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Carli Coetzee: *Written Under the Skin: Blood and Intergenerational Memory in South Africa*. Wits University Press, 2019, 177pp. ISBN: 978-1-7761-4326-9.

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My first involvement with Africa began in 1950, with brotherly friendships with students from different parts of Africa, who lived, studied and worked with me. Then in 1960 I began my research and writing about Africa, with the publication of *Africa's South West Hell* and writing for *Africa Today* research articles on the situation in South Africa and elsewhere. I went beneath the skin and tried to spill blood on what was happening in the colonies. My review of Nelson Mandela's first book was made into an editorial in a Boston newspaper when I was a doctoral student at Harvard in the 1960s.

That said, Carli Coetzee's book is particularly focused on "women's embodied experiences of blood" and that these "are crucial to understanding and 'reading' the surging and ever emergent present in South Africa" (p 1). For both men and women, blood is part of their coming-of-age stories. Much exists in the literature on first menstruation and societal separation while menstruating. Less exists for men, but in many societies bloodletting at circumcision was part of the initiation of adolescents into their society. "The trauma associated with lives lived under and through *apartheid* is written in the blood" (p 4). Solomon Kalushi Mhlangu is remembered for his statement before his execution in 1979 for acts of terrorism: "My blood will nourish the tree that will bear the fruits of freedom" (p 3). Coetzee took time to learn about the medical and scientific uses of blood and their changing role in South African history. This and the drop of blood used in DNA analysis are present in this volume.

South Africa has had a bloody history that is constantly being re-examined and made sense of. Skin has been used as a marker of race, but although "South Africans like skinning each other" to read each other racially, it may be a "screen that both covers and conceals" (p 10). "*Apartheid* thinking, like the skin on our bodies, has renewed itself and reinvented itself and importantly had lost the memory of this process" of the corruption and oppression of *apartheid* (p 11).

The book is divided into two parts: the first covering the lives of four critical individuals and a reconsideration of their histories. Among them are Nelson Mandela and "the cell as a portal into a bloodless time"; Eugene de Kock as seen by a number of his prison visitors; Ruth First, her prison days and her "strongroom of memory"; and Hamilton Naki an assistant in animal experiments for Christian Barnard. The second part begins with the #Fallist student movements in the Western Cape in the context of recent writing by women in South Africa. The author continues by raising the question of "Who can see the bleeding"; this is carried even further as it considers both women's and men's blood in these #Fallist times. The following chapter delves deeply beneath the skin into the bloody fingerprint by Zanele Muholi on the cover of the book.

Coetzee takes the reader to Robben Island and to prisoner 4664's cell, the most visited place, frequently written about, and of renewed interest to the younger generation in South Africa. The island is seen as a "symbol of the triumph of the human spirit over adversity" (p 23). Different writers in the past 20 years are referred to for their re-interpretations of Mandela, including Neville Alexander, Lindiwe Dovey, Pamela Dineo Gqola, Xolelo Mangcu, Litheko Modisane and Sabelo Ndlovu--Gatsheni. Coetzee examines the implications of various movies made about Mandela, particularly *Drum* (2004) by Zola Maseko, *Invictus* (2009) by Clint Eastwood where Morgan Freeman plays Mandela, and *Mandela's Gun* (2016) by John Irvin. Other African Americans who have played Madiba are: Danny Glover (*Mandela*, 1987), Sidney Poitier (*Mandela and de Klerk*, 1997) and Dennis Haysbert (*Goodbye Bafana*, 2007). Coetzee notes that "the work of reading Mandela's bloods has begun," and that Xolelo Mangcu's new biography will fill in missing information about Mandela's life, especially his youth.

The second chapter on Eugene de Kock is just one of many new takes on one of the world's extensive torturers and murderers, named "Prime Evil". De Kock is now a free man, a liberty made possible partially by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and his role in finding the missing remains of so many anti-*Apartheid* activists that he had helped kill. He assisted the Missing Persons Task Force, "as an apology for the crimes he committed" (p 41). He was sentenced to 212 years and two life sentences (the new South Africa does not have capital punishment). To many, Eugene de Kock's freedom is astounding because of the extent of his confessions and what he was guilty of.

Coetzee has chosen to focus on the writings of three people on Prime Evil: Janet Malcolm *The Journalist and the Murderer* (1997), Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela who interviewed de Kock in prison over 46 hours spread out over many months and eventually wrote *A Human Being Died That Night: Forgiving Apartheids Chief Killer* (2003), and Anemari Jansen, his biographer who spent years producing her biography. According to Coetzee, Jansen's approach was more at the level of common bloods transcending the tainted blood of violence. "Jansen's texts and the texts it takes up under its skin, functions as evidence of de Kock's willingness to bring secrets to the surface, as if this urge to truth telling absolves him and cleanses him of his deeds" (p 57).

Ruth First was murdered by Craig Williamson in Maputo by a mail-bomb that was so powerful that her blood was spread around her office at the university. After Williamson's confession the TRC granted him amnesty. I doubt whether Ruth First would have approved of that based on her criticism of me in 1969 for not having two SWAPO traitors executed; they had deserted the army of liberation and I had helped them seek shelter in Botswana after they had refused to fight in the Caprivi. Coetzee's key concern in Chapter 4 is with interpretations from the book and movie based on Ruth First's time in prison for 117 days in 1963. The state police, as with many others, were attempting to elicit from her information that they could then use against her and others who were opposing the *apartheid* state, either openly or underground.

Ruth First had been for many years a leading member of both the South African Communist Party and the African National Congress. *117 Days: An Account of Confinement and Interrogation under the South African 90-Day Detention Law* (1965) was published in London. Coetzee calls it an "account of non-disclosure". Ruth First wrote the script for the film *90-Days* (1965); it was directed by Jack Gold. Ruth First refused to sign the statement she allegedly made while in prison. She artfully tried only to give her interrogators information they would already know. Whether she had in anyway colluded with them remains unknown. Bessie Head, active in the Pan Africanist Congress, had been imprisoned before being allowed to leave for Botswana.

Her fear of what she might have done, and its possible cause of bloodshed deeply troubled her for the rest of her life.

Coetzee notes that the various anti-*apartheid* movements did not keep archives, and this has made it difficult to re-create and write about what is an oral history. I experienced this in 1992 when I was asked to evaluate SACHED (South African Committee on Higher Education) and found records were scarce because they feared the theft of computers by the police or special branch. Coetzee quotes Ruth First, “I was packing my mind into a strongroom section labelled, ‘never be divulged’” (p 66). Coetzee also considers the work of Barbara Harlow that focusses on these issues. Ruth First says, “In prison you see only the moves of the enemy”. Yet female prisoners must deal with their “leak”, their menstruation. Ruth First and Slovo had three daughters. They also have been involved in telling their parents’ story. Coetzee refers succinctly to Gillian Slovo’s *Every Secret Thing* (1997).

Coetzee’s next chapter is on Dr Christian Barnard, aspects of his life, the heart transplant museum at Groot Schuur Hospital where he did the first operation 52 years ago, and how over three decades starting in 1960 his outward facing perspective changed opportunistically. She also considers the Afrikaner search for recognition and acceptance that manipulated the way he and others treated and publicized his dog laboratory research assistant, Hamilton Naki. A language of “super modernity” allowed Barnard and others to play linguistic fantasy games to paint a positive picture of Afrikaner nationalism, that they were “pursuing a course that would ensure a better life for all” (p 95).

Chapter 5 starts with Rhodes Must Fall (#RMF) and Fees Must Fall (#FMF) or the #Fallist movement in South Africa. What becomes significant is the links between home and school, between parents and their students, between the actions of Chumani Maxwele on the statue of Rhodes, and the creation of Shackville on the UCT campus to highlight the student housing crisis. Observation and art come to the fore. “The very idea of the university ... is intimately linked with violence” (p 107). Enter the relations, the so-called uneducated members of the “family” who work as cleaners, domestic workers, and in other non-academic positions, and the labour unions and their struggles.

Coetzee cites many studies that expose these issues, from Jacklyn Cock’s *Maids and Madams: A Study in the Politics of Exploitation* (1980) to Gabeba Baderoon’s *The Ghost in the House: Women, Race and Domesticity in South Africa* (2014). Baderoon quotes the artist Zanele Muholi, “Look at me, everything I do comes from my mum’s sweat and blood. It is directly connected with my history” (p 111). Shobane’s *Art of Hypocrisy* (2016) is a trailblazer here challenging what is academic excellence, the role of the researcher and what constitutes a family and a home. Mamphela Ramphele’s *A Bed Called Home* (1993) is a study of hostel dwellers that is a noted classic. I would add Kgebetli Moele’s novel *Room 207* (2006) on a small space in Hillbrow.

In Chapter 6 “Who can see the Bleeding? Women’s Blood and Men’s Blood in the #Fallist Times”, Coetzee is inspired by the Abantu Book Festival in Soweto in 2016 and by Kopano Matlwa, a medical student, whose *Coconut* (2007) was published when she was 21. I was sent a copy to review by Jacana, and never did so because I saw it as a novel for late-adolescent women. Coetzee shows how wrong I was. Matlwa followed it with *Spilt Milk* (2010) and *Period Pain* (2016) - or *Evening Primrose* in the northern world - now re-released as a trilogy. *Coconut* has sold 25,000 copies in South Africa, and at the rate books are shared perhaps 250,000 have read it. For a book in South Africa to reach 5,000 sales shows it has been well received.

Dozens of other writers during this period are also covered by Coetzee in this chapter, too many for me even to start to list them. South Africa, along with Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland, has had the highest rate of gender-based violence in the world. In Botswana in 1994 the Kagisano Society, of which I was a chairperson, opened a shelter for abused women and children, intended to serve southern Botswana. Soon we had clients from Namibia, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, South Africa, Lesotho and Swaziland. Thereafter others came from elsewhere in Africa and Europe, South America and Asia. We never dreamed how great the need was or how extensive the abuse of women.

Many authors have explored this. Coetzee turns to the writings of Njabulo Ndebele and Pumla Dineo Gqola, particularly for her insights on spectacular masculinity. I personally found this chapter the most intriguing because in May 1962, I covered, as a journalist, the first All-Africa Writers' Conference in Kampala, Uganda. Gathered there were the greats of African literature, including Chinua Achebe, J.P. Clark, Christopher Okigbo and Wole Soyinka to Okot p'Bitek, John Nagenda, Rajat Neogy, Ali Mazuri, Rebeka Njau, James Ngugi (to become Ngugi wa Thiong'o), Ezekiel Mphahlele, Lewis Nkosi and many others. It remains one of the most exciting gatherings I have ever attended.

In the final chapter Coetzee goes deeper into discussing blood found in South African art and writing, beginning with Zanele Muholi's bloody creations. "Muholi has described the menstrual project as a form of testimony" (p 148). The rape and violent murder of women is central here. Her art is created as a form of memorial with each piece representing a woman who has been raped, abused in other ways, or died shedding both physical and spiritual blood. Coetzee quotes from Pumla Dineo Gqola's book *Rape: A South African Nightmare* (2015). Redi Tlhabi in her *Endings and Beginnings: A Story of Healing* (2012) recounts how a notorious rapist and murderer, Mabegzo, cared for her and helped her when she had her first period, what Coetzee calls "an introspective reading under the skin" (p 152).

Coetzee concludes: "The chapters in this book have shown that the multidirectional and intergenerational meanings of the past in the present sometimes surge and flow in reinvigorating currents. At other times they are arrested or blocked; but they always leave a mark" (p 154).

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