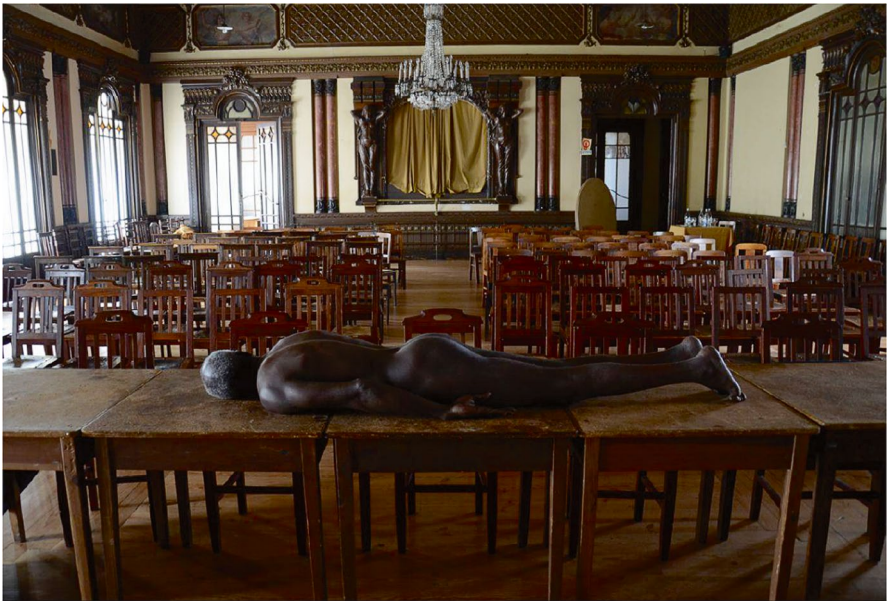


Fig. 5.6 Kiluanji Kia Henda, *Othello's Fate (Act IV)*, digital print mounted on aluminium, 2013

“lethargy” (Shakespeare, 2016, iv.1.43–53) Othello falls into when he is pushed by Iago to believe in Desdemona’s betrayal, sidereally distancing himself from reality and truth. In the fifth and last photograph (Fig. 5.7), the same stage as in the first photograph is again in the foreground, but the curtain has fallen and the subject is absent: Othello has left the scene annulling himself through suicide.

It has long been clear to the critics that the two Venetian plays written by Shakespeare share some fundamental thematic issues that justify their analogous reception path, made up of rewritings and reinterpretations strictly intertwined with the history and contexts in which they appeared. As a matter of fact, not only are *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello* “two plays that investigate what it means to live in a cosmopolitan city during times of increasing international trade” (Thompson, 2016, p. 22), but they also both ask “what it is to be human” (38) and, in a certain sense, “how humanity is differentiated from being an animal”. Not differently from Shylock, and with an apparently similar inferiorization of his humanity, Othello is referred and alluded to (mostly by Iago) as “ram” (Shakespeare, 2016, i.1.87), “horse” (i.1. 110) and “ass” (i.3.401), in addition to “devil” (i.1.90) and “thing” (i.2.71). However, in *Othello* these derogatory epithets referring to animality are added with a further semantic nuance, one that is functional in sustaining the myth of the wild and predatory sexuality of the Moor, which constitutes one of the most characteristic attributes of the construction of racial discrimination and delirium.



Fig. 5.7 Kiluanji Kia Henda, *Othello's Fate* (Act V), digital print mounted on aluminium, 2013

As obvious as it may seem, it is on the bodily level that the otherwise equated othernesses incarnated by the Jew and the Black¹⁶ differ, as had already been noted by Frantz Fanon:

[The] Jew can be unknown in his Jewishness. He is not wholly what he is. [...] He is a white man, and, apart from some rather debatable characteristics, he can sometimes go unnoticed. [...] The Jew is disliked from the moment he is tracked down. But in my case everything takes on a *new* guise. I am given no chance. I am overdetermined from without. I am the slave not of the “idea” that others have of me but of my own appearance. (Fanon, 2008, p. 87; italics in the original)

The centrality of the body in the racial construction of the Other—the Fanonian “composition of my *self* as a body” (83)—is precisely the element that Kiluanji Kia Henda, as we have seen, enhances in *Othello's Fate*. What is enacted in the photographic series is indeed the solitary tragedy of a man whose existence in the space of the artistic representation is uniquely defined by his naked, and unavoidably ‘black’, corporeality, thus giving no other clue for explaining the ultimate resolution of the (visual) narration which he is the protagonist of besides this “loneliness of colour” (Okri, 1997, p. 73). Yet, one cannot help but observe how the ‘bodily schema’ of Henda’s subject is in harmony with the surrounding context, except for the already mentioned *Act III*, where his blackness contrasts with the whiteness of the bed and the women’s representation. The subject being the same, suggesting a stable identity if considered in his standalone materiality and presence, it is the only changing feature of the immersion in a ‘white world’ that triggers the tragedy of his annihilation. In this way, the artist’s accurate choice of the colour palette of his photos subtly makes visible the ‘overdetermination from without’ caused by racism, a “commerce of the gaze” depending exclusively on that who performs the act of seeing, through which the body (not the human being it ‘belongs’ to) is inspected and assigned “within a skein of significations that are beyond him” (Mbembe, 2017, p. 111). And if such a commerce “in order to function [...] demands elision and blindness”, then its ultimate result is the destruction of such a phantasmagorically constructed (because of its origin in the realm of imaginary) Other—that is, the “altruicide” (10).

¹⁶The comparability between the historic destinies of discrimination which both Jews and people of African descent have been subjected to is another common trait between *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello*: “Some might argue that we experience multiple frames when reading or seeing any, and all, of Shakespeare’s plays—that Shakespeare’s plays are both timely and untimely all at once. While this is true to a certain extent, there is something different about the ways history and context get framed for Shakespeare’s Venetian plays, *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello*. The violent histories that occurred towards Jews and Africans since the early modern period render history and context more fraught and complex when approaching the constructions and presentations of religion and race in Shakespeare’s plays” (Thompson, 2016, pp. 3–4).

*THE ISLE OF VENUS: THE UNFRUITFUL PROMISE
OF A LOCUS AMÆNUS*

The latest evolution of the *Self-Portrait as a White Man* project is the installation of *The Isle of Venus* (2018), specifically designed for the space of the HANGAR Artistic Research Centre in Lisbon. The title refers to the ‘Isle of Venus’ from the ninth canto of *The Lusiads* by Luís Vaz de Camões, the “divine, enchanted / Isle adorned with greenery and flowers” (Camões, 1997, IX.21) that the goddess decides to prepare as a rewarding gift for their adventures to Vasco da Gama’s fleet on their voyage back to Portugal from the newly attained India.

The theme of the Other is not evident and explicit in the subject of this Henda’s work, but rather implied by the wink that the title itself establishes with what has been considered “the text of the foundation of colonial literary discourse in European literature” (Seixo, 2000, p. 308), whose canonization went “hand in hand [...] with the political goals of the state in general and, more particularly, with its imperial and colonialist claims” (Medeiros, 2014b, p. 284). One of the devices of colonial rhetoric used in the narrative of *The Lusiads* is actually the referral of a hostile and contemptuous relationship of the collective hero represented by the Portuguese sailors with almost all the other peoples they meet along their route, marked by irrational projections, strategic misunderstandings camouflaged by divine mischiefs, inferiorizing reductions (Figueira, 2011). Such hostility is an attitude that can be traced from the very beginning of the poem, in the proposition, where the deeds of the “matchless heroes” (Camões, 1997, I.1) are declared as its theme alongside those of “Kings likewise of glorious memory / Who magnified Christ and Empire, / Bringing ruin on the degenerate / Lands of Africa and Asia” (I.2); and in the dedication to King Sebastian, justifying it once again with the great political and religious project of “the expansion / Of Christendom’s small empire” (I.6), for the sake of which the king is regarded as the one who will “yoke and humble / Arabia’s wild horsemen, infidel / Turks, and India’s sons and daughters” (I.8).

The figurative complex of Henda’s installation departs, though, from these chronologically remote roots of the colonial discourse and jumps forward to its less recognized most recent developments and implications. It consists of an island of cement blocks topped by miniaturized reproductions of the most famous figures of classical and Renaissance statuary (Fig. 5.8)—the Venus of Milo, Michelangelo’s *David* (Fig. 5.9), Bernini’s *The Rape of Proserpina* (Fig. 5.10), among others—protected by coloured condoms (whose denomination in Portuguese, *camisas-de-vénus*, can be literally translated as ‘shirts of Venus’ and so ironically refers to the installation title). These colours may echo the

Colours between the green boughs,
Colours which sight and sense judged



Fig. 5.8 Kiluanji Kia Henda, *The Isle of Venus*, installation, 2018



Fig. 5.9 Kiluanji Kia Henda, *The Isle of Venus* [detail], installation, 2018

Fig. 5.10 Kiluanji Kia Henda, *The Isle of Venus* [detail], installation, 2018



Were too vivid to be flowers,
But fine wool and variegated silks
To incite the ardour of lovers,
As those breathing, human roses veiled part,
Making themselves more beautiful by art. (IX.68)

The colours, the allusion to flowers and the references to love and beauty, as well as to “every kind of food and drink”, the “fragrant wines, and sweet roses”, the “palaces of marvellous crystal” (IX.41), are attributes of an Edenic place, a *locus amœnus* where Camões’s heroes can rest, according to the wishes of the goddess, from the deadly dangers of “the heaving ocean” (IX.39). It is also a haven where a sort of ‘encounter of cultures’ takes place, even if it doesn’t involve any of the foreign peoples the Portuguese stumble upon along their voyage, but it symbolizes, through the free expression of sexual desire between the sailors and the nymphs they meet on the island, the union between men (the Christian world) and gods (the ancient, classical pagan world): “deities are dragged through the mire / While humans soar on pinions of desire” (IX.20). The whole scene has also an allegorical meaning of glory and initiation, of a communion that enables a superior knowledge—that of the “great machine of

the universe” shown by Tethys to Vasco da Gama in the tenth canto (Binet, 2019, pp. 40–1).

But in Henda’s work, the link with Camões’s verses takes the form of a sarcastic deconstruction and subversion, where the colours of the condoms, rather than exalting the beauty of the statues, suffocate and, in a way, ridicule them. Given their vivacity, their function seems rather to be that of attractive (and traitorous) sirens for an island that in its materiality is grey, inert, sterile, preventing the free expression of life instead of favouring it. An actual siren sound can be heard in the location of the installation: it is the Angolan song *Monami*, a lament in Kimbundu of a mother who has lost one of his two children, which reinforces the deadly connotations of the brick-and-statue island. In the artist’s own words,

“Isle of Venus” is more about the impact of migration. About all those thousands of people who die every year on the Mediterranean Sea while they attempt to reach Europe. To me, every new boat that sinks is a new island. On these islands, I place little statues of Venus from classical European art, wrapped in condoms. Condoms have a double meaning to me. They protect you, but at the same time they ensure that you can no longer procreate. Many places in Europe are closed in this way... To me, it is a continent that is inhibited by its own history. Everything is heritage, everything has to be preserved, and new cultures have no place in that.¹⁷

There’s no reward for the contemporary ‘sailors’ who navigate the routes of the so-called discoveries on the opposite direction, fast-forwarding the tape of History and trying to reach the land where “freedom, democracy, equality and the rule of law, promoting peace and stability”,¹⁸ reign, the *locus amoenus* of the twenty-first century that post-imperial Europe proclaims to be. What they, contemporary representatives of the historical Other, the ‘stranger’, the ‘Moor’, the ‘infidel’ from outside, too often encounter, instead of the realization of their desire to achieve a more prosperous and dignified life, is the impotent inevitability of death, the mourning for the loss of too many of their children’s lives, and a fearful continent that only knows how to erect defensive barriers against a supposed ‘invasion’—Fortress Europe.

What is, in the end, the picture that emerges from the *Self-Portrait as a White Man* works? What does it mean, for Kiluanji Kia Henda in his engagement with Europe and its literary tradition, to “speak of me as I am”—that is, to speak of the historically constructed Other as they truly are? If, at first, the declaration of their Africanness/Blackness is explicit, the increasing metaphorization of the figurative discourse built by the artist denounces, on the contrary, their still ongoing invisibilization and absence: the transition goes from the full-length photos of *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello’s Fate* (Act I–IV)

¹⁷ Taken from: <https://www.mleuven.be/en/even-more-m/kiluanji-kia-henda-exhibiting-m>

¹⁸ Taken from the “Principles and values” section of the European Union website: https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history_en

to the reference to Othello's suicide in *Othello's Fate (Act V)*, up until the complete omission of living figures in *The Isle of Venus*. Yet, what he exposes is but a 'fictitious absence', that is a "narrative framework whose aim is the creation and maintenance of a public sphere where African migrants are either virtually or physically prevented from being seen" (Zoppi, 2020, p. 628)—a narrative of colonial descent that the public discourse in Europe too often reiterates in order to deny any responsibility for this Other as a fellow human being.

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