

“The Culpability of Innocence”: The Encounter of Canadian Women and Africa in the Short Stories of Isabel Huggan

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In 1987, Canadian author Isabel Huggan accompanied her husband to Nairobi, Kenya, where he got a job on a project for an international development agency. In some ways, her experiences in Africa followed the pattern of other White travelers to Africa as recounted in diaries, memoirs, histories, and fictional works (see, e.g., Lewis; Milbury-Steen; Stratton; Vickers). On the other hand, as a woman and a Canadian, Huggan also had quite different experiences from those portrayed by male authors, particularly those from Europe, and even White natives of Africa. Scholars of the White-African encounter tend to generalize on the basis of male authors and characters who chose to go to Africa, and who are in a relatively clear position of social power in their new surroundings by virtue of their race and gender. For Huggan, going to Africa was not a matter of choice, and for a variety of reasons – her gender, her race, and her North American upbringing – her status in Africa was far more complex than that of her husband.

It took Huggan some time to assimilate and derive artistic inspiration from that period. Her first response was not to write about it at all, to maintain a respectful silence, and during her stay she wrote an essay for *Books in Canada*, “Mirror and World,” in which she discusses her hesitation: “If we write about ourselves, as expatriate Whites here, we have little good to say; and if we write about, or as if we are, Africans, unless we have been here a very long time we risk superficiality, a lack

of authenticity and accuracy” (1-2). Eventually, however, she broke the silence, publishing two short stories based on her African experiences – “Losing Face” and “Skin the Colour of Money” – which appear in her collection, *You Never Know* (1993), and a memoir, *Belonging: Home Away from Home* (2003), about her travels to Africa, Europe, and Asia. In her introduction to “Skin the Colour of Money” in *Books in Canada*, she discusses her political innocence as a Canadian encountering a developing country for the first time, and makes it clear that such political innocence is not merely regrettable but is, paradoxically, morally objectionable: “perhaps acknowledging the culpability of innocence awakened me to its value as a tool in fiction, and I’ve since been working on stories in which the central narrators are Canadians in an African setting... I am well aware of the limits imposed by the point of view I’ve chosen, but those limits are what I want to examine” (24).

These texts present both the hope for and the failure of communication between female Canadian visitors and the Africans whom they meet and even employ. In their efforts to bridge the cultural and language gaps dividing them from the Africans, Huggan and her protagonists go through a parallel process of change and emotional growth, if only in learning to recognize their own limitations. Huggan and her stories’ narrators – or perhaps narrator, as the two stories seem to feature the same protagonist – face two main problems in their efforts to cross the divide separating them from native Africans. One is their sense of guilt over the colonial past and their desire to alleviate that guilt and the poverty they see by attempting to improve the lot of the Africans they encounter. The other is their desire to overcome the cultural barriers that divide the White and African communities in order to establish true friendships, especially with African women. But despite their liberal beliefs and mostly (but not completely) sincere and well-intentioned efforts to form these bonds, differences of race, language, and above all class prove largely insurmountable. Good intentions cannot erase the colonial legacy or the huge discrepancy in wealth between Whites and Kenyans; as Huggan says in a 1994 interview,

“People come from outside with the right intentions, but they get frustrated and they end up just thinking they can do it with money, or a show of power, and that’s not how it’s done. That’s not how the world gets fixed” (“An Interview” 24). The common element in all the encounters of the author and her protagonists with Africans is the unavoidable role of money; indeed, race becomes monetized, as Africans associate white skin with wealth, and no relationship can escape being tainted by economic considerations. Huggan makes this point in the same interview: “It seems to me looking at the world now that it’s the economic barriers that really separate us. I could see that when I was living in Africa, and I wrote out of that experience relatively directly” (24).

In *Belonging*, Huggan says that she was at first simultaneously excited by and fearful of going to Kenya: “Awake, I am brave and excited, but in my sleep, I cry out in alarm” (35). Upon arrival, she is invited to a party of expatriates working on development and health issues, and she expresses her doubts about her own and the others’ presence in Africa:

It all seems crazily backward, how first we come and undo their lives and then we come and undo them again, we foreign experts who seem to know everything and who, without meaning to, divide the world into *them* and *us*. Can nobody get it right? Should we be here at all? (40)

In an earlier paper comparing the fiction of Huggan and Audrey Thomas, I discussed the discomfort North American characters feel having servants for the first time; having been brought up in an egalitarian society, Canadian and American women are unaccustomed to and ideologically uncomfortable with issuing orders to cooks and gardeners. When Huggan takes up her residence in a fairly affluent suburb of Nairobi, she says that she is “not fearful at all, although a bit fazed by the social necessity of having house staff” (41). Her cook, Mary, advises her not to wear expensive jewellery or carry large amounts of money in the city, but to have coins to give to parking boys and beggars, who will expect her to have money and retaliate if she does not give it. One beggar woman in particular draws her, but together

with the guilt that provokes her to give comes the sense that she cannot make any real difference in the woman's life:

Whether I give her money or not, it is never enough. It can never make a difference; she will be there again tomorrow, beseeching, unless I take her home, and what then? I leave with her eyes hot on my retreating back and feel her angry despair drilling into me for hours after. There is no doubt in my mind that this woman – every one of them – hates me, no matter how many coins I make clatter into her small cup. Now I am on the edge of understanding, and the accompanying sense of culpability... is excruciating. (43-44)

She desperately wants to “know Kenyans, not foreigners like myself” but recognizes it “is possibly a noble sentiment, but rather stupid and self-limiting” (44).

Because she is a spouse she may not work, and so she tries to relieve her loneliness by making African friends. She succeeds in befriending Rachel, a single mother and domestic who receives financial assistance from a former employer who has now moved back to London. Huggan becomes the conduit by which the money finds its way to Rachel, and they develop a deep bond. To Huggan's relief, “She does not speak in a servile way, nor does she call me *memsahib*, but looks at me straight on, woman to woman, no false humility in her acceptance of the money she needs” (45). Mary becomes jealous of their friendship, and warns Huggan that Rachel is only interested in taking advantage of her, and is equally jealous of Huggan's close relationship with Benson, the gardener. As it turns out, Huggan gets along far better with working-class Africans than with her neighbours: “The houses are owned by wealthy black, white and Asian Kenyans, and some are rented to foreigners like us – but we meet very few neighbours, because there is no common grounds where we might see each other”; the same is not true of the unemployed men and the house-girls she meets (49). At one point, Huggan goes so far as to deliver the money to Rachel's home.

Periodically, Rachel asks her for loans to tide her over until the next payment from her former employer, and Huggan agrees, even offering

the money as a gift instead. She feels it necessary to hide these gifts from Mary, who will take these requests as confirmation of her suspicions; it is noteworthy that in this matter, Mary is the one in power and Huggan who feels intimidated. Huggan admits, “I am using Rachel, it seems to me. She has opened a door into a place I would never have gone without her” (51). The nature of their friendship is thus quite open to question; the two women are gaining material and other benefits from the relationship. Then, Rachel invites Huggan to attend a service at her church:

Mary laughs derisively and says I’d better take a lot of money, because that’s why I’ve been invited: to make a large donation at the *harambee* following the service. “You be the only white person there, and you be expected to give many hundred shillings, I warn you.” (54)

Sure enough, during the service there are numerous requests for donations, and Huggan gives as much as she feels is required. Since the name of each donor and the amount given are announced, Huggan feels additional pressure to be generous. Fortunately, she does not embarrass herself or Rachel by the amount she has given over the course of the day, but cannot help wondering why Rachel did not warn her about *harambee*. “Had she thought I’d know? Or did she think I might not come if she explained what the service would entail?” (56).

As the rivalry between Mary and Benson escalates, Huggan decides to dismiss Mary and she meets Benson’s family, later offering to help with his children’s schooling. When Rachel’s benefactor stops sending money, Huggan and Rachel see each other less often. She says, “I worry that Rachel is hoping I will take over the role of benefactor and we have already committed ourselves to Benson” (60). When the three years of Bob’s work are up, the Huggans move on to France to work on another project. Rachel writes to Huggan asking for money to help with her children:

She wonders if I can send her anything to help out but adds she will understand if I can’t find a way. I write back and say of course I will try, but I don’t do it immediately. A few weeks later, there is another letter. This one is shorter and more direct. It says that she has “something in her blood” and must spend time in Kenyatta Hospital on this account. She is desperate for money. (63)

Huggan does send her money, but is suspicious of Rachel's motives: "I wonder why she's felt she had to make up such a story about her blood in order to get money. Didn't she know I'd give it?" (63). Then, to her shame, she learns that Rachel is indeed suffering from leukemia. After Rachel dies, Huggan wants to help her children, but her husband warns her that there is no way to do so safely given the worsening political climate:

"Don't worry so," Bob says, seeking to comfort me. "The family will be cared for by their own people. They are not your responsibility. Remember, Rachel's church will have a *harambee*, it will be okay." He is not heartless – he is committed, after all, to helping people in developing countries – but he is a realist and he knows there are limits. (64)

Huggan acknowledges her powerlessness:

There is nothing for me to do now but to remember Rachel – I can see that. She is dead, and nothing I might have done could have prevented her from dying. Still, her death seems enormously hard to accept. Rachel is dead, I keep repeating to myself, and what that means, I slowly begin to understand, is that I am mourning Kenya as much as I am grieving for her. (64-65)

Money inevitably colours her relationship with Rachel; indeed, she can never truly prevent it from influencing how she sees and interacts with the African women she has known.

Huggan's short stories similarly portray a stark tension between the protagonists' optimism and well-meaning efforts and the economic realities that separate Canadian women from their African counterparts. In "Losing Face," for example, the unnamed narrator is coping with the culture shock of relocating to Kenya with her husband, Larry, and having servants for the first time in her life. Wanting to be generous to those working for her, she and Larry regularly offer gifts of food to Noah, the night guard in their compound, ignoring warnings from her Kenyan neighbours: "If you start feeding them every night you spoil them. Food puts them to sleep, you know" (54). It is the couple's innocence that causes them to break the social rules governing the relationship between master and servant: "I am embarrassed by our soft-heartedness, maybe even a little ashamed. We have been here

in Nairobi long enough to have smartened up” (54). The narrator is distressed to see Florence, her cook, and other African women laden with heavy burdens on their heads: “Beasts of burden weighted by centuries of male oppression. And what do I do about it? What can I? Well, I hire Florence – there’s one woman less lugging wood” (55). Thus, she feels she can use her wealth to correct at least some of what she perceives to be the social ills of her new home. She tries to convince Florence to work in a less strenuous manner, but Florence reverts to the ways of washing the floor and performing her other duties to which she is accustomed. As for Florence’s goals, the narrator sees her as seeking economic security and advancement: working for Whites “is her protection, her only security in the world she inhabits, working for expatriates who come and go.... And that is her hope, that for one of us she will prove to be so essential that she will end up in London, or Toronto, or some European capital. Not forever, she says, Just for a little while” (56-57). While desiring a closer bond with Florence, the narrator cannot help seeing their relationship as one of mutual dependence, and one that is coloured by self-interest: “Florence and I are bound together in an inextricable knot, each of us needing the other for different reasons, both of us knowing that and resenting it” (57-58).

A more overtly money-based relationship develops between the couple and Ignatius, their gardener. When he does extra chores in the house, the narrator realizes, “It’s the way he lets me know he wants a few extra shillings, and we all feel more comfortable if he has worked for the money” (58). He then asks them directly for money to help him supply his children with “extras,” and Larry always obliges. Yet this constitutes neither real generosity nor a true connection with Ignatius at a human level; what emerges is that the couple’s gifts and regular payment for services rendered are offered in a very patronizing manner. They suspect Ignatius is lying about what he intends to do with the money; at one point, as Larry is paying Ignatius for some work he did in the kitchen, “he considers giving Ignatius some extra cash then he decides not to, since we have agreed privately on a system: we do not pay him until the very last minute before his leave, so that he cannot

spend the money on his girlfriend Dinda who lives in the location... not far from here” (59). Their motivation is a combination of guilt over what they have seen of African poverty and an arrogant belief they know what is best for Africans: “ever since we drove him home on his leave last year and saw those poor children of his, Larry and I try to do what we can to keep the money out of Dinda’s pocket. It’s just too depressing, those six children in that little hut. The size of Larry’s office at the UN” (60). They automatically assume that Ignatius is attempting to fool them, and equally assume the right to decide what he may do with his money.

To their shame, it turns out that Ignatius has used the money to buy a new lamp so that his children can study better at night (60-61). Out of a sense of guilt, at their unfounded suspicions and perhaps their privileged state, Larry offers Ignatius even more money. The scene well illustrates the nature of their relationship:

It is nearly dusk now, but I can see he’s putting something into the black man’s outstretched hand and I know with certainty it will be several hundred-shilling notes. I also know that Ignatius opened his palm toward Larry a fraction of a second before Larry spoke, a fraction in which the heartache and cunning of poverty shone forth. The halo is not for Larry but for clever Ignatius, who has found a way to get a lamp for his children. I am struck by what a beautiful scene it is, the two men seeming to hold hands in the twilight, their colour hardly visible, just two men joined together. Then Ignatius is bowing, his head bobbing above his folded hands, everything in his stance servile, humble, grateful unto earth. (61-62)

The final humiliation comes when the narrator begins receiving obscene phone calls. While Huggan is not explicit about who has been making the calls, we are clearly meant to infer that it is Noah. By giving him more food than he should have expected, the narrator has violated the regrettable but necessary, or inescapable, rules governing the relationships between Whites and Africans. Despite her best efforts, she cannot simply erase the gap separating them through well-intended but inappropriate gestures. Offering sandwiches proves to be a futile gesture in the face of centuries of social and economic exploitation and stratification. She has Ignatius wash the wall where someone has been rubbing himself, and Ignatius does so in the same spirit in which

he trims their hedges: “so easy to keep these *wazungu* happy doing jobs over and over, why not wash the wall? It will just get dirty again. He stands on his ladder in the sunlight, cutting back the hedge, the constant growth requiring endless trimming, endless care, that means he has a livelihood” (66-67). That night, she is unable to sleep:

I see myself as from above, and watch my body flopping about beneath the sheets, something less than human, something gross. Like some kind of ugly great fish, flailing in panic, gills fibrillating, fins quivering in the air. A fish out of water. I am a fish out of water. (67)

She has imported liberal, egalitarian beliefs along with her wealth and status as a middle-class White woman, and realizes how foreign and alienated she is. In all, what the story reveals is her paradoxical power and lack of it. She is a member of Africa’s racial power elite, thanks to her colour and especially her wealth, yet remains helpless when it comes to solving Africa’s social and economic problems and transcending the barriers her identity constructs.

Perhaps the best illustration of the association between money and race in Huggan’s African stories is the phrase that provides the title of “Skin the Colour of Money.” The story concerns the narrator’s efforts to bargain for and purchase goods at the local market. Huggan introduces the theme of money in the very first lines of the story:

The first time, you feel a little awkward and self-conscious, horribly aware of not only your pale skin but your fine clothes, your watch, and the gold bangle you forgot to take off before coming here. You feel unjustly assessed by the eyes watching you from every corner, you want to stop and explain: “Look, I’m not as rich as you think I am.” (123).

As in “Losing Face,” the narrator is told to be wary of becoming too close to the Africans; her friend Bertha, another White woman, acts as her geographical and social guide:

... the woman who brought you here has warned against too much conversation. To be overtly friendly is to invite confidences of the sort which end in requests for money to pay for children’s schooling, a mother’s medical bills, a brother’s bail ... the less you know about them, she says, the less they can ask of you. (124)

It is Bertha who tells her what her colour means:

You must never forget for a moment that people will try to use you for their own ends, as a way of meeting their own needs. Within that framework, you can still communicate, give and take and learn from each other ... but you must remember: There is only one thing black Africans see when they look at you. They see your skin, and your skin is the colour of money. (124)

What the narrator seeks above all are the gourds carved by an artisan named Boniface; to her, they are beautiful in their simplicity and represent irresistible examples of pure folk art. Of course, to Florence (obviously the same housekeeper as in the previous story) they are grotesque in their depiction of animals having sex. Florence is also baffled by the narrator's love for the many clay pots she buys; they are valueless because they are impractical (127). The narrator's response to the pots is disturbingly condescending and naively romantic: "You were astounded by the pots, the incredible number of them – pots of every sort and size, so simply made and so ... yes, what you thought was, so primitive. You were quite moved by that aspect" (126). On the other hand, in a neat reversal, Florence finds beauty in the kitschy objects the narrator brings from overseas (127).

The narrator's relationship with Boniface begins with her unsuccessful attempt to bargain with him for his gourds; she does not know how to play the game, and needs Bertha to step in and help her. She thinks she has insulted Boniface with her first offer, and the response of both Boniface and the men standing in the next stall leaves her ashamed: "You are anxious about what they will think of a white woman haggling over coins she can well afford to spend. You are lost, you do not know which moves to make to restore your dignity. Which moves are yours, which moves are theirs? How is one ever, ever to know?" (129-30). Eventually, however, she and Boniface do become friends of a sort, but he refers to her not only as "friend" but also as "my white person"; more tellingly, the leather workers in the next stall call her "Mrs. Money" (130):

Mrs. White Person with skin the colour of Boniface's hopes and dreams. If only he could make enough money, he could stop this business and then ... and then, what? You buy as much from him as you can and you sit on the stool beside him and smile your friendliest smile for, really, what else is there to do? You cannot help who you are, and nor can he. (130)

A bond does develop between the narrator and Boniface's grandmother, Mercy, who speaks no English and must have Boniface act as translator. At first, the narrator does not know how to communicate across the many barriers separating them: "What to say, what to call across the great divide of age and race? What to offer, what to ask?" Out of embarrassment at her own "cultural incompetence" she blushes (132). Her change in colour provokes laughter from Mercy and, when the cause of Mercy's laughter is translated, from the other Africans as well. Boniface translates:

"She has looked at your face and has wondered if you are trying to change your colour." He had to stop there to catch his breath before going on with more laughter, more slapping of his leg while urging everyone around to join in this grand joke. A *mzungu* turning from white to red. What next? Maroon? Copper? Mahogany? Chocolate? Coal? (132)

In a way, then, the narrator is apparently, if inadvertently, attempting to cross the racial bridge between them. That would, of course, be impossible, as the laughter indicates; the gap is far too great. Nevertheless, the joke breaks the ice between them, and Mercy welcomes the narrator in her subsequent visits to the Kariokor market. The narrator brings gifts for Mercy, who sings what seem to be racy songs in return (133). It is, in fact, a characteristic postcolonial exchange: material goods from white to African, and cultural goods, much like Boniface's gourds and other souvenirs, from African to white. Still, the narrator overcomes her distrust; she recalls Bertha telling her, "'Don't fool yourself You can never be one of them and don't forget it'" (135).

At the end of the story, the narrator wishes to bring Mercy a cake, but the ever-jealous Florence objects on tribal grounds: "'You take this food I make to some old Kamba?'" (135). Instead, she decides that it might be better to buy cakes from a bakery, or revert to the conventional White-African relationship, and adhere to accepted beliefs about what her colour means:

Or maybe, you think, you should just give her some shillings, and then she could buy what she needed. Yes, that would no doubt be better. But you must be careful not to insult the old lady with cold cash replacing your usual personal gifts. You will sit with Boniface a while, and ask him what he thinks of the idea. (135)

Sadly, the racial/cultural barriers seem utterly insurmountable; the narrator simply does not know how to connect on a meaningful level with Mercy or the other Africans, and surrenders to what prove to be entrenched distances. That distance is stylistically conveyed through Huggan's use of the second person. The narrator distances herself from what occurs and from her own responses by employing the nonspecific pronoun "you," suggesting the inability to establish a true connection to African natives is a universal rather than a purely individual experience. In a way, she takes on Bertha's role *vis-à-vis* the reader, warning whoever reads her account that the inescapable linking of money and race will hinder any real human bonds between the neocolonizers and those who have been colonized.

In her interviews and *Belonging*, Huggan has expressed a pessimistic attitude toward the possibility of achieving communication between Canadians and those in the Third World. The legacy of colonial oppression and the racial and social distinctions that divide Whites and Africans militate against true emotional connections and human contact. Try as she might, Huggan's protagonist cannot manage to overcome the barriers she faces, including those erected by her own status and blindness to its inevitable effects. Whether she intends to or not, Huggan's narrator reproduces the worst features of the colonial relationship, with its alienating matrix of race and money. When it comes to the reality of poverty and oppression, Canadian innocence in fact constitutes culpability.

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