BOOK REVIEWS

Going Dutch

Author: Obie Oberholzer
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Introduction

It was at the Grahamstown Art Festival in 1995 that I first encountered Obie Oberholzer's photography. It was a solo exhibition which left me in awe—the extra-large colourful images were exquisitely printed and complemented his subject matter. This was during the analogue era, and I found out that the superior clarity and colour saturation were enhanced by Oberholzer's use of Agfa 50 ISO Ultra film and a medium format Pentax 6x7 SLR camera. A year later, I left psychology to become a full-time photographer.[1] One of our photographic business's first investments was copying Obie Oberholzer by buying a similar Pentax and using Agfa Ultra for landscape work.

At a striking 300 x 500 mm (unfolded), 444 pages and weighing 3.7kg, Obie Oberholzer's *Going Dutch* (2024) is as physically imposing as it is conceptually ambitious—a fitting 16th addition to his acclaimed corpus of coffee table pictorial books. The work juxtaposes nine South African towns (among them Utrecht, Haarlem and Rotterdam) with their Dutch namesakes, contrasting landscapes, architectures, and communities to interrogate colonial histories embedded in shared nomenclature and divergent modern identities. Oberholzer, former professor and head of photography at Rhodes University, weaves personal anecdotes into this visual dialogue, probing the fraught cultural and historical ties between

[1] As an Afrikaner, like Oberholzer, raised on a farm, I share his political awakening through Freirean ***conscientização*** and the liminality of 'insider-outsiders'. My path diverges: psychology gave way to photography (1996–2013) before I returned to therapy, integrating artistic sensibilities. This duality—of vocation and vision—shapes my perspective as reader-viewer of ***Going Dutch***'s interplay of image and text, its excavation of identity, memory and belonging's fragile tessellations.

South Africa and the Netherlands. Yet, *Going Dutch* transcends mere documentation: its physical heft mirrors the weight of history it interrogates, transforming colonial guilt into a tactile reckoning. The book's materiality—its 3.7 kg mass and sprawling pages—becomes a metaphor for the burden of colonial legacies and Oberholzer's sublimated 'white guilt', redirected through his lens into a collective challenge. Readers must physically grapple with its scale, the act of lifting its pages paralleling the emotional labour of unpacking colonialism's afterlife. Here, sublimation is not just psychological, but embodied, as the book's imposing form forces engagement with unresolved tensions, echoing Oberholzer's journey from complicity to generative critique. Beyond passive consumption, *Going Dutch* demands active accountability, its imagery and infrastructure alike weaponised against historical erasure.

Analysis and critique

Oberholzer's *Going Dutch* opens with unflinching introspection, grounding its critique of colonialism in the author's formative experiences under Afrikaner nationalism. His recollections of a childhood education steeped in mythic historiography—where divine providence and colonial heroism coalesced into a distorted origin story—reveal the epistemic violence of insular nationalism. His teacher's punctuation of the start of South Africa's history *…in the very beginning of absolutely everything there was just God and that Jan van Riebeeck, when he landed in the Cape in 1652, was the first person in South Africa…"* and the directive to pray for "*our Nationalist Government, the Afrikaner nation and its heritage* (p. 18) underscores how apartheid-era pedagogy weaponised spirituality to sanctify racial hierarchy. By foregrounding this upbringing, Oberholzer positions his work as both a product of, and rebellion against the ideological frameworks that shaped him, creating a dialectical tension between inherited identity and ethical reckoning.

Central to this reckoning is Oberholzer's conceptualisation of South Africa as a "*happysadland*"—a term crystallising the nation's unresolved contradictions. The author's photography oscillates between the sublime beauty of its landscapes and the visceral decay of postcolonial disillusionment, framing democracy not as a triumphant endpoint, but as an ongoing negotiation between aspiration and historical inertia. This duality is amplified through the author's technical mastery: images meticulously constructed to mimic serendipitous snapshots, saturated colours that hyperbolise reality and maximal depth of field that "reveals everything in full technicolour".[2] Such aesthetic choices

[2] This stands in stark contrast to the style of another acclaimed South African photographer, Guy Tillim, whose book *Departure* features black-and-white images often characterised by deliberate soft focus.

transform photography into a metaphor for accountability—a refusal to look away from the granular complexities of post-apartheid society. As a master-craftsman, Oberholzer can craft photographs that *appear* casual, spontaneous, or accidentally meaningful—as if they were captured in a fleeting, unplanned moment—while in reality, they are meticulously composed, lit, and edited.

This deliberate illusion of spontaneity serves multiple purposes: it cultivates aesthetic authenticity by avoiding overt staging, creating relatable immediacy akin to stumbling upon a raw, candid moment; it critically subverts expectations by juxtaposing the 'snapshot' aesthetics ordinariness with weighty historical themes, rendering complex critiques of power disarmingly accessible; it showcases technical mastery, where Oberholzer's jazz-like balance of chaos and control—honed through graphic design training and German photography studies—masks meticulous craft behind apparent effortlessness; and it injects ethical ambiguity, blurring lines between observer and participant to interrogate photography's subjectivity, mirroring Oberholzer's conflicted role as a privileged Afrikaner chronicling marginalised communities.

The book's titular exploration of Dutch-South African parallels transcends mere geographic comparison, instead excavating colonialism's *Vergangenheit*—a German term denoting a past that persists as an unresolved spectre. Unlike the English 'past', which implies chronological distance, *Vergangenheit* evokes a legacy demanding active ethical engagement, akin to Germany's *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (reckoning with historical guilt). Oberholzer materialises this concept through stark juxtapositions: Rotterdam, South Africa—a marginalised rural enclave—against Rotterdam, Netherlands, a gleaming European port; derelict Boer homesteads, versus pristine Dutch towns. These contrasts expose colonialism's asymmetric afterlife: the metropole's prosperity built on extracted wealth, the colony inheriting infrastructural debris and systemic rot. The book's physical heft (3.7 kg) literalizes this burden, insisting that history cannot be archived, but must be carried.

This thematic weight is counterbalanced by Oberholzer's irreverent, deeply personal narrative voice. Rejecting conventional captions, the author employs stream-of-consciousness commentary that intertwines irony, self-deprecation, and existential musing. A photograph of a crumbling Ermelo swimming pool is annotated with, *"This is the once popular municipal swimming pool…Now it's a stinking cesspool of floating turds, broken bottles and fallen debris, abandoned, and left to vandals and vagrants. My eyes are too dry for tears, as I stand with sadness, with thoughts of what has become of our liberation party"* (p. 215),

merging documentary observation with visceral indictment of post-apartheid governance. Similarly, Oberholzer's meta-reflections on photography— *"I am a window peeper, a toucher of reflections, a watcher, an outsider"* (p. 59)—foreground the medium's dual insider-outsider role. This narrative approach mirrors Oberholzer's photographic technique of "subtraction": paring chaotic scenes to their evocative essence, using absence to amplify the viewer's complicity in constructing meaning.

Autobiography permeates every frame. Oberholzer's confessed 'white guilt' *"I am still ashamed of my privileged white past, sorry for the poor Pedi man and his peoples, and that in the historic past the Boers and the British stole his land."* (p. 364)

"This damned Apartheid with its racial humiliation was what I lived through as a boy, at school and at university, only briefly rebelling against it. Till the end of my days, it will remain a dark tattoo in my head, a burden that has dispersed over the years but still persists." (p. 365)—transforms the work into a sublimation of complicity. Through gritty, yet empathetic portraits of marginalised subjects, Oberholzer channels guilt into a reparative act, elevating those 'historically erased' into focal points of dignity. A 72-year-old Lettie Groeners, photographed in a home dwarfed by the value of his camera, *"I am cool with a camera while there's a shame in my head. Here I am, momentarily, without invitation in Berg Street. My cameras are worth a lot more than her house and the food she buys in a year."* (p. 69). The author becomes both subject and mirror, reflecting the artist's uneasy position as privileged chronicler. Critics might question whether such gestures transcend symbolic atonement, however, Oberholzer pre-empts cynicism by embedding self-critique within the work itself, acknowledging photography's limitations as a tool for justice.

Oberholzer's persona—a blend of irreverence and rigor—mirrors the author's subject matter. Former students recount his dual nature: a mentor who hosted raucous parties, yet delivered piercing critiques. His self-deprecating anecdotes—like being demoted after a "debauched" celebration (p. 233)—underscore a life lived at the intersection of chaos and discipline.

This duality permeates *Going Dutch*. Images of Dutch precision clash with South African entropy; personal nostalgia collides with postcolonial critique. Oberholzer embraces these contradictions, framing them as inherent to the Afrikaner identity—a people simultaneously rooted in Africa and estranged from it.

The book's pedagogical potency lies in its interdisciplinary fusion of visual art, memoir, and historiography. Oberholzer's juxtapositions—e.g., Alkmaar's Dutch Reformed Church

pulpit cloth embroidered with *"Luister na My, my volk"* ("Listen to Me, my people") against Afrikaner nationalism's messianic complex (p. 325)—invite analysis of how iconography sustains collective memory. Similarly, the author's focus on decaying infrastructure (abandoned schools, defunct pools) offers case studies for tracing colonialism's material afterlife. These elements align with Bradford Keeney's postmodern assertion that *"the observer is always present in that which is observed"*, a framework Oberholzer embodies through deliberate subjectivity. His work resists didacticism, instead provoking viewers to interrogate their own positionality within systems of heritage and power.

Psychologically, *Going Dutch* resonates with Erik Erikson's concept of *ego integrity versus despair*—the late-life struggle to reconcile one's past (Oberholzer was born in 1947), oscillates between ambivalent longing (*"my heart bleeds from all the feeling"* [p. 233]) and self-reproach epitomises this developmental tension. Oberholzer's photographic practice becomes a mechanism for life review, with the camera serving as both scalpel and salve: dissecting complicity while suturing fractured identities. Even his technical choices—stark horizons, isolated figures—reflect a minimalist ethos that mirrors the stripping away of defensive mythologies to confront raw historical truth.

Ultimately, Oberholzer's work defies categorisation. It is a visual *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, a sublimation of guilt into artistry, and a challenge to pedagogies that divorce emotion from historiography. By framing colonialism not as a closed chapter, but as a *Vergangenheit* haunting the present, *Going Dutch* compels viewers to grapple with a disquieting truth: that the 'post' in postcolonial and post-apartheid denotes not resolution, but perpetual negotiation.

Recommendations and conclusion

Oberholzer's ability to "*find cohesion in the haphazard beauty of the imperfect*" (p. 59) transforms history into an accessible, emotionally resonant inquiry, one that bridges the intimate terrain of personal reckoning with the collective scaffolding of memory. The author's narrative serves as a microcosm of apartheid's psychosocial machinery, exposing how myth, religion, and state-sanctioned pedagogy converged to entrench white supremacy. Through his unflinching interrogation of self and society—a process that mirrors *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* in its insistence on ethical accountability—Oberholzer models a decolonial praxis, repurposing autobiography as a tool to dismantle oppressive narratives. By centring marginalised voices and reimagining histories through inclusivity, Oberholzer's work transcends mere documentation, becoming an act of restorative justice.

This approach not only revitalises academic and artistic discourse, it also illuminates pathways for South Africa's fraught journey toward reconciliation, where identity reformation demands confronting the spectral weight of an unresolved past.

Going Dutch exemplifies the potency of interdisciplinary scholarship, challenging historians and educators to integrate visual, emotional, and experiential dimensions into pedagogy. To foster critical engagement with colonialism's legacies, educators might adopt the following strategies:

- Integrate Intersectional Sources: Pair Oberholzer's photographs with Dutch colonial archives, Indigenous Khoisan oral histories and critical essays on Afrikaner nationalism. This juxtaposition invites students to dissect colonial mythmaking while amplifying marginalised counter-narratives, such as the dissonance between missionary rhetoric and land dispossession.
- Leverage Visual Dialogues: Use Oberholzer's images—which juxtapose decaying apartheid-era infrastructure with the Netherlands' curated modernity—to spark debates on heritage preservation, identity, and the ethics of memorialisation. For instance, Oberholzer's photograph of the Ermelo municipal pool (p. 215) could prompt discussions on postcolonial governance and the material afterlife of segregation.
- Embrace Creative Methodologies: Encourage students to adopt Oberholzer's subtractive lens by crafting photo essays that link local histories (e.g., contested monuments, family archives) to global themes like displacement or cultural erasure. Such projects mirror the author's technique of revealing everything in full technicolour, challenging learners to interrogate what—and who—is excluded from dominant historical frames.
- Propose collaborations between history, art and psychology departments to study the psychosocial impact of colonial iconography (e.g. statues, street names).

These strategies empower students to deconstruct hegemonic narratives while cultivating agency to reshape discourse through creative expression. Oberholzer's work underscores the transformative potential of art and education: by confronting the fragmented echoes of *Vergangenheit*, pathways are charted to more equitable futures. Oberholzer's lens transmutes personal guilt into a mechanism of visibility, positioning *Going Dutch* as both a psychological excavation and a cultural intervention in post-apartheid reckoning. Through its interdisciplinary fusion of memoir, historiography, and visual art, the text compels readers to confront urgent questions: *Who controls historical*

memory? Whose pain is monumentalized, and whose is erased?

Ultimately, *Going Dutch* bridges rigorous historical inquiry with the visceral immediacy of humanistic photography, offering a pedagogical blueprint for grappling with South Africa's colonial past and its enduring socio-political complexities. By refusing to disentangle the personal from the political, Oberholzer invites readers to engage with history as a living, contested terrain—one where intellectual rigor and emotional resonance coexist. The author's work challenges one to recognise that reconciliation is not a destination, but a process: an ongoing dialogue between the ghosts of the past and the possibilities of repair.