NEGATING THE SERIF: POSTCOLONIAL APPROACHES TO TYPEFACE DESIGN

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Abstract

The practice and the teaching of Typography in South Africa has yet to undergo radical or substantive changes in light of the multiple shifts and developments in critical thinking that has taken place in Academia and contemporary visual practice in recent years. While contemporaneous thinking has " forced a change " in many disciplines in light of the Postmodern, Post Colonial and other "Post" posturing that challenge the dominance of Europe and the West as the centre, very little of the core imperatives of these schools of thought has found its way into the development and thinking around Typography in South Africa save a few seminal books and teachers.

The reason for limited pedagogical experimentation in the field can often be attributed to the fact that the typographic canon has been deemed sacrosanct, readily perpetuated by institutions in the belief that if students and courses in Typography are to have any enduring value, the canon must be propagated unaltered and unscathed.

By analysing typography currently being developed and commercialised for distribution by the Iron Age Font Foundry, a project funded by the University of Cape Town's Research and Innovation Centre comprising of designers and academics I will investigate alternative approaches that Postcolonial thought strategies make possible for both the practice and teaching of Typography. The very names of typefaces forged in this foundry, the ideas behind them and most importantly the visual language and resonances of these letterforms highlight an alternative approach that negates Western dominance of history and production in the realm of Typography.

This paper challenges the typographer to be an active, conscious author of meaning in both practice and teaching evidenced in critical engagement with typography from the past and active, multidisciplinary engagement with social and political issues in the development of typefaces for the present. The paper will highlight the important role that contemporary font foundries can play commercially and conceptually through this multidisciplinary approach.

Key words*: Postcolonial, typography, hegemony, canon*

Introduction

All typography, when viewed in a critical light, engages culture and history to greater or lesser extents. The "how" and "why" of this phenomenon is a well-trodden field in structuralist and linguistic debate. The aim of this paper is to foreground Postcolonial thought strategies in the realm of typography and as a consequence negotiates the cultural and historical resonance of established and newly developed typography. This will manifest in a critical engagement with the typographic canons of the West and the encouragement of a broader theoretical and historical subject matter that can be used to generate typography and typographic research. The paper introduces some of the problems encountered in the uncritical use and propagation of distinctly Western and European typography, best embodied by the seriffed letter of Roman type. The work of a contemporary font foundry (Iron Age Font Foundry) will be discussed as a case study of the production of typefaces engaging the ideas of Postcolonial theory and Subaltern Studies. The paper moots this interdisciplinary approach (Typography in dialogue with Postcolonial theory and Subaltern studies) as an important tool in the critical education of typographers because of the alternative methods of research and production that it encourages.

The writings of Premesh Lalu (2009) are critical in understanding how Subaltern Studies and Postcolonial theory as a guiding idea or framework can assist designers in their production and research. Lalu's most recent work, "The Deaths of Hintsa" discusses the key imperatives of Subaltern Studies in the South African context and engages the problematic legacy of the Colonial Archive[1]. The key features of his argument in my reading of his work that I wish to engage with in this paper can be summarised in two points. The first point is his concept of anti-disciplinarity, the idea that the agency of the Historian (or in our case the typographer) is not truly independent or liberated to follow significant paths of inquiry if his/her work is simply forced to respond or reproduce an equivalence of the existing colonial canon or archive of his/her discipline, albeit with a different focus. To do so in many ways argues Lalu is to simply limit "agency" to a sentimental ideal. Instead he argues for new models of critical enquiry that will as a consequence have radical trajectories based less on the regime of disciplinary orthodoxy and more on the possibility of "imaginary structures".

The second point is his conception of Subaltern Studies as a vehicle to form a "rupture" in the systems of knowledge of the very discipline it is engaging by thinking at the limits of the discipline so that both the research produced and the very modes of enquiry mount a challenged to the discipline itself.

These Postcolonial conceptual strategies mooted by Lalu, when considered in the field of typographic design contain, in my view, a great deal of promise, challenging the discipline of Typography by negating traditional disciplinary canons and archives in favour of research that challenges the epistemic status quo. In one manner of speaking, this paper will explore ways to recover and intimate aspects of subaltern knowledge, history and culture using typographic design as the central mode of critical enquiry.

Critical views of the Serif: More than just a pretty Face

The serif, or the "little foot" at the base of letters in Roman typefaces that can be observed in typefaces such as "Times Roman", "Bodoni" and "Old Style" to name a few variations, has its origin in the Greek and Roman writing tradition. Capital inscribing letters etched into marble plaques and cut into stone columns are the earliest recorded examples of these visual devices[2]. The seriffed letter is ubiquitous in the medieval cathedrals of Southern and Northern Europe. Gravestones and memorials of great leaders present and past often employ seriffed type. The ubiquity of the seriffed Roman can be attributed in large part to British designers such as William Caslon and John Baskerville who used seriffed Roman style moveable type for the production of the first high volume printed works of the day including newspapers and novels, making the seriffed Roman the most widely read face in the Western and Northern hemisphere in the 1700's. As such, it can be seen as the quintessential printed letter of the early British Empire and modern industrial Europe[3]. The high cost involved in producing new typefaces in conjunction with the equipment and the closely guarded expertise and technology of the printing trade made a wider range of typefaces from a greater diversity of designers impossible.

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[1] Lalu, P.2009. *The deaths of Hintsa*: *Post apartheid South Africa and the shape of the recurring past.* Cape Town: HSRC Press.

[2] Trojans Column in Rome is one of the earliest examples of Capital Roman Serif letters carved into the surface of a public structure dating circa AD114.

[3] This conclusion is deduced from a survey conducted at the Rare Books and Special Collections Department at the University of Cape Town in 2009 that include both popular and specialist publications spanning Europe from 1520 to the 1900's that substantiate this claim.

Figure 1: Greek Inspired Type specimen

Figure 2: Type Specimen Sheet from the W. Caslon Foundry

In South Africa, the seriffed Roman has an established history. A survey of archeological discoveries and museum collections from the Iziko South African Museums Social History Collection reveal many intriguing ways the seriffed Roman was employed in the Cape dating from the 1700's. Numerous examples of the Dutch East Indian Company logo that featured the seriffed letters "VOC" appear on both mundane domestic items, as well as highly prized objects of importance ranging from coins, furniture, ceramics and trophies. The variety of these items attest to the prominence of the seriffed Roman in the bureaucracy and daily life of the gentry in early Cape society. Perhaps most striking of the objects in the Social History collection is the official seal for the slave and deeds registry, used to mark Slavery certificates of indenture on which the seriffed Roman features prominently, seemingly enjoying the same ubiquitous presence it did in Europe and the West and representing, in it's various uses, corporate power, institutionalised governance and legislative authority in Early Cape life[4].

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[4] An extensive review of domestic, military and state artefacts incorporating typography and inscribed letters in some form housed in the Cape Slave Lodge Museum Collection and the Castle of Good Hope Museum Collection of Iziko Museums of South Africa was conducted by the author in 2008 to reveal the ubiquity of the seriffed letter in objects as diverse as ceramic plates to trophies. The silver smiths at the Cape ensured the propagation of this letter form, most of whom came from Europe or Britain servicing the Dutch East India Company and certain retail shops that sold silver cutlery. The range of these objects bearing seriffed letters provide proof of the seriffed letters role in the various aspects of private and corporate life in the Cape for both noble and ignoble use. The definitive work on Cape silver and silversmiths is the Stephen Welz reference book *Cape Silver and Silversmiths* including fine examples of how the seriff was used in the employ of the ruling power to mark military trophies, communion cups, wine labels, and most notably a "staff of office" presented to Andries Waterboer, chief of the Griquas, marking the first written agreement between English authorities and native rulers in the Cape

Figure 3: Dutch East Indian Company plate with "VOC" logo

Figure 4: Slave Registry Seal.

A critical view must acknowledge that however grand or mundane the associations we now have with the serif or seriffed typefaces, it also contains another association, that of the Colonist. The uncritical use of the seriffed letter and indeed of most typefaces developed in the West and Europe is a stumbling block, particularly when designers are unfamiliar with the historical resonance of these typefaces and use them to present content or ideas that jar with their historical legacy. There are numerous books published that deal with Postcolonial cultural resistance and Journals that exist for the express purposes of negating Western and European dominance in Visual practice that are published in a Roman Serif. This is a tenuous match between forms and content, symptomatic of the relatively minor role that typography plays in the intellectual imagination of academics. The creation of purposely designed fonts or broader research into more conceptually cohesive type is not an unreasonable challenge to the professional academic interested in the broadest possible impact of his writing. The visual identity for newly liberated nations can also be affected by unreflective typographic practice, as was evident in South Africa in 1996.

Home Groan

After the first democratic election in 1994, the South African government prioritised the overhaul of all official letterheads and departmental signage in an attempt to portray a new visual identity. In addition it embarked on designing a new coat of arms. Yet, in spite of the desire to create an afro-centric visual language for the South African Democracy[5] that would foreground political and ideological independence and liberation, the weight of typography as a conceptual tool was ignored as the typeface "Gill Sans" has was selected in 1996 for all official government department corporate identity signage and communication. Although the typeface selected by the government did not contain a serif, it is world renowned as the leading modern British typeface, made famous for its effective use in the British National Rail signage system that continues to this day. The typeface used for the revised National Coat of Arms is a derivative of Helvetica, an equally famous typeface with a strong European association. The choice of these typefaces is conceptually confusing when one considers the attention to detail given to the motto on the coat of arms (based on the Khoi San language) and the iconography derived from the indigenous rock art, elephant tusks and proteas, all of which was conceptualised[6] to represent an "authentic" South African image. These typefaces could be said to work against the aspirations of a young, Postcolonial democracy trying to portray a revised identity.

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[5] Based on the official explanation and motivation for the corporate identity of the South African Government Departments contained in the designers style guide.

[6] See Bredekamps essay: *A cultural heritage of a democratic South Africa: An Overview.*
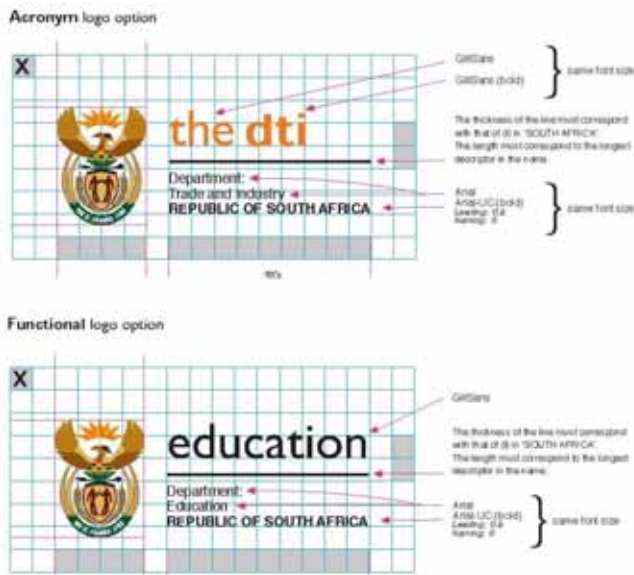
Figure 5: National style guide for Government signage   **Figure 6: South African Coat of Arms**

Cultural and political associations of letterforms

Is it possible to speak of letters embodying the abstract notions of Nation or Empire? Research into the use of typefaces in the last century to achieve political ends or resonate cultural meaning clearly shows that it is indeed possible to approach letters as conduits for the abstract ideas of Nationhood and Heritage. The German Blackletter typeface was used to print the first Gutenberg Bible. As such, it gained an important place in the psyche of the German nation. It was used many years later in the form of Fraktur, declared by Hitler to be the official typeface of the Third Reich, to be used in signage, badges and documents. Hitler infamously employed it for the cover of "Mein Kampf", making visible his desire to be seen as supportive of German heritage and national ideals[7]. The release by Trennert of the typeface called "Blizzard" in 1938 is an explicit example of a typeface designed for National Socialist Germany using the words "Heil Hitler!" printed in various sizes in the type catalogue used to promote it[8]. There also are examples of other politically minded typefaces produced in Germany shortly before World War Two in the collection of type historian Jan Thollenard that include swastikas as part of the official typeface set.

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[7] David Jury2002. *About Face. Reviving the rules of Typography*. Singapore: Rotovision

[8] See De Jong,C, Purvis,A, Tholenaar,J.(Eds). 2009. *A visual history of typefaces and graphic Styles*. Hong Kong: Taschen
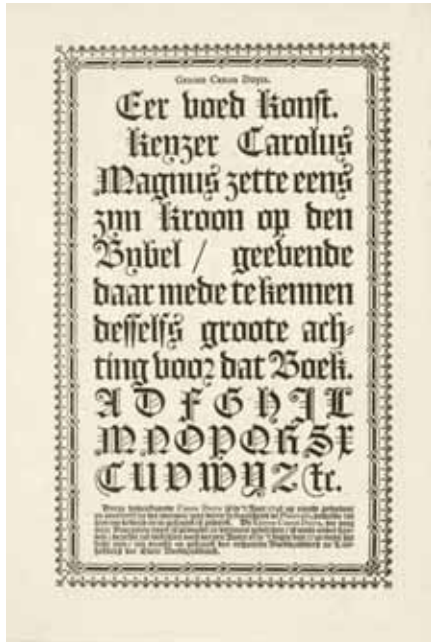
Figure 7: An Example of Blackletter Type

Figure 8: Fraktur used for Mein Kampf

A present day example that further illustrates the Social and Political resonance of type can be seen in the recent American presidential campaign of 2009. The runner up to the American presidency, John McCain used his participation in the Vietnam War as both a pilot and prisoner of war to great effect in presenting himself as a hero to the American electorate. The typography used in his campaign reflected his desire to be seen in this light, as "Optima" was selected for signage and promotional material. Optima is the same typeface used in the iconic Vietnam War memorial. The typeface, already part of the American patriotic imagination because of this national symbol of civic duty and sacrifice was used in his campaign for constructing a particular visual identity[9].

Figure 9: Vietnam Veterans Wall

Figure 10: John McCain Campaign

Jonathan Barnbrook, an influential British designer currently working in the field of Typography makes the conscious decision to bring both the name and form of all of his typefaces into the social and political

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[9] The Vietnam Veterans Wall remains arguably the most widely viewed military memorial due to the "Moving Wall" project instituted by John Devitt in 1980 with the express purpose of taking a smaller replica of the wall to as many American states as possible for temporary exhibition. Twenty-five years of uninterrupted exhibitions continue to this day.

arena. The typeface that most directly illustrates this being his "Shock and Awe" typeface released in 2004. The letters in his alphabet have their origin in the lettering of the Enola Gay, the plane that dropped the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima. The term itself "Shock and Awe" is a military term used to describe the first stages of warfare when heavy artillery is used to demonstrate firepower and destructive ability to opposing forces. The explication in his recently published book about the typeface is clearly seeking to engage those who read and use the typeface in relation to form and origin:

> "Once a font has been used or comes from something of great social significance does this affect every other usage? The cultural resonance of typefaces … is rarely discussed" (Barnbrook 2007:186).

Typefaces always act as signifiers to broader meanings and associations however relative this may at first appear. In the realm of Linguistic Theory, as much as the division between "imago" and "logos" was mooted by the likes of Saussure, Derrida and other structuralists, the division between "imago" and "logos" is in practice fictitious. Johanne Drucker (1996: 245) succinctly puts this debate in perspective:

> "All various activities that typography can engage in the production of value: pictorial analogy, emotional expression, formal iconic imagery the freeing of linguistic elements from traditional syntactic relations and arranging them in field –like structures demonstrate it's ability to participate in the production of signified value".

The Archeology of form

The Iron Age Font Foundry was formed in 2008 consisting of academics and designers from the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Cape Town. As a result of its conceptual location in the Humanities it is not surprising that the significant social, cultural and material aspects of the South African past were a focal point for research. From a formal point of view, it was decided at the very first meeting in 2008 that utilitarian perfection could not in itself hold the key to exciting typographic research in light of the digital revolution that made perfectly balanced and shaped letters easily achievable with software. As with painting in the wake of the camera, a broader enquiry into the nature and socio-political possibilities of typography was seen as acceptable and beneficial.

In South Africa there is already a strong tradition of foregrounding cultural and political ideas in the creation of typography. The post apartheid era created conditions favourable to the publication of "i – Jusi" magazine, founded by Garth Walker[10]. This magazine became a platform and cult icon for experimental post apartheid Typography and Design. Of special note is *"National Typografika"* in issue eleven and *"National Typografika Two"* in issue seventeen. These editions focused exclusively on typography and showcased the desire designers had to engage in broader cultural circles after the oppressive ideological system of apartheid ended. Typefaces ranging from the celebration of black owned barber shops to typefaces designed in response to the austere and almost sinister headquarters of the South African secret service was created and displayed. These typefaces are important as they stretch the idea of type design to the limits, annunciating political and social meaning and using the diverse sources as the basis for the development of letter forms.

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[10] i-Juisy magazine was founded by Garth Walker in 1995. It continues to be produced to this day with themed editions dictating the content of the submissions eventually printed. The author is aware of twenty– five editions.
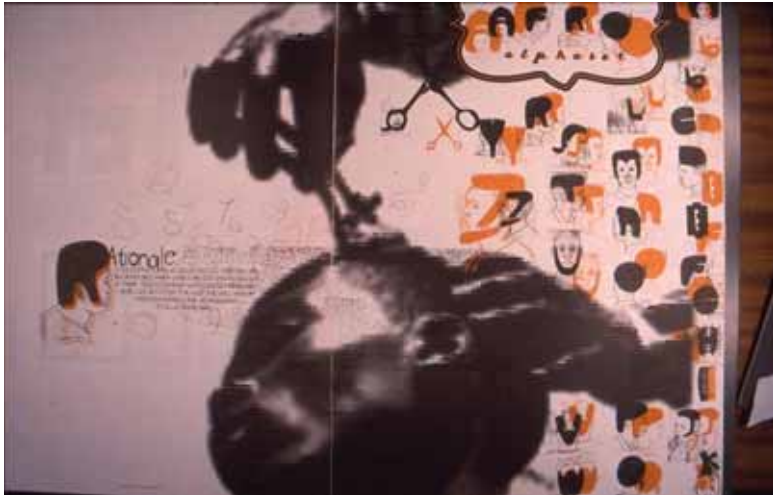
Figure 11: i-Juisy typography feature "Afro Alphabet".
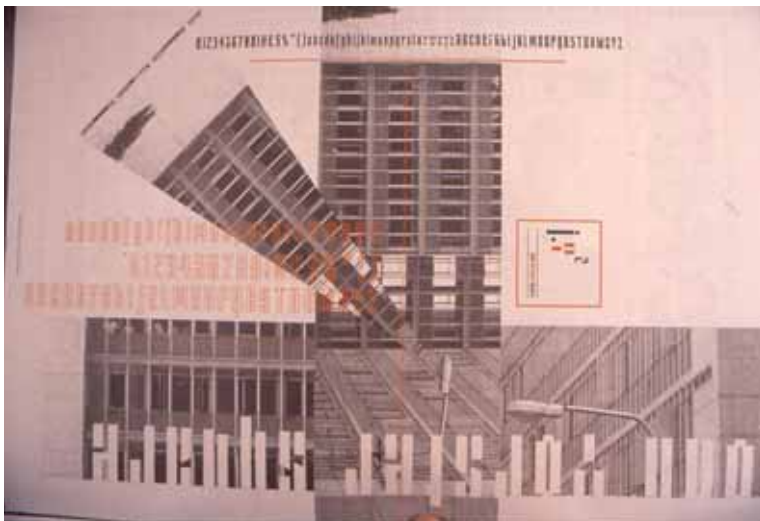
Figure 12: i-Juisy typography feature "Vorster Square".

Saki Mafundikwa has produced a seminal book in the postcolonial canon of typography in South Africa with his "Afrikan Alphabet", showcasing the body of knowledge and writing traditions that exists in Africa and that is mostly ignored in my view as a result of institutional indifference. Recent groundbreaking publications and exhibitions about the writing tradition in Timbuktu[11] is a significant step toward a re-discovery of subjugated histories and a powerful reminder of what the African intellectual tradition has to offer academia as broader creative influences emerge, explicated by a growing number of scholars.

The Designers Colophon

In keeping with the central ideas of Premesh Lalu and his warnings to not merely produce an equivalence to current colonial disciplinary archives as we engage the subaltern subject, the Iron Age Font Foundry was careful not to simply alter existing letters in the hope of making appear more indigenous or producing fonts that in some way referenced existing ones, in so doing falling into the conceptual trap mentioned by Lalu, i.e. simply producing a predictable response. Instead, the cultural resonance and the politics of

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[11] Jeppie,S and Diagne, S (eds). 2008. The meanings of Timbuktu. Cape Town: HSRC

material heritage of the Museums of South Africa and their most important artefacts became the starting point in the design of alternative letterforms. This modus operandi resulted in Zulu headrests, Queen Anne antique furniture, the Mapungubwe gold rhino being selected for the design process. There were exceptions, notably the typeface Kaggen that celebrated aspects of the Khoi people's beliefs in the form of typography. The paragraphs that follow briefly detail three typefaces produced by the Iron Age Font Foundry in 2008. They are seen as secondary to engaging with the glyph specimens themselves. The Typefaces discussed below are Mapangubwe, Heirloom and Kaggen.

Mapangubwe Typeface

The first font designed by the Foundry was inspired by the ancient African city of Mapungubwe, excavated in the 1930's. Of all the artefacts researched from the excavation site, the famed gold rhino sculpture of Mapungubwe was most influential in the design of the typeface. Subsequent research into the discovery and excavation of the Mapungubwe site revealed conspicuous absences and silences in public and academic publications since its discovery that suggest in the authors view Apartheid state control over publication about the artefacts and civilization of Mapungubwe that spoke perhaps too loudly of highly developed metal and agricultural industries before the arrival of Europeans. The design process demanded that designers visit the Museums that housed the artefacts as well as studying books and essays that contained images and descriptions of the artefact. In all the descriptions read, impressions formed and commentary received about the formal elements of the gold rhino, it was the ears and tail of the rhino that were regarded as most intriguing. They are very delicate, well observed and elegant. These apexes became the defining feature of the visual structure (ascenders and descenders) of the typeface Mapangubwe.
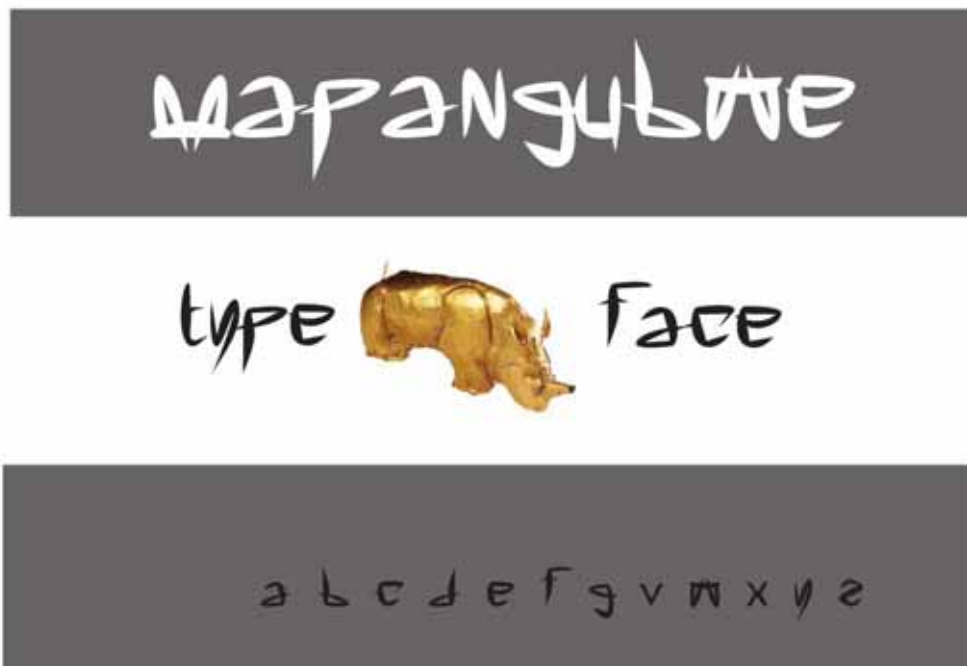

Figure 13: Mapangubwe Typeface Specimen

Heirloom Typeface

Queen Anne era heirlooms are often prized for their ball-and-claw design, seen as a highpoint in British craftsmanship and highly desirable in the antiques trade in Cape Town based on the authors discussion with important dealerships. A wide range of ball-and–claw furniture exists in the collections of Iziko Museums of South Africa, including Bertram house and the William Fehr collection. A critical look at the origin of the ball-and-claw design reveals diverse cultural influences including Asian artefacts dating from

the 18th century that feature the claws of dragons clutching pearls[12] that undoubtedly influenced the ball-and claw form. The idea of Imperial innovation and craftsmanship resulting in the ball-and-claw form is a deceptive design myth still prevalent in the minds of many antique dealers the author has encountered. African staffs and headrests that feature Zoomorphic shapes and claws from the same period do not enjoy the same prominence and popularity in the market often treated as curios when they are traded. This inspired the typeface Heirloom. Heirloom is visually deceptive in its form: although having the appearance of being a Gothic, European Blackletter, it is in fact designed entirely from the form and diamond shaped decorations (amasumpa) of a Zulu headrest. Its aim is to interrogate and undermine assumptions related to originality and "purity" in design. Heirloom as a title is thus used critically, visually questioning the division between a curio and heirloom.

Figure 14: Heirloom typeface Specimen

Kaggen Typeface

Kaggen is a central Deity of the Khoisan people, often described as a large mantis. The Afrikaans name for the praying mantis acknowledges this history: Hottentotsgod, roughly translated as "God of the Khoisan". Every letterform was designed in relation to the actual claw of a Preying Mantis. Both the letterforms and the name of the typeface is very direct in pointing to this history. Many of the stories relating to Kaggen are included in the specimen sheet accompanying the typeface to stimulate research into San history and cultural beliefs. Although this typeface was not based on an artefact as such, it engages subjugated cultures and works with the histories and beliefs obscured by the Colonial project fitting well into the conceptual objectives of the foundry.

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[12] See Vandal, N. 1990.Queen Anne Furniture: History, Design and Construction. Connecticut:Taunton.

Figure 15: Kaggen Typeface Specimen

Concluding remarks

Postcolonial theory and Subaltern Studies is valuable as a pedagogical approach to Typography as it encourages a critical stance to the Discipline and the Canon. Typography produced using this frame does not fit easily into existing categories of typographic research, as in the case of the Iron Age Font Foundry that use artifacts and aspects of indigenous cultural beliefs as the conceptual basis for typographic design, but will share, as with all projects involved in the recovery of subjugated traditions, peoples or cultures, a critique of the Colonial project and the desire to annunciate in alternative ways. A multidisciplinary approach to Typographic design sees both the medium of Typography and Postcolonial theory being extended into new areas of engagement. Typography designed through this dialogue extends the typographic archive beyond the limiting categories of the discipline such as Serif or Sans Serif, calling attention away from the technical category of appearance in favour of drawing attention to the conceptual conditions of development.

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Figure references

Figure 1: Type specimen Sheet, 1768, J Enschede, Taschen Typography Archive. http://www.taschen.com/pages/en/community/archive_type_1/index.4.htm [15 October 2009]

Figure 2: William Caslon's Type Specimen Sheet, 1923, Taschen Typography Archive. http://www.taschen.com/pages/en/community/archive_type_1/1054.william_caslons_type_specimen_sheet_facsimile.htm?view=text_pics&title=caslon&year_from=&year_til=&location=&type_foundry=&main_page=1 [15 October 2009]

Figure 3: Dutch East Indian Company plate featuring "VOC" Logo, Iziko Social History Collection. http://www.iziko.org.za/sh/resources/highlights/shist021.html [15 October 2009]

Figure 4: Slave Registry Seal, 1816, Iziko Social History Collection. http://www.iziko.org.za/sh/resources/highlights/shist089.html [15October 2009]

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Figure 7: Izaak and Enschede' Type Foundry specimen sheet, 1748, Taschen Type Archive. http://www.taschen.com/pages/en/community/archive_type_1/33.proef_van_letteren.htm?view=pics_only&title=&year_from=&year_til=1922&location=&type_foundry=&main_page=1 [15 October 2009]

Figure 8: Fraktur used for Mein Kampf. Citation pending.

Figure 9: Names of Vietnam veterans at Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C by Hu Totya. http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Names_of_Vietnam_Veterans.jpg [15 October 2009]

Figure 10: John McCain by River Bissonnette. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:McCain25April2007Portsmouth.jpg [15 October 2009]

Figure 11: 2002 i-Jusi, *National Typografika*. Durban: Orange Juice Design.

Figure 12: 2002 i-Jusi National Typografika. Durban: Orange Juice Deisgn.

Figure 13: Iron Age Font Foundry Specimen sheet 2008. Collection of the author.

Figure 14: Iron Age Font Foundry Specimen sheet 2008. Collection of the author.

Figure 15: Iron Age Font Foundry Specimen sheet 2008. Collection of the author.

Figure 16: Iron Age Font Foundry Specimen sheet 2008. Collection of the author.

Short Biography

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