

K. SELLO DUIKER

Thirteen Cents

Introduction by Shaun Viljoen

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K. Sello Duiker's *Thirteen Cents*

AN INTRODUCTION

Shaun Viljoen

ONE BREEZY NIGHT LATE IN NOVEMBER

One breezy night late in November
and after the April elections
Two friends stood outside
admiring the moon
'charming sky,' said the one
to the other
'What's even more charming is that
whitey has finally allowed himself
to be surrounded by darkey and they
seem to be getting on,' remarked
the other, staring into the night
At that moment a shooting star
blurred across the sky and both friends
saw it.
Wistful silence fell between them
the one not sure whether the other
had seen the meteorite. Then the
other opened: 'Perhaps it's not
about whitey and darkey anymore.'
The other assented.¹

K. Sello Duiker's poem "One Breezy Night Late in November" imagines what the April 1994 democratic elections, the first in South Africa's history, meant for social relations that

had been racialized since the landing of Dutch settlers in 1652 and hyperracialized since Afrikaner white minority rule took hold in 1948. In a reflective exchange between two friends in the poem, the initial thought of one about the historic turning point six months earlier asserts that the country will see racial reconciliation; the other responds unsurely, saying, “Perhaps it’s not / about whitey and darkey anymore.” In this tentative claim Duiker raises precisely what his astounding contribution to postapartheid literature has been—a provocative unsettling of the black and white, the categorical terms of engagement that marked human relations and writing under apartheid. Instead, as Meg Samuelson says of Duiker’s first two novels, his work “interrogate[s] borders—whether social, national or ontological.”²

The epiphanic moment in the poem occurs after “a shooting star / blurred across the sky” and a strange silence falls between the friends. As in the poem, all three of Duiker’s novels—*Thirteen Cents*³ (2000), *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* (2001), and *The Hidden Star* (published posthumously in 2006)—are marked by the presence of the supernatural, the surreal, the mythical, which layer and disrupt the real and comment on it. Narrative modes in the novels shift continuously between realist, hyperrealist, and surrealist, shunting the protagonist and the reader between different realms of consciousness and perception.

As in the poem, protagonists in the novels exist primarily as exceptional individuals, as an “I” rather than, as was the case with much (black) writing under apartheid in which the

individual was metonymic of the greater (racial) community, as an “I” who is at the same time the “we.” If anything, the voices in the poem represent themselves and are at a distance from both “whitey” and “darkey,” identifying overtly with neither. There is an intimacy between the two friends, yet at the same time we feel a distance between the two, “the one not sure whether the other / had seen.” All three novels present us with protagonists who are extraordinary individuals, with Azure in *Thirteen Cents* being the most clearly solitary and relentlessly individual character, who does not belong to any one place or to any social group, and who defies attempts to categorize him.

Thirteen Cents is a searing, disturbing coming-of-age account of Azure, a twelve-year-old orphan who has traveled from his home near Johannesburg to eke out an existence on the streets of post-1994 Cape Town. Azure lives in an underworld of shack dwellers, drug dealers, and gangsters and is exploited, often in most violent and demeaning ways, by all kinds of adults for their own ends. He survives through prostitution, selling sex to older men. In *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* Tshepo is a university student who at the start of the novel has been institutionalized for cannabis-induced psychosis and who, like the younger Azure, is an orphan and tries to find a sense of belonging in a hostile, dystopic postapartheid Cape Town. However, violence, exploitation, and bigoted attitudes that prevailed under apartheid continue to resurface in his quest to find a way of being in the world. Tshepo joins a brothel for male-to-male sex to earn money but also to

explore his own homosexual impulses and need to create a fraternity or family. In the end, Tshepo leaves Cape Town for Johannesburg to try to find a better life. *The Hidden Star*, written for younger readers, is set in a township on the outskirts of Johannesburg and employs a child protagonist: the young girl Nolitye, who is invested with special powers by a magical stone, embarks on a quest to battle forces of greed and evil and restore her true family, displaced by these evil impostors. In the final novel the narrative shifts between the modes of African folktale and gritty realism, linking assertions of the ancestral to a strong sense of injustice in the contemporary social order. Duiker reiterates this link when he writes about the meaning of his own name. He dropped his first name, Kabelo, and adopted his second name, Sello, as the first name by which he wished to be known. Sello, his grandfather's name, is, he says, "a poetic name and it means lament! Someone who always cries out about things he sees—like injustice. It is a name that is very tied to ancestral voices."⁴

Thirteen Cents was published a mere six years after the first democratic elections, when Duiker was twenty-six years old, to critical acclaim and wide readership inside South Africa and abroad.⁵ Of all the South African novels I have taught at undergraduate level, *Thirteen Cents* has proved to be the one that engages large numbers of young students. Is this because the novel speaks in such direct, frank, and contemporary terms about sex, sexuality, and addiction? Is it because of the manner in which we as readers are compelled to see the world from the point of view of the marginalized, abused, and

exploited street boy narrator Azure, who represents what we see but dismiss every day of our waking life—those who are down and out and living on the far edges of monied, motorized, propertied society? Is it because, despite the horror and seemingly insurmountable odds stacked against him, Azure does not succumb to any of the dehumanizing forces that grind him down and the novel ends on a muted note of hope and the possibility of an alternative way of being in this world? This ability to engage a younger generation of readers seems to hold for places outside South Africa as well. According to Dutch writer Adriaan van Dis, who toured Indonesia in 2003 with Duiker as part of the Winternachten literary festival based in The Hague, Duiker’s “frank and sincere stories about sex and the dark side of city life strongly spoke to the young Indonesians.”⁶

Azure’s position as a twelve-year-old who turns thirteen in the novel situates him on the threshold of the world of adults and subjects him to the rites of passage that induct him into particular forms of adulthood—in this case a particularly exploitative, destructive social order. He is a critical outsider to this world and continually resists incorporation—“Grown-ups are fucked up,” he asserts (42). It is this significant turning from boyhood to manhood, this becoming thirteen to which the title alludes, that positions him as a critical commentator moving into and out of the dominant matrix of hierarchies and power. He is often drawn into and subject to this adult world and its values—“Men don’t cry,” he claims, “[a]nd since I’m nearly thirteen I mustn’t cry. I must be strong. I

must be a man" (26). This slippage into and out of the dominant social order across its ontological and spacial borderlines subjects the reader, as it does Azure, to experiences and perceptions of this order from both the intimacy of the inside and the estrangement of the outside. This contradictory fluidity is intensified by the first-person narrative Duiker deploys. Azure not only narrates his story himself but often does so in childlike egocentric vocabulary and syntax: the frequency of the narrating pronoun "I," probably the most frequent word in the text; the short, emotive sentences; and the clipped and spare dialogue. On the other hand, Azure's experiences are anything but childlike and innocent. The code-switching between languages and between colloquial and taboo registers attests to the child's harsh and very adult circumstances. The horrific verbal, emotional, and sexual abuse he is subject to stem from a world where self-interest, greed, addiction, and prejudice are rampant. Adults and their values have become the new oppressor, replacing the "whitey" who played that role in protest literature by black writers under apartheid. "[M]oney is everything" (18), Azure tells himself after he has been robbed of forty rands by the gangster pimp Allen, insightfully identifying the commodification and commercialization of social relations that rapidly overlaid race as the dominant line of fracture in postapartheid South Africa. As the title of the novel suggests, the destructive forces in Azure's worlds continually work to reduce him to near nothing, to a meager thirteen cents, to an object whose value is merely monetary.

Azure's physical appearance is as unsettling as is his narrative positioning. His blue eyes, to characters like the gang leader Gerald, are anomalous, given his dark skin, and provoke and interrogate stereotypical ideas of race, identity, and social hierarchy. Azure troubles the main racial categories of apartheid identity, "white," "coloured," and "black"—he is none of them and at the same time all of them.⁷ Not only do his looks defy inherited racial classification, but his dress sense has no regard for conventions that are racially associated. Azure's childhood friend from Johannesburg and one of his few protectors, Vincent, warns him that Gerald is out to get him: "He thinks he's white because he's got straight hair and a light skin. If you show up with those shoes and your blue eyes, he'll kill you. He'll say, Who the fuck do you think you are? Trying to be white?" (39–40).

Gerald heads a hierarchy of destruction and evil equivalent to the evil witches MaMtonga and Ncitišana in *The Hidden Star*: His power resides in his control over others through relentless thuggery and brutality combined with his creation of financial, territorial, and emotional dependency that mimics supportive familial relations. After days of protracted physical torture and sexual violence inflicted on Azure by Gerald's minions like Sealy and Richard, Azure is expected to pay allegiance to Gerald, who takes on the role of father figure and protector, claiming in fact to have killed Azure's parents himself. The extraordinary power of the gangster is manifest in the manner in which he is able, in the mind of Azure and others, to transmute into the all-powerful dinosaur T-rex on the

one hand, and into the form of ubiquitous pigeons on the other. To secure Azure as his own creation, Gerald insists he change his name to “Blue.” But Gerald and his world cannot finally make Azure belong. Gerald’s ignorance of the fact that “Blue” and “Azure” are essentially synonymous signifies his failure to rename the boy, and Gerald’s final destruction marks Azure’s triumph at resisting incorporation into Gerald’s world and its debased values. In this regard, the final assertion of the novel, “My mother is dead. My father is dead,” a disturbing refrain throughout the work that emphasizes Azure’s orphaned and dislocated state, becomes a positive and hopeful statement against false belonging and inauthentic values that the impostor father represented. The unambiguously happy ending of *The Hidden Star* tells of Nolitye’s final victory in casting off her false mother and being reunited with her real mother, whom she has rescued from the evil underworld: “‘At last we’re going home,’ Nolitye says gratefully. ‘Together’” (233).

Alongside the violence the young Azure experiences at the hands of adults, it is the sexualized nature of his existence on the streets that shocks and unsettles. Many readings of *Thirteen Cents* emphasize the fact that Azure engages in homosexual encounters with older men in order to earn money and survive on the streets. Azure confirms this reading when on numerous occasions he describes the encounters in graphic detail, but qualifies what is happening by stressing that he does what he does for the money, as a “trick.” However, it is possible to nuance this reading with one that also sees the novel as a bildungsroman of the boy’s sexuality in formation,

with the exploration of inchoate sexuality, perhaps even homosexuality, as a subtext. The most protracted description of sex with a man is the one with the rich banker Mr Lebowitz. During this encounter, Azure distances himself and stresses that this is just another of many similar “tricks” he performs: “I know these bastards. I’ve done this a thousand times” (98). As he does on a number of occasions, he asserts a heteronormativity when he says he gets it up by thinking of Toni Braxton. Yet, on a number of occasions during this encounter, there are, despite the ominous suggestion of being filmed and watched, hints at pleasure-taking, both in the comfort and warmth of domestic space and even sexually. Azure’s descriptions of moments of the encounter can be read as ambiguous and possibly, even subconsciously, taking pleasure. At one point also he feels a sense of pleasure during the encounter, but this is fleeting: “After a while the pleasure turns into sadness” (100). At another point, when they have a second go at it to the accompaniment of the “Winter” movement of Vivaldi’s *Four Seasons*, Mr Lebowitz talks of trees without leaves, which takes Azure into a reverie of his own: “Trees, I know trees. I listen to the music. It is too much. . . . This guy is trying to open me up” (107). Azure here briefly reveals that there is something hidden within him that he is reluctant or unable to face but quickly reverts to a defense of this response as his way of protecting himself from exploitative adults like Mr Lebowitz and Joyce.

The closest we come to the young teenager reflecting more objectively on his sexuality and a possible alternative sexuality

is when, toward the end of the novel, before his final ascent up the mountain, he interrogates his contradictory sexual impulses:

I never dream of doing it with a woman. I'm not a moffie. One of the bastards once asked me if I was a moffie. And I told him that I'm not a moffie. But it's strange that I never dream of doing it with a woman, not even beautiful Toni Braxton. And the other guys are always saying that it happens to them. I just lie about it and say that it happens to me too even though it never has. (171–72)

The reiterated denials, “I’m not a moffie,” suggest the young boy’s repression of the disturbing possibility of its opposite—too traumatic a thought for someone his age and in his context to admit. By reading against the grain of the narrator’s own claims, or finding contradictory moments on its surface, this bildungsroman then is as much about survival and a sense of self on the urban edges as it is about marginalized sexuality in formation (rather than an *assertion* of a particular set sexual identity). Like Azure, Duiker himself discourages reading the novel as being about “gay identity” when, in response to a question with regard to his own sexuality, he responded: “I’m a writer and interested in every aspect of human relations and identity. The whole thing is not an issue for me. My first novel, *Thirteen Cents*, did not have a gay character and neither will the third. I really don’t want to be pigeon-holed.”⁸

The explorations of homosexuality in Duiker’s second novel, inflected with an array of other issues about young urban

identity and belonging, makes such a subtextual reading of *Thirteen Cents* more plausible. He was in fact composing the two novels at the same time. Duiker's own interrogation in his fiction and poetry of the inherited boundaries of conventional identities and of limiting, categorical thinking, as well as his crisscrossing of languages and narrative modes in his work, would further corroborate such an interpretation. In addition, such a reading queers the dominant interpretation which insists that the homosexual encounters are, on Azure's side, simply to survive. It also challenges homophobic and moralistic readings of the novel, like that of Osita Ezeliora, whose emphasis on "survivalism" precludes any such exploration of sexuality in *Thirteen Cents* and condemns its exploration in the subsequent novel: "Duiker's transition from survivalism as the ideological propellant of homosexuality in *Thirteen Cents* to its glamorisation in *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* incites a perception of his narratives as literary sabotage of Africa's moral sanity, historical memory and cultural development."⁹ The notion of homosexuality as "un-African" implicit in Ezeliora's view continues to undergird often violent repression of any sexual practice perceived as nonheteronormative in South Africa and on the African continent.¹⁰

Thirteen Cents is as much about Azure's interrogation and exploration of the temporal and spacial dimensions of his urban world as it is about the social and sexual dimensions. In the final third of the novel Azure makes two ascents up Table Mountain, which rises out of the heart of Cape Town and towers above it. These episodes are marked by insistent

movement up and out of the cityscape and again down and into its innards as Azure tries to overcome the debilitating forces that engulf and consume him on the streets. Not only does his quest for a life of belonging beyond these destructive forces allow him to literally rise above them, but it also helps him imagine, through intensely sensory, hyperrealist¹¹ dream sequences, a different genealogy and a new city as the old is being destroyed before his very eyes.

On the mountain he experiences intense sensations and fantastical images, and his graphic and primordial dreams are shot through with elements of his real life. In an extended dream (the whole of chapter 17) he finds Saartjie, “a woman who looks like she lived a very long time ago” (139), whose name and figure invoke the ancestral Southern African Khoisan woman Saartjie (Sarah) Baartman.¹² She is at times maternal and protective of him, defending him against the omnipotent and diabolical T-rex, whom she claims is his father and her husband. She in turn is daughter to the terrifying Mantis who eats the sun, and she also claims Azure is the son of the sun. This private mythology and chain of being the boy dreams up is intermingled with his real past—T-rex is a figure from popular film culture and also a transmogrification of Gerald. In his vision Azure creates a new genealogy for himself to restore his dead mother and father. The imagined alternative is one deeply entangled with real history and African folklore, but also marked by contradiction, terror, and destruction, as is his real life. The destruction of the evil Gerald in the dream is paralleled by the destruction of the real

Gerald when Azure descends the mountain. The novel ends on an apocalyptic note; Azure, once again on top of the mountain, either imagines he sees or actually sees a giant explosion in the sky and fire falling to earth, and a tsunami sweeping away the city below. The ending, on the surface, is one of destruction and negation. But the mayhem also holds a moment of reassurance for both Azure and the reader: “I *know* what fear is . . . I have seen the centre of darkness . . . I *know* his secrets” (my emphases). The young boy has come through the apocalypse, and has attained greater self-knowledge and knowledge about his world. Azure’s final assertion, “My mother is dead. My father is dead,” is no longer merely an ever-present refrain; it is now also an acknowledged fact that the boy begins to grasp. Still completely alone, but with clarity of mind, he can, the ending suggests, begin again on the clean slate emerging beneath his feet.

* * *

Sello Duiker’s life (1974–2005) straddled the dying days of apartheid and the post-1994 period. He was born in the iconic Johannesburg black township of Soweto, the place synonymous with the student revolts of 1976 that helped break apartheid’s stranglehold on the country. His father and mother were part of the growing black middle class and both had degrees. His father’s job with an international company relocated the family to England for a while.¹³ Duiker credits his mother, an avid reader, with sparking his interest in books.¹⁴ His parents of course wanted their firstborn to be well educated, sending him to a reputable Roman Catholic

school in a neighboring “coloured” area. “It was at [this] time,” he says, “[that] I was becoming aware of my race. I discovered that in the coloured community there was a lot of politics around hair, the smoothness and the colour.”¹⁵ As a schoolboy in his teens in the equally turbulent 1980s in Soweto he says he was “witnessing necklacing [and] kangaroo courts.”¹⁶ Duiker, like all South Africans, lived with the legacy of violence resulting from more than three and a half centuries of colonial and apartheid domination and divide-and-rule.

After school Duiker traveled for two years, first to the United States and then to Europe, working for a while as a dishwasher in Paris and also on a farm in France, and it was during this time that he started writing longer pieces of prose.¹⁷ In Paris he visited many art exhibitions and, he says, was struck by the *Made in Heaven* exhibition of American artist Jeff Koons, in which explicit and graphic images blurred the borders between art and pornography.¹⁸ When he returned home in 1995 he started a degree in journalism at Rhodes University in the Eastern Cape, which he felt would enable him to explore his desire to write. It was during his years as a student at Rhodes that he became interested in the lives of children living on the streets and started writing full-length fiction seriously. He tried but was unsuccessful at getting a manuscript published.¹⁹

He then moved to Cape Town in 1998, where he studied copywriting. During his two-year stay in the city he continued to explore his curiosity about street children, living, by chance Duiker says, with them for three and a half weeks

when he was asked to help find a boy who went missing.²⁰ As a result of this long absence from his studies he was expelled from his college and in fact institutionalized in a psychiatric institution for two months. On his release he wrote the first draft of *Thirteen Cents* in less than two months.²¹ The experience of living on the streets undoubtedly helped him capture street life in Cape Town with impressive verisimilitude—a hallmark of the novel which, like the work of Zimbabwean writer Dambudzo Marachera, shocks and provokes. At the same time he was working on the manuscript of *The Quiet Violence of Dreams*, which had already been accepted by Kwela Books but which his editor there, Annari van der Merwe, insisted he revise.²² He returned to Johannesburg, where he completed *Thirteen Cents* and took up work as a freelance journalist and advertising copywriter, and also as a scriptwriter for the popular television soap operas *Backstage* and *Isidingo*.

While his life straddles the apartheid and postapartheid eras, Duiker's work has been firmly located by literary scholars as part of the postapartheid period,²³ dated often as starting in 1994 or even a bit earlier, in 1990, with the release of Nelson Mandela from prison. Much recent scholarship about South African letters has focused on attempts to characterize postapartheid society, literature, and culture and question what is distinctive in comparison to life, literature, and culture under apartheid. For Michael Chapman, this period of transition is marked by "anxieties and confusions about matters of identity in relation to massive socio-political change."²⁴

Seminal to the literary debate have been the claims by writer and critic Njabulo S. Ndebele, whose essay “The Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Some New Writings in South Africa,” first published in 1986, led the charge against black protest writing under apartheid, which he labeled “spectacular,” with writers taking their cue from the “visible symbols of the overwhelmingly oppressive South African formation.”²⁵ He characterized fiction by black South African writers as follows:

The spectacular documents; it indicts implicitly; it is demonstrative, preferring exteriority to interiority; it keeps the larger issues of society in our minds, obliterating the details; it provokes identification through recognition and feeling rather than through observation and analytical thought; it calls for emotion rather than conviction; it establishes a vast sense of presence without offering intimate knowledge.²⁶

Postapartheid literature moves away from the exterior binaries and the protesting voice to a preoccupation with the inner, the intimate, the individual, and the intermingled ordinary. It is, Andries Oliphant argues, a move away from “instrumentality” to “explore the new freedoms promised by the transition.”²⁷ A new generation of novelists like Phaswane Mpe and Sello Duiker took up this newfound freedom and were seen as creative pioneers at the beginning of the new century, not only because of the focus of their fiction on contradictory entanglement of new and old, but also because they were seen to be “more formally innovative.”²⁸

In an attempt to characterize South African writing, both pre- and post-1994, David Attwell discusses the uneasy yet pervasive distinction often made between white writing and black writing, particularly under apartheid, and concludes that “tension, instability, and negotiation across a historical and cross-cultural divide permeate South African writing.”²⁹ Duiker, speaking in interviews about his literary influences, points to a range of Southern African and international writers across lines of color and gives reasons for these identifications that have more often than not to do with questions of tension and instability. Bessie Head looms large in this regard, and Duiker says of her: “Bessie Head . . . [is] a ‘coloured’ South African writer. She was born from a white woman and rejected by her . . . by her own mother. Her strong identity as a ‘coloured’ woman is reflected in her writing.”³⁰ He states that Head’s novel *A Question of Power* inspired him to become a writer because “[h]ere is this person who was rejected by her community and took refuge wherever she could. I related to that, to her trying to find her feet.”³¹ Other literary works Duiker claims were important in shaping him as a youngster were Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road*, Ayi Kwei Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, and the iconoclastic work of Dambudzo Marechera.³² Duiker’s *Azure* is remarkably similar to Okri’s exceptional spirit child Azaro in *The Famished Road* (1991), and the Nigerian’s negotiation of realist and surrealist styles clearly inspired the young South African. Sam Raditlhalo also suggests that *Azure/Blue* alludes to Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970).

Duiker epitomizes a new generation of South African writers who succeed more easily in creatively transgressing the old black/white divide that Attwell and others identify and attempt to bridge. The writers he names as making their mark range widely, asserting a cosmopolitanism and non-racialism rather than privileging merely the racial, nationalist, or Pan-Africanist. During Duiker's years of travel immediately after school he says he discovered the works of J. M. Coetzee, Breyten Breytenbach, and Doris Lessing. Duiker's work also invites wide-ranging comparison. There are striking similarities between Azure and Michael K, the protagonist of Coetzee's *The Life and Times of Michael K* (1983). A comparative study of the two novels would cut across the racial writing divide, as would, for example, a comparative study of a string of South African boy bildungsromans, from Es'kia Mphahlele's *Down Second Avenue* (1959) to Mark Behr's *The Smell of Apples* (1995), to *Thirteen Cents* and Michiel Heyns's *The Children's Day* (2002). A comparison between *Thirteen Cents* and Patricia Schonstein's *Skyline*, published in the same year as Duiker's novel, about a young girl's encounter with urban dwellers in Long Street, Cape Town, could invite a gendered analysis of postapartheid relations in the inner city. Such comparative, thematic analyses might go some way toward filling the gap identified by Rita Barnard: "There are, to date, surprisingly few critical works . . . that consider South African literature in a broad thematic way, and there are fewer still without the modifiers 'black' or 'white' inserted in the title."³³ Duiker's life, vision, and work certainly

invite such nonracial explorations without diminishing the way questions of race still affect our lives.

Sello Duiker took his own life in January 2005, just about a month after his friend and fellow writer Phaswane Mpe had died.³⁴ A few days before Duiker's death, van der Merwe had sent him her edited version of *The Hidden Star* through the post, but it failed to reach him; his last novel ends by realizing the quest his first protagonist Azure had begun and fleetingly glimpsed from the top of the mountain: "home is never far away when you believe in it" (233).

A Note on K. Sello Duiker's Use of Language

Andries Oliphant outlines the effects of colonial and apartheid rule and ideology in South Africa on the domain of literature:

Linguistically, Apartheid crystallised the colonial imperatives of segregation and white supremacy into rigid ethnic divisions between English and Afrikaans, on the one hand, as well as between these languages and the indigenous languages, on the other. This, as Msimang (1996:51) states, produced three distinct literary systems consisting of the two literatures in English and Afrikaans, separated from each other and placed at the apex and centre of the system, and the nine literatures in the African languages, located at the periphery and below English and Afrikaans.³⁵

This separation and hierarchy of South African literature along language lines under apartheid begins to be challenged,

to a certain extent, in the post-1994 period. Writers still choose one of the numerous languages used in South Africa as the language of their text (English, Afrikaans, isiZulu, and isiXhosa as the main ones), but there is now a greater mixing of languages, particularly in dialogue, in many creative works. Duiker continues to write in a tradition of Anglophone African writers, epitomized by Chinua Achebe, who choose to write in English rather than in an African language but at the same time make English serve their local and particular creative purpose. Nationally, Duiker follows in the South African novel tradition of writers like Peter Abrahams, Es'kia Mphahlele, Nadine Gordimer, Richard Rive, Alex La Guma, and J. M. Coetzee. Like these writers, Duiker inflects Standard South African English with other languages; in *Thirteen Cents* he combines English with regional dialect prevalent in the Cape that mixes English and Afrikaans with Sotho and Xhosa names and words in the narrative. Duiker can be seen as continuing the modern novel tradition in English, as Es'kia Mphahlele sees it, initiated by Peter Abrahams:

Peter Abrahams . . . had become acquainted with the Negro authors of the Harlem Renaissance in the New York of the 1920s and the new consciousness that was to create a new kind of writing by Blacks. It was a re-discovery of an identity that echoed their African origins. Theirs was a style that captured the immediacy of an experience with vivid and concrete imagery, in all its harshness, in all its resonance of the fact of Black survival.³⁶

Yet Duiker goes much further than any of these writers, crossing three conventional boundaries of fictional representation—he graphically depicts sex between child and adult, he does so specifically in relation to homosexual acts, and he uses expletives and the language of insult in a sustained manner that goes beyond merely inflecting the prose with local color.³⁷ Dehumanizing language is a violent assault on the human spirit, and Duiker attempts to capture this onslaught and resistance to it in authentic detail. He says: “I don’t go out intentionally to shock. A lot of what I said could have been toned down. But violence is so much a part of our culture that if I had toned it down it wouldn’t have been authentic.”³⁸

Unlike Mark Behr, for example, a South African novelist resident in the United States, who in his recent fiction *Kings of the Water* (2009) generates simultaneous translations of Afrikaans phrases within the text and a glossary of terms for his international readership, Duiker writes *Thirteen Cents* in the first instance for a younger, local audience, assuming his readers are familiar with the non-English terms. The absence of authorial mediation between the language of the story and readers also suggests Duiker’s desire to construct an uncompromising, true-to-life account of a harsh reality. It gives his fiction a contemporary and naturalistic quality, much like the linguistic code-switching and cacophony of languages that one finds in popular South African TV soap operas and recent South African film.

The glossary that follows is intended to help readers decode the meaning and nuances of certain key terms in the novel not in English.

Glossary

babelas (isiZulu, slang)—hungover

ba batla borotho (Sesotho)—they want bread

baksheesh (Persian, slang)—tips and bribes

bergies (Afrikaans, slang)—literally mountain people; homeless people who take shelter on the slopes of Table Mountain or on Cape Town city streets

braai (Afrikaans)—cookout, barbecue

buttons (informal)—Mandrax, Quaaludes

cherrie (Afrikaans, slang)—young woman or girlfriend

daai glad hare (Afrikaans)—that smooth hair

dankie (Afrikaans)—thank you

deurmekaar (Afrikaans)—crazy

eish (slang)—oh dear

gemors (Afrikaans)—a mess, confusion

hey voetsek (Afrikaans)—fuck off

julle fokken (Afrikaans)—your fucking

kaffir (derogatory)—native, black man/woman

kak (Afrikaans)—shit

kwaito (derived from Afrikaans)—South African mix of township hip hop, reggae, house music

laaitie (Afrikaans, slang)—young boy

los hom (Afrikaans)—let him go, leave him alone

maar (Afrikaans)—but

mageu (isiZulu)—traditional drink made from fermented maize

mahala (South African slang)—for free, free of charge

makwerekwere (isiXhosa, derogatory)—foreigners, outsiders, non-South Africans

mannetjies (Afrikaans)—little men

meisietjie (Afrikaans)—girl

mense (Afrikaans)—people

mnqusho (isiXhosa)—traditional meal of hominy-like samp (dried corn kernels that are soaked and coarsely pounded; generally cooked with beans)

moegoe (Afrikaans slang)—dope, fool, idiot

moer (Afrikaans, threatening)—to beat up; to fuck up

moffie (Afrikaans, derogatory)—faggot

naai (Afrikaans, slang)—one of many words for having sex; screw, poke

ouens (Afrikaans)—guys

oupa (Afrikaans)—grandfather

outie (Afrikaans, slang)—wiseguy

Pagad mense—*PAGAD*—People against Gangsterism and
Drugs, Islamic vigilante group in Cape Town

phuzza-face (isiZulu, slang)—an alcoholic

piel (Afrikaans, slang)—dick, penis

poes (Afrikaans, derogatory)—cunt

skyf (Afrikaans)—cigarette, puff, joint

spaza (slang)—small convenience store in township or
rural area

stop / zol / pilletjie (Afrikaans slang)—a joint

suiġ (Afrikaans)—suck

thula (isiZulu)—quiet or hush

Vaalie mense (Afrikaans slang)—(white) people from the old
Transvaal province

veldskoene—(Afrikaans) usually handmade soft shoes made from
untanned leather, field shoes

wena—(isiXhosa) you

windgat—(Afrikaans) windbag, someone who talks and boasts
too much

yessus—from Jesus, meaning damn

voetsek—fuck

Notes

1. K. Sello Duiker, "One Breezy Night Late in November," first published in *Words Gone Two Soon: A Tribute to Phaswane Mpe and K. Sello Duiker*, edited by Mbulelo Vizikhungo Mzamane (Pretoria: Umgangatho, 2005), 62, and reprinted with the kind permission of the Duiker family.

2. Samuelson, "Crossing Borders with Words," 199.

3. A number of scholars, and Duiker himself, use lowercase letters when citing the title of this novel, the form given on the cover of the David Philip publication. Others, myself included, have chosen to standardize the title using conventional capitalization.

4. In a letter to Mories Römken, quoted in Annari van der Merwe's "Tribute" in Mzamane, *Words Gone Two Soon*, 12–13.

5. For *Thirteen Cents* Duiker won the 2001 Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best First Book in the Africa Region. For *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* he was awarded the 2001 Herman Charles Bosman Prize.

6. Quoted in van der Merwe, "Tribute," 12.

7. For more on Duiker's nonracialism, see Shaun Viljoen's "Non-Racialism Remains a Fiction."

8. "Interview with Victor Lackay," in Mzamane, *Words Gone Two Soon*, 20.

9. Ezeliora, "The Novels of K. Sello Duiker and Phaswane Mpe," in Mzamane, *Words Gone Two Soon*, 173.

10. For arguments that counter the homogenizing and essentialist view that certain sexualities are "un-African" see various chapters in *African Sexualities: A Reader*, edited by Sylvia Tamale.

11. I use the term "hyperrealist" to describe a narrative style that deploys graphic, extraordinary, and gritty language, situations, and imagery in sustained ways to represent and comment on a particular reality.

12. Saartjie Baartman was taken from Cape Town to Europe in 1807 and exhibited in Britain and France as the "Hottentot

Venus,” a sexual and racial exotic because of the size and shape of her buttocks. Her remains were returned to South Africa in 2006. Many scholars see Baartman’s story as exemplifying colonial fascination with the African woman as the sexualized exotic.

13. Duiker, “‘The Last Word’: Sello Duiker,” in Mzamane, *Words Gone Two Soon*, 27.

14. *Ibid.*, 28.

15. “Interview with Bafana Khumalo,” in Mzamane, *Words Gone Two Soon*, 22.

16. “Interview with Victor Lackay,” 19.

17. Duiker, “‘The Last Word’: Sello Duiker,” 27.

18. Interview by Mikkel Simonsen, in Simonsen, “Realising the Gift,” 6.

19. “Interview with Bafana Khumalo,” 23.

20. “Interview with Victor Lackay,” 20.

21. Duiker, “‘The Last Word’: Sello Duiker,” 28.

22. Van der Merwe, “Tribute,” 6. Van der Merwe played a seminal role in Duiker’s life as a writer, becoming a friend and a champion of Duiker’s work and taking on responsibility for editing his last novel for publication after his death.

23. The term “postapartheid” is widely used to talk about South African literature after 1990, or 1994. Reservations about the appropriateness of the term stem from the fact that while racial discrimination ceased to have any legal basis post-1994 and especially post-1996 (when the new “nonracial” South African constitution was installed), many of the social features of life under apartheid—the encampment of black people in locations in periurban areas, the widespread poverty and unemployment among black people, a dysfunctional school system in black areas—persist to the present. In addition, as Rita Barnard claims about the geographies of South African cities after apartheid, “old divisions are now articulated and justified in new terms” (*Apartheid and Beyond*, 67). An example of this is the manner in which the rapid gentrification of the inner Cape Town has made it accessible for the wealthier, mainly white populace and forced

out and kept out the poorer, mainly nonwhite citizens who were removed from their city homes by apartheid legislation.

24. Chapman, *Southern African Literatures*, xiv.

25. Ndebele, "The Rediscovery of the Ordinary," 31.

26. *Ibid.*, 41.

27. Oliphant, "A Changing Topography," 236.

28. Cornwell, Klopper, and MacKenzie, *The Columbia Guide to South African Literature in English since 1945*, 32.

29. Attwell, *Rewriting Modernity*, 16.

30. "Interview with Victor Lackay," 21.

31. "Interview with Bafana Khumalo," 23.

32. Duiker, "'The Last Word': Sello Duiker," 27; interview by Simonsen, 8.

33. Barnard, *Apartheid and Beyond*, 4.

34. In a tribute to Duiker, Sam Raditlhalo gives more speculative detail about the death: "Duiker, who suffered from bipolar affective disorder, committed suicide in a state of depression he attributed to his mood-stabilising medication, which he felt was 'taking too great a toll on his artistic creativity and joie de vivre' (van der Merwe, 2005). He may have died by his own hand, but there is no doubt that what killed him was a potentially lethal illness that is stigmatised, little understood and often poorly managed." Raditlhalo, "'The Travelling Salesman,'" 96.

35. Oliphant, "A Changing Topography," 231.

36. Mphahlele, *Es'kia Continued*, 36.

37. A comparison with the language of the gangster in short stories by Richard Rive, such as "Dagga-smoker's Dream" or "Rain," written in the 1950s, will reveal the extent to which Duiker goes to capture authenticity rather than local color.

38. Interview by Simonsen, 11.

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