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# Too White to be Coloured too Coloured to be Black: On the search for home and meaning

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## Introduction

*Too white to be Coloured, Too Coloured to be Black* is a dazzling hybrid of memoir, commentary, first-hand observation, and analysis, encapsulating defining moments of contemporary South African history and society. As a photographer, journalist, academic, and columnist, the author forces a conversation between the present and the past. He illustrates the extent to which the past has influenced the present. Such a conversation is important for a country riddled with injustices. The coloured question has received little attention from South African historiography. It is a continuation of racial discrimination beyond liberation. In exposing the details of his life, Lagardien provides a taunt indictment of South Africa's politics of race and discrimination. Throughout the book, he often pauses to reflect on his own failures and shortcomings in search of freedom. He has always been trying to fill the emptiness of displacement and meaninglessness. Tortured by psychological and physical violence and struggles with his coloured white skin and green eyes, he drifts away from the ties that bind one to family, faith, identity, and community toward displacement. Eventually, Lagardien accepted his own helplessness and lack of purpose without surrendering responsibility for his personal choices.

## Chapters

In chapter 1, the author tries to make sense of memoir writing. He was labouring under the impression that writing a memoir was simply a case of ‘you have nothing worthy to talk about, so talk about yourself.’ Lagardien thought his sentiments would find better expression in a memoir, without blowing his own trumpet. Memoirs of Eric Hobsbawm, Mohamad Mahathir, and autobiographies of Jean-Paul Sartre and Arthur Koestler *Arrow in the Blue and the Invisible Writing* served as a source of inspiration. The author takes the reader through his preferred approach to memoir writing. He contends that he may not be an interesting person, but he had lived in interesting times. He expressed misgivings about the passage by Tolstoy in *The Cossacks*: “And he went on talking about himself, not realising that this was not as interesting to others as it was to him”.

This more or less sums up Lagardien’s approach. This book is a memoir, it is not entirely about him, it is about the times he lived in, as well as his relationship with these times. It draws on the past to understand the present and determine future possibilities. In some ways the author feels that he lives in a country that seems alien to him after being away for 14 years. He spent most of these years at the London School of Economics, the World Bank, University of Wales, Aberystwyth, and the Universities in the Carolinas in the USA. Upon his return to South Africa, Lagardien faced challenges of diverse magnitudes. He navigated the injustices of the apartheid regime. He also dealt with the devastating effects of the Covid-19 pandemic that compelled him to halt his book project. He contends that the year 2021 marked the crossing of the moral threshold: an event from which there is no return, no redemption, and even less forgiveness. Guilt and innocence, accountability, and the vague sense of humility have traded places with avarice, greed, senses of exceptionalism and purity, and threats against non-Africans. The author expresses his intention to provide an objective account of his lived experiences.

In chapter 9, the author details his experiences with photography. In July 2021, as Lagardien was sitting in his car outside La Penitence market in Georgetown, Washington, a steaming hot, tropical city with runnels of effluent between buildings, along streets, and across public spaces. The place was filthy. It resembled a gem-infested swamp where its inhabitants aspired to leave someday. Most buildings were dilapidated and abandoned. There is a street in Georgetown named after Nelson Mandela. A roadside vendor described it as a rubbish dump called Mandela. One of the scenes captured by the author was a cow, a dog, a long-legged bird, and a man foraging for food side by side on the same mound of smouldering garbage. That speaks to the deplorable socioeconomic conditions under

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which people live in Georgetown. Photography in some instances was not a pleasant experience for Lagardien. Taking pictures of poor people makes no difference to their lives. The photograph of Ernesto Alfabeto Nhamuave on his knees and burning to death after being beaten and stabbed in 2015 did not prevent recurrent xenophobic attacks and other related intolerances in South Africa. Photographs of the horrors of the First World War (“the war to end all wars”) failed to prevent the return to slaughter in the Second World War. Photographs of severed limbs and spilled guts, cracked craniums with brain matter seeping from them, failed to prevent US-led wars against the people of Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan, between Iraq and Iran, as well as among the people of Sudan. The author continues to argue that photographs of the horrors of war failed to stop the dismemberment and bombing of former Yugoslavia and genocide in Rwanda. However, photographs form an integral part of capturing moments in history.

Chapter 15 details how he experienced political violence in South Africa. Toward the end of 1987, the country was on the verge of a civil war. The economy was plummeting. Sporadic violence was spreading across the country. Lagardien was friends with Chris Hani. They shared the same date of birth and would regularly meet up for lunch. Hani described the political tension in the country as a “low-intensity warfare” waged against the forces of democracy. Inkatha received support from the National Party Government. The Inkathagate scandal of 1991 concluded that the National Party Government funded Inkatha rallies. In April 1993, Chris Hani was shot and killed. To this day, the motive behind his assassination remains a mystery. Covering stories of political violence in the country was a traumatic experience for Lagardien. Conflict between Inkatha and the ANC was brutal. David Ottaway, a friend and colleague of the author, described it as a “slaughter”. The writer could not stop the horrors and nightmares of what he had witnessed during the 1980s. He had images of people engulfed in flames. Among the photographs he managed to rescue and digitise, was one from somewhere in the north of the country where a woman had been burnt to death by a mob, dancing and singing liberation songs. In the last chapter, the author shares his perspectives about the future of South Africa. He does not believe that progressive change is possible. He thinks the current leadership of the ruling party will move on or die someday. The author decided to leave the predictions of South Africa’s future to economists, big-tent pastors and fortune tellers. On the contrary, the author made a few bold statements about the future of this country.

## Conclusion

The author wrote the book with brutal honesty and humility through the lens of a green-eyed coloured in a country where he never belonged. The book succeeds in giving us a powerful and searing portrait of the annihilating consequences of race and identity politics. Interestingly enough, the book courses through the apartheid era and the moral decay of racial essentialism in present-day South Africa.