

“Skin Hunger”: Pieter Hugo’s Photographs and Achmat Dangor’s *Strange Pilgrimages*

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RÉSUMÉ

La photographie fut pour Zola un moyen d’atteindre à une connaissance plus exacte du monde. Par une intuition qui préfigure les compréhensions modernes du medium, l’écrivain comprit en particulier que les photographies représentent la réalité en même temps qu’elles la construisent. L’approche zolienne nous permettra d’examiner ici l’œuvre de deux artistes sud-africains contemporains, le photographe Pieter Hugo et l’écrivain Achmat Dangor. En tant que néo-naturalistes, tous deux dévoilent des vérités touchant à des vies vécues à la charnière de l’avant et de l’après, dans l’Afrique du sud-post-apartheid.

*Pour chaque artiste, la peau s’avère un signifiant puissant. Pieter Hugo, dans son livre de portraits, *There is a Place in Hell for Me and My Friends*, manipule ses images pour faire ressortir la mélanine de la peau de ses sujets afin que ceux-ci semblent profondément marqués par des imperfections et les dégâts du soleil. Ces portraits, véritable antithèse de représentations idéalisées du corps, exposent les contradictions résultant de distinctions raciales fondées sur la couleur de la peau. Les photographies d’Hugo offrent une représentation visuelle du travail que Dangor accomplit dans son recueil de nouvelles, *Strange Pilgrimages*. Dans ces histoires, qui font chacune le portrait d’un personnage, le passé émerge sur un mode à la fois figuré et littéral pour marquer la peau et y laisser des traces, révélant ainsi l’héritage problématique de ce qu’Hugo appelle “l’échec de l’expérience coloniale.”*

In July of 1888 photography for the masses become possible with George Eastman’s breakthrough of replacing the photographic plate with film and the marketing of his box camera with the brilliant slogan, “You press the button, we do the rest.” Émile Zola became an enthusiast, although it was not until 1894 that he paid serious attention to his hobby.¹ During the eight years until his death in 1902, Zola took “several thousand photographs.”² He “acquired at least ten different cameras with a wide variety of formats.”³ It becomes evident that “among his peers, Zola was the writer most passionate about photography [...]. He installed three darkrooms in the basements of his various homes [...].⁴ He took “selfies,” inventing his own pneumatic shutter release so that he could be in the photograph. He made notes on developing, experimented with processes, tinkered with photographic technology, and tried different papers. For portraiture, he “set up a neutral colored backcloth out-of-doors,”⁵ although he seems to have had a preference for “motion, everyday scenes, and natural subjects.”⁶ An examination of Zola’s approach and

¹ Information on Zola’s interest in photography is taken from Zola’s grandson François Émile-Zola and Massin, *Zola: Photographer*, trans. Liliane Emery Tuck (New York: Seaver Books, 1988).

² Émile-Zola and Massin 3.

³ John A. Lambeth, “Zola Photographer,” *Emile Zola and the Arts*, eds. Jean-Max Guieu and Alison Hilton (George Town, USA: Georgetown University Press, 1988) 59.

⁴ Émile-Zola and Massin 4.

⁵ Émile-Zola and Massin 14.

⁶ Émile-Zola and Massin 14.

appreciation of photography reveals that his hobby “dovetails nicely with his esthetic ideas,”⁷ and it is a relationship worthy of serious attention. Jean Dieuzaide writes that:

Le naturalisme de Zola est tout à la fois une illustration littéraire de la philosophie positive, une transposition dans le roman des méthodes scientifiques de l’histoire naturelle et, enfin, une esthétique de fidélité intransigeante du réel: c’est pourquoi, dès qu’il prend conscience de la photographie, il la juge naturaliste par essence.⁸

There is a synergy between Zola’s interest in and use of photography and his naturalism. Making such a connection relies on the assumption that both forms of artistic endeavor aim to represent and then present for the reader/viewer “the real.” This conclusion, however, only takes one so far. Meredith Lehman argues that one must move beyond reducing “Zola’s photography to a scientific project or anodyne pastime, emphasizing his ability to use the camera for impartial observation.”⁹ She goes on to argue that Zola was doing much more than just taking photographs of what he happened to see. He was indeed engaging in “photographic practices” that aimed to get beyond simply what is seen through the lens and that, in fact, he “prefigures more modern uses of the camera.”¹⁰

Although in *Le Roman expérimental* Zola disparages the photographic medium for not allowing experimentation, this work was published some eight years before Zola took up photography as a serious hobby, engaging in a great variety of photographic experiments.¹¹ Lehman, particularly through an examination of two of Zola’s photographs – one of the Eiffel Tower and the other of the *Champ de Mars* gardens – makes the case that Zola well understood the artist’s construction of the “real” in its representation and that what is real is always “mediated.” Photography, as Zola came to understand, “plays a role in both constructing and undermining the ‘real,’”¹² revealing that [he] had a thoroughly modern understanding of photography.

Susan Sontag in *On Photography* states that “Photographs do not simply render reality – realistically. It is reality which is scrutinized, and evaluated for its fidelity to photographs.”¹³ In making this point she quotes part of Zola’s comment to an interviewer that was published in the “Notes” section under the heading of “Zola’s New Hobby” in the December 1900 section of *The Photo-Miniature*:

When you arrived I was developing some snapshots I had taken this afternoon at the Exhibition. Every man should have a hobby, and I confess to a wondrous love of mine. In my opinion, you cannot say you have thoroughly seen anything until you have got a photograph of it, revealing a lot of points which otherwise would be unnoticed, and which in most cases could not be distinguished.”¹⁴

⁷ Lambeth 56.

⁸ Quoted in Lambeth 57.

⁹ Meredith Lehman, “The Author Behind the Camera: Rethinking Zola’s Naturalism,” in *Rethinking the Real: Fiction, Art, and Theatre in the Time of Émile Zola*, eds. Valerie Minogue and Patrick Pollard (London: The Emile Zola Society, 2014) 168.

¹⁰ Lehman 169.

¹¹ See Lehman 170.

¹² Lehman 173.

¹³ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Picador, 1977) 87.

¹⁴ Sontag states that Zola made this statement in 1901 (87). Given that it was published, in English, in the December 1900 issue of *The Photo-Miniature* (which later becomes *American Photography*) indicates that the comment was made a year earlier. The interview was originally in *The King* (also 1900); it is reproduced as well in *Zola Photographer* (5).

Commenting on the same quotation, Lehman states: “Zola suggests that the camera provides a way to circumvent the flaws of human perception and arrive at a more exact and accurate understanding of the external world.”¹⁵ In its focusing, highlighting, synthesizing, organizing, and its constructing (even fictionalizing), art enables one to understand the REAL in ways that would not otherwise be possible. This process is often described using metaphors of sight because of its double signification of seeing and of understanding. References to and use of visual terms such as sight, vision, and observation, as William J. Berg notes, dominate “Zola’s theories and criticism [...]. In effect, Zola evolves a poetics where literature, painting, and science intersect in the realm of the visual.”¹⁶ For Zola, “creativity was, in fact, ‘an optical phenomenon.’”¹⁷ Berg goes on to argue that “Zola’s literary theories express clearly his belief that the eye could embrace, within the act of seeing, the faculties of cognition and imagination required for scientific analysis and literary creation.”¹⁸ Thus one can accept that Zola’s comments about seeing with regard to art and photography apply to fiction and, in fact, to the whole thrust and impetus of naturalism.

Given Zola’s interests in, and experimentation with both writing and photography, it is entirely within the spirit of Zola’s enquiry to compare two South African artists: the photographer Pieter Hugo and the writer Achmat Dangor. Both present to the viewer and the reader a constructed, yet neo-naturalistic, reality of present day South Africa: a reality constructed and deconstructed particularly by participation in and *response* to historical events. Both artists believe that art reveals the *reality* of what it means to live in post-apartheid South Africa with all its hopes and contradictions, a reality made manifest through multiple layers of irony. Given South Africa’s social and political history, it is particularly challenging to construct what is fully “real.” Zola’s instance on close observation is applied. Hugo’s photographic mediation and innovative manipulation of the photographic medium address the question of the construction of “the truth” in a manner that makes his photographs particularly relevant and remarkable.¹⁹

Hugo, in his book, *There is a Place in Hell for Me and My Friends*²⁰ presents the viewer with a series of portraits that are intentionally the antithesis of what one typically expects from a professional portrait photographer. With a professional portrait, there is the expectation that the image shows one at one’s best – better than one “normally” looks. The desire is that the portrait be flattering. The photographer obliges, using skill and technology to get the most pleasing shot. With digital photography nowadays much more editing can be accomplished post-shot to “enhance” and “improve” the image. The desired result is an idealized, perfected, and thus false, “reality.” Although highly manipulated, Hugo’s portraits do not heighten stereotypical notions of beauty. The resulting photographs are the antithesis of all assumptions and expectations regarding portraits. They do not flatter, but seek to reveal what is hidden. He is aware of what Sontag notes regarding photographs, particularly portraits, that they are a lie. She states:

The Photo-Miniature, ed. John A. Tennant, Hathi Trust Digital Library 2.21 (Dec. 1900): 396, Web. 18 July 2015 <<https://www.hathitrust.org/>>.

¹⁵ Lehman 167.

¹⁶ William J. Berg, “A Poetics of Vision: Zola’s Theory and Criticism,” in *Emile Zola*, ed. Harold Bloom (Broomall, USA: Chelsea House Publishers, 2004) 37.

¹⁷ Berg 63.

¹⁸ Berg 64.

¹⁹ Hugo’s photographs may be viewed at: Stevenson Gallery, Cape Town and Johannesburg (On-line at: <<http://www.stevenson.info/>>).

²⁰ Pieter Hugo, *There is a Place in Hell for Me and My Friends* (London: Oodde, 2012).

The history of photography could be recapitulated as the struggle between two different imperatives: Beautification, which comes from the fine arts, and truth-telling, which is measured not only by a notion of value-free truth, a legacy from the sciences, but by a moralized ideal of truth-telling, adapted from nineteenth-century literary models and from the (then) new profession of independent journalism [...] the photograph was supposed to unmask hypocrisy and combat ignorance.²¹

Both Hugo and Dangor are acutely aware that the whole structure and power of apartheid was an edifice of lies. Coping with the ruins of that legacy is *the* subject of both of their works.

For Hugo, to get at the truth, means manipulating, even falsifying, what is seen through the camera lens. The resulting portraits are compelling, riveting, and intimate. For the portraits, Hugo shot in colour and then converted the image to black and white, “manipulating the colour channels”²² to emphasize “the melanin in the skin.”²³ The result is that the skin reveals its history, “damaged and blemished.”²⁴ Hugo states, “The issue of the colonial experience really came to the front. How do you depict this failed experiment, this colonial experiment that we are already a part of?”²⁵ For Hugo, “it seems [that] the personal, professional and political are inextricably linked.”²⁶ Following Zola’s belief, he makes the viewer’s eye “embrace, within the act of seeing, the faculties of cognition and imagination.”²⁷ What Hugo tries to reveal is the cognition of post-apartheid South Africa’s present state. The photographs are gritty and perhaps difficult to look at, yet compelling. Skin, as an instant racial signifier, is challenged, even destabilized. One cannot always tell, by skin tone, the person’s race. Even when one can determine ethnicity from skin tone, the difference between skin tones is narrowed in these photos, signifying less racial difference amongst the subjects. This destabilization, the removal of context, and the technical manipulation of the images allow for other kinds of signification to emerge: blemishes stand out revealing marks of lives lived through unsettling circumstances. The eyes are prominent and intense, creating for the viewer a personal, intimate encounter. Hugo is able to craft, as in his other work, “an exquisite balance between dignity and vulnerability.”²⁸ This time, the effect is accomplished through attention to the skin the faces wear. When Ronit Frenkel talks about Achmat Dangor’s work he states that it reveals the “ambiguous character of South African culture, where identities and histories are placed and replaced in a state of constant renegotiation,”²⁹ he could have just as easily been referring to Hugo’s photographs. This is particularly true in a post-apartheid era where the euphoria that surrounded the 1994 inauguration of a multiracial, multicultural society seemed

²¹ Sontag 86.

²² Nicola Schwartz, Lindokuhle Nkosi, Stacy Hardy, and Olga Norman, “Pieter Hugo: Cape Town,” *Elephant* (Spring 2013): 156.

²³ Schwartz, Nkosi, Hardy, and Norman 156.

²⁴ Schwartz, Nkosi, Hardy, and Norman 156.

²⁵ Hugo quoted in Schwartz, Nkosi, Hardy, and Norman 156.

²⁶ Hugo quoted in Schwartz, Nkosi, Hardy, and Norman 157.

²⁷ Berg 64.

²⁸ Bronwyn Law-Viljoen, “Pieter Hugo: The Critical Zone Of Engagement,” *Aperture* 186 (2007): 26. *OmniFile Full Text Select* (H.W. Wilson), Web. 20 Feb. 2014

<<http://ezproxy.achcu.talonline.ca/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ofs&AN=505240359>>. Law-Viljoen makes this point with regards to Hugo’s “Looking Aside” series. I believe that it also applies to his current series (See Law-Viljoen 20).

²⁹ Ronit Frenkel, “Performing Race, Reconsidering History: Achmat Dangor’s Recent Fiction,” *Research In African Literatures* 39.1 (2008): 149-65. *Academic Search Elite*, Web. 21 Feb. 2014 <<http://ezproxy.achcu.talonline.ca/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=28628442>>.

possible has given way to the much more difficult realities of violence, corruption, a troubled economy, and new forms of racism and inequality.

Hugo's portraits also reference the I.D. photograph that in most contexts means a passport or driver's licence, but in South Africa the reference conjures up the hated passbooks of the apartheid era. A passbook had a black and white head-shot photo used for identification, posed in much the same way as Hugo's portraits. Every "non-white" had to carry one, especially in a white area. The document determined where one could live and work and was used to restrict the movement of non-whites. Hugo is both critical and empathetic. By compelling the viewer to look, to see what might not otherwise be noticed, the viewer will begin to see the reality masked by apartheid.³⁰ Skin, in Hugo's images becomes a multiple signifier contingent on personal, historical, geographic and cultural contexts liberated from the long imposed, dominated bifurcated reality of apartheid-era social and artificial cultural constructions. This is in concert with Zola's idea that a "novelist had a double role as an observer and as an experimenter"³¹ in order to get at the true reality of South Africa.

Like Hugo's neo-naturalist portraits, each story in the Achmat Dangor collection *Strange Pilgrimages* is a portrait of a character where, in figurative and literal ways, the past emerges to mark and scar the skin. This emergence reveals the personal scars of South Africa's damaged legacy, which is something Hugo wrestles with. For Hugo, "it seems the personal, professional and political are inextricably linked."³² The personal, professional and political are also all inextricably linked in Dangor's stories. History collides with the present attempts of the characters to construct a livable narrative that can contain the truth of both the past and the present. It is no accident that in several stories, the narrator is a writer: Josh in "The Poppie of 42nd Street" and the unnamed narrator in "A Strange Pilgrimage," for example. Both writers in these two stories struggle to get down on the page what is real. In "History is a Sexually Transmitted Disease" Edward is a photographer who, although he would like to be an artist (perhaps like Hugo), is instead compelled to be a reporter ("This is a newspaper, not an art gallery!"³³). Working for a newspaper, "He soon learned how to capture death with the detachment the paper demanded and perhaps the dead deserved."³⁴ In all of Dangor's stories, the realities of the past intrude on the realities of present; and the clash between the two brings guilt, regret, loss, betrayal, and the desire for escape.

Dangor crafts in *Strange Pilgrimages* a collection threaded through with the intrusion of the past into the present.³⁵ These intrusions complicate the lives of the characters who try to live in the present while trying to create a future even as they try to escape the past. South Africa certainly has a past one would wish to escape. Living in South Africa under apartheid bestowed on South Africa and South Africans a special status, the status of living under and in an oppressed state. The sharp bi-furcation of South Africa into the hard binary of White and Black, for all its injustice, had the effect of simplifying choices and states of being: white/non-white had a functional day-to-day, inescapable reality – a reality that was real in its support of white privilege while hiding the brutal reality of those designated as "non-white." Post-apartheid South Africa, as Achmat Dangor and others explore it, has a much more complex and fissured reality where, as with Peter

³⁰ See Law-Vijoen 20.

³¹ Lambeth 57.

³² Schwartz, Nkosi, Hardy, and Norman 157.

³³ Achmat Dangor, *Strange Pilgrimages* (Johannesburg: Picaor Africa, 2013) 103.

³⁴ Dangor 103.

³⁵ Known for his novels, *Kafka's Curse* (1997) and *Bitter Fruit* (2004), and for his work as CFO of the Nelson Mandela Foundation, Achmat Dangor currently works for the Ford Foundation in South Africa.

Hugo’s portraits, nothing now can be bifurcated into the simplistic dualities of black and white.³⁶ Strip away the overlay of the apartheid mythos and one sees in both the photographs and the stories that the black/white duality was not only a lie, its “simplicity” was also a lie. Coming to terms with these realities, where the once “unitary taxonomies”³⁷ existed, makes sorting out the past fraught with complication and challenge.

One of the primary complications is that the past, by way of memory, story, and psychological conditioning, continually inhabits the present. Dobrota Pucherova observes that the past is also the past, meaning that it is inaccessible and can only be recalled through memory articulated as narratives “based on other narratives or ‘sites of memory’”³⁸ – mainly symbolic and constructed for and by the individual for the present – as much as one would like to believe, there is “no collective ‘living memory’ where the facts of history are safely deposited.”³⁹ There are only individual narratives, individual portraits. The stories also reveal that events in the present can trigger past traumas back into pain, as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings have demonstrated. One of the consequences is the on-going production of “identities that are continually split between the past and the present.”⁴⁰ The complexity of memory and history woven into the complexities of narrative raises the problematic questions of how one creates a realistic, naturalistic narrative portrait of people in post-apartheid South Africa. Berg’s understanding and endorsement of Zola’s naturalistic project is instructive: “the causal determination of natural and human phenomena by the physical milieu.”⁴¹

With so much of South Africa’s historical realities constructed around the dualities of “black” and “white,” the post-apartheid situation allows many other fissures emerge.⁴² Most all of the characters in Dangor’s collection of short stories are bifurcated not just between “black” and “white” but between past and present: the “before” – the apartheid era often referred to as “the struggle” – and the present. Personal identities formed in the “before” now have to cope with the “now.” “Before” and “after” cannot be neatly separated. The past disrupts the present, since memories unsettle the current moment; and the past disrupts the construction of a present and future narrative.

Dangor is fully aware of and sensitive to the complex interplays between history, narrative, and memory. In the title story of his collection, the main character – of all the stories in the collection – is unnamed (perhaps an everyman?) who one learns from the first sentence is someone who hates “commemorations,” those official markers of historical events – be they personal, as in birthdays, to “adopting a constitution.”⁴³ Ironically, yet pointedly, he shares a birthday with Nelson Mandela – a personal history marker linked, beyond his choice, to national remembrance and

³⁶ A number of writers come to mind. A short list might include Zales Mda, Kabelo Sello Duiker, Ishtyaq Shuri, and Ivan Vladislavic.

³⁷ Frenkel 149.

³⁸ Dobrota Pucherova, “Re-Imagining the Other: The Politics of Friendship in Three Twenty-First Century South African Novels,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 35.4 (2009): 929-43. Academic Search Complete, Web. 17 Feb. 2014 <<http://ezproxy.achcu.talonline.ca/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=hlh&AN=49235690>>.

³⁹ Pucherova 930-31.

⁴⁰ Pucherova 931.

⁴¹ Berg 46.

⁴² For a survey of the varied reactions by writers, both in English and in Afrikaans, and of all racial backgrounds to living in and coming to terms with life in post-apartheid South Africa, see Luc Renders’s essay, “Paradise Regained and Lost Again: South African Literature in the Post-apartheid Era,” *Journal of Literary Studies* 21.1-2 (2005): 119-42.

⁴³ Dangor 139.

celebration. He turns sixty on Mandela's ninetieth birthday and is traveling to Cape Town "not to visit a place, but a memory."⁴⁴ The protagonist slips in and out of the present and in and out of memories, recalling passages of literature from T.S. Eliot and Cavafy to *Zorba the Greek* (European texts he has studied), well realizing that he must "guard against the trickery memory is capable of."⁴⁵ Dangor cleverly conflates white literary construction with history. History, however, is problematic: "In South Africa [...] history being the shithouse that it is."⁴⁶ He is traveling to Cape Town because of a memory, the memory of a girl and a New Year's Eve. He dances, "bodies closely held, Doe-Eyes teaching him to embrace the music and not her skin."⁴⁷ The girl, whose skin he does not get to touch, except for a fleeting brush of her lips, is already "spoken for." This touch is sufficient to create a powerful memory of loss and longing that becomes transformed (that is, constructed) where he buries "his beautiful sorrow in the steep of words that would one day become a novel,"⁴⁸ an African novel, however, that is never published or even offered for publication. His story never reaches completion, the reality that only (white/European) published work achieves. His story of beautiful innocence cannot yet emerge in the deeply conflicted South African narrative. Where acknowledged in the story, memory is a "devious bastard,"⁴⁹ nostalgia for a past still not possible in the present or for the foreseeable future.

Forgetting, if possible, is one solution, but that does not seem to be the way forward in South Africa when its past is, in a real sense, unforgettable. There are just too many signifiers of and from the past ready to spring traps of complications and difficulty that hamper the present actions of the characters. As Pieter Hugo and Achmat Dangor demonstrate, national history and personal memory signify in the present with literal and figurative traces on skin. However, if the past presents itself as narrative and not just as history, then as narrative, the story can be reconfigured and re-tooled, if not erased. The ways of doing so, however, are never easy or singular.

Escape is another strategy of attempted reconfiguration. Part One of Dangor's collection is entitled "Africans Abroad." In all the stories the protagonists have left South Africa, often ostensibly for careers outside South Africa; but what exiling oneself *means* is more difficult to discern. Distance and separation are not just about geography. Physical distance is easy to achieve; emotional and psychological distance is much more difficult, if achievable at all. Physical escape becomes a false promise. In "The Poppie of 42nd Street," Josh, a writer struggling to write new stories in a new country (but not succeeding), takes walks as an "exercise in guilt"⁵⁰ for avoiding writing. On one such walk, he sees a woman who looks just like his grandmother, his "ouma," who raised him. In the time "before," when his skin colour clearly identified him as non-white, her skin colour, almost white, made things ambiguous and complex:

Yes, the ambiguity of her race at a time when things and people were either black or white, made people stare. Of course the boy she held by the hand gave a hint: a commingling of races, the slow bastardisation process that would eventually eliminate the white race; everything they were being warned against now paraded before them in broad daylight.⁵¹

⁴⁴ Dangor 139.

⁴⁵ Dangor 141.

⁴⁶ Dangor 140.

⁴⁷ Dangor 145.

⁴⁸ Dangor 146.

⁴⁹ Dangor 147.

⁵⁰ Dangor 4.

⁵¹ Dangor 7.

In the “before” of South Africa “The Future is white.”⁵² The whiteness of his grandmother, however, fails to provide for him a future in South Africa or even in the United States. The image of her whiteness is a blockage. Josh leaves South Africa, but the memory of seeing his *ouma* naked one night has handicapped him ever since. The image of his *ouma*: “[...] the same pale, gleaming image of his grandmother the night he spied on her. This was his *ouma*’s nakedness all over again, the nakedness of every woman he had always resisted describing, and where his current work in progress was stuck once more.”⁵³ He returns from his walk and burns his manuscripts, having had enough of “exaggerated histories and the memories” as a means to escape from the past and recognizing that there are “other stories to be told.”⁵⁴ Although exactly what stories is unclear other than the knowledge that there is something else. Perhaps someday there will be stories not linked to the determining force of skin signification. Josh realizes that he now has “an empty drawer he could put to good use other than for burying discarded manuscripts.”⁵⁵ The other uses are not determined. Josh, as most of the other characters in this collection of stories, has yet to emerge from that liminal space of being both part of the “before” and part of the “after” in South Africa.

Of all the signifiers of the past, skin colour is the most persistent, and powerful. Skin, and its cost, extract a great deal from South Africans, particularly those who straddle divide between the “before” and the “after” of apartheid. For the interactions of skin in Dangor’s work to be redemptive at all, the characters must first deal with not only escape but also loss, denial, and betrayal. It is no accident then that skin and the physicality of sex become important, reoccurring motifs in this author’s stories. Its assumed signification of “oneness,” failing in much the same way as the whole colonial experiment fails.

In “Skin Costs Extra,” Simon Mashaba who, during the “before” was an underground operative and arms smuggler, is now deployed by the new government as an economics expert to New York. On the way he stops in England where he once studied. He visits Birmingham where everything is “rooted in memory.”⁵⁶ This stop includes visiting a brothel where he looks for Miriam, a prostitute he befriended in the past; but, as the reader learns, she has since died of AIDS. Instead, he engages Mary (her name alone, along with Miriam, become rhizomatic with various intersections of Christian and colonial resonances) who is “pale and thin, insubstantial,”⁵⁷ unlike his wife Nomsa who is later to join him in New York. Mary queries him about using a condom, letting him know that without it, “Skin costs extra.”⁵⁸ Indeed it does. The cost, ironically for Simon as an economist, is not reason for concern. In New York, when Simon goes for the medical check-up required for his new job, he is shocked to learn that he is HIV-positive. His reaction is to blame Nomsa, about whose pregnancy he is unaware. They had been wanting to have a child for some time when they moved out of Soweto into “a quiet, tree-lined street in the northern suburbs,”⁵⁹ just before his deployment. He sees her skin change and, not correctly reading the significance, assumes that she is ill. He notes that: “He could see that ‘worn-out’ state in her ashen face. Black people don’t go pale, he thought, we get ash in our skin.”⁶⁰ The attractive

⁵² Dangor 8.

⁵³ Dangor 15.

⁵⁴ Dangor 17.

⁵⁵ Dangor 17.

⁵⁶ Dangor 42.

⁵⁷ Dangor 42.

⁵⁸ Dangor 42.

⁵⁹ Dangor 37, 53.

⁶⁰ Dangor 51.

paleness of Mary, becomes ash – a death image – on Nomsa. To make the irony even more wounding, Nomsa is a Zulu name meaning “caring one” or “faithful.” Mashaba’s past not only destroys his present, but compromises the future of his unborn child. The skin-cost is the ruin of his future.

In “Goodbye, Goodnight,” a story of betrayal, sex is also a primary signifier. The narrator, Abdullah Davids, who goes by Bobby, is now in the “after” period the CEO of an independent history institute. One day he is handed an apartheid-era intelligence file with his name on it. He is to make a recommendation of the file’s value in helping to shape the new narrative of South Africa. He discovers that his former lover was a double agent working for both the resistance and the apartheid regime. In reading the file on himself, the narrative slips into the memory of his time with her and during a long night he speaks his story out loud as if she is present. Her code name is Hemeline, Afrikaans for “Heaven-one.” She also goes by Firdose, “Arabic for paradise.”⁶¹ Both names suggest the visitation of an angel, but the visitation is ambiguous, being neither one of hope nor one of curse. Although both are married to other people, after they meet they have sex because she says, “my skin is hungry.”⁶² Bobby admits to her: “Your whispered words would reveal a bewildering new vocabulary to me, the lexicon of skin.”⁶³ This is after he had made a speech of his dream “of a nation free of racism and its obsession with race.”⁶⁴ She tells him, “I needed you to fuck me, skin hunger, no more, no less [...]. So stop crucifying yourself, and me in the process.” Skin hunger cannot, of course, be reduced like apartheid to so easy an equation. Slowly, there are other realizations of which Bobby becomes aware as he speaks out loud to no one but himself:

Skin hunger. Nothing profound like an attraction for the man, the troubled bedeviled human being, inside of me. I lay awake for a while, aware of the role reversal. I was an instrument of lust, something that we men usually turn woman into. Yet, I was ready to offer all my being to feed your voracious skin.⁶⁵

After their last encounter in a New York apartment, she leaves him a note asking him for forgiveness, although at this point he does not know that she is a double agent; asking forgiveness also includes “endlessly” weeping and “not asking [him] to fuck [her] last night.”⁶⁶ She goes on to say her “skin hunger has spread into [her] soul.”⁶⁷ The lexicon of skin fails to provide him a text of her true nature, as would be the case for all readings based on skin alone. Bobby, now alone, is left wondering what he has become: “I’m not ready to face the darkness. Ja, it’s that early. God what have I been reduced to? An insomniac who ruminates loudly, entering into dialogues with an alter ego what was once impervious to the terrors of memory.”⁶⁸ Bobby rules that the file has “no information of any special or extraordinary historical value”⁶⁹ and that it be returned to the “State Archives without any further follow-up.”⁷⁰ There is, however, follow-up, but the follow-up is on the personal level, redemptive. Perhaps the angel’s visit is one of prophecy revealed in the last lines of a poem he writes for her:

⁶¹ Dangor 66.

⁶² Dangor 73.

⁶³ Dangor 73.

⁶⁴ Dangor 69.

⁶⁵ Dangor 75.

⁶⁶ Dangor 83.

⁶⁷ Dangor 83.

⁶⁸ Dangor 66.

⁶⁹ Dangor 86.

⁷⁰ Dangor 86

[...] I do not care to reveal
The pleasures of Firdose’s firdose
It is not a thing to discuss,
Such divine matters,
In a cafe’ at the Yard of Ale,
Think of the wayward lusts
You may inspire in the wayward
Traffic of clowns.⁷¹

If prophecy, it is contingent. She “may” inspire, or not. The “Traffic of clowns,” those who remain, is assumed and he is among them.

The historical narrative cannot have significance until the personal narrative is formed and completed. For although betrayed by Firdose, and while he is speaking the poem out loud unaware that there is now an audience, a couple at the next table are staring at him uncomprehendingly as if he is a crazy old man; he raises a glass to them and asks Firdose for forgiveness rather than demanding it. The literary creation, the mutual asking, becomes the construction/reconstruction and creation of a possible healing narrative, even if only personal and not understood by anyone else.

Part two of Dangor’s collection, entitled “Interregnums,” names directly the liminal space his characters occupy between the “before” and the “after.” History, in the title of the first story of the section, is a sexually transmitted disease. Edward leaves his wife Carla after a dinner party when he realizes that one of the guests, and a friend of his wife, Bongani, was someone he recognized from a photograph, a photograph he took years before during the struggle. In covering the violence in the townships, Bongani, now a doctor, was involved in the brutal violence of necklacing. The one-time lover of his wife, “Bongani had been a murderer who participated in the mob justice called ‘necklacing’ that remains a blemish on the freedom struggle, as if history was nothing but a sexually transmitted disease.”⁷² Bongani, the reader learns, had given Carla an STD. Sex, here again, signifies disease, both physical and psychological. Ironically, Edward is the only one of the group of friends who does not have and has not had an STD. Yet, it is Edward who flees with no clear destination. He believes that to move on one must forget the past and he throws the incriminating photograph away. Yet, where he is to go and where he does go remain unanswered. The new realities of South Africa are yet to be determined. There is not yet a narrative that works for all.

In “Venus in my Eye,” Jimmy Natali is neither black nor white, having an Italian father and an African Mother. During the time of the struggles, he is accused of having “too much whiteness”⁷³ in a time when being black meant “no longer being afraid, even of death [...]. Kill the whites before they kill you.”⁷⁴ Jimmy eventually is radicalized, leaves the country, and becomes implicated in a bombing, an act that redeems him and makes him no longer white. In the “after” of South Africa, Jimmy is now a lawyer fighting organized crime. His work is “like wading upstream in a river of mortal human effluence, murder, intrigue, betrayal and brutality. It felt like a dull

⁷¹ Dangor 87.

⁷² Dangor 107.

⁷³ Dangor 153.

⁷⁴ Dangor 153, 154.

bilge of evil was brushing up against his skin, every day, even when he slept.”⁷⁵ He becomes a “man driven by loneliness to excel in all things but life.”⁷⁶ Situated in the liminality of “before” and “after,” like many other characters in the collection, he has no refuge or redemption. As Luc Renders notes in his survey of post-apartheid South African literature, “The bright colours of the rainbow nation have lost some of their lustre. South Africa is still [as Pieter Hugo and Achmat Dangor make clear] experiencing a post-apartheid trauma.”⁷⁷

What both Dangor and Hugo are wrestling with, Hugo articulates: “I really do think in South Africa you’re living in this sort of aftermath of meta-narratives. You have apartheid, post-apartheid, rainbow nation, post-rainbow nation, Mandela hero, post-Mandela hero.”⁷⁸ Finding narratives, lives – a skin to wear that bears all these tracings – is what Dangor’s characters and Hugo’s portraits seek to accomplish and what makes their work compelling and real. The ability to articulate the challenges and complexities via photography or story requires a detachment, a stepping outside of the issues in order to examine and present them to the viewer/reader. Art organizes and makes life coherent. That process, in itself, points to the possibilities of future narratives and future possibilities. The stories and photographs give the reader/viewer a place and time in South Africa that illuminates a culture seeking to move through the calculus of suffering stirred by memory and present-day realities, from the critical analysis of blame to the recognition that acceptance of whatever the skin lays bare is what will make a future possible. Émile Zola, Berg argues, “distinguishes himself from many of his contemporaries,”⁷⁹ in recognizing the synergistic conjunction of the visual, the scientific, and the analytic in understanding that, like the visual artists of the late nineteenth century, “the writer must also combine observation and analysis to achieve a ‘new vision’ that is direct and immediate yet ‘experimental.’”⁸⁰ This is precisely what Pieter Hugo and Achmat Dangor accomplish.

⁷⁵ Dangor 165.

⁷⁶ Dangor 164-65.

⁷⁷ Renders 137.

⁷⁸ Hugo quoted in Schwartz, Nkosi, Hardy, and Norman 162.

⁷⁹ Berg 52.

⁸⁰ Berg 52.