

## The Interpellated Subject Lies Back: Angeline Hango's *Truthfully Yours*

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I used to think that it was much easier to hide behind a little harmless fib . . . than to bare awkwardness or incompetence, or lack of this or that. . . .

— Angeline Hango (4)

In speaking of lies, we come inevitably to the subject of truth.

— Ann Oakley (167)

### 1: Individual Destiny and Collective Identity

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL ACTS are, by their discursive nature, paradoxical and self-contradictory. On the one hand, their conditions of possibility call for, indeed call forth, a postulated subject: the autobiographer is somebody who has taken that leap of faith which enables him or her to say "I," "I am." On the other hand, having said "I am," the subject has irrevocably surrendered any claim to a unary subjectivity, for it is only a split subject who can say "I am." "I am" is not so much a self-referential affirmation of being as a modality of address: it sets up a relationship between an enunciating (or speaking) subject and the subject of enunciation. But a relationship is neither an entity nor an identity, which is why Roland Barthes contends, in a memorable line from his own autobiography, that "*in the field of the subject, there is no referent*" (56). A troubling idea that, not surprisingly, leads Barthes to thoughts of suicide. For consciousness abhors a vacuum, and self-consciousness is perhaps a particularly panicky *état d'âme*. How, then, to jump across this abyss that is the space of self-reflection?

Personal narratives and theories of subjectivity can instruct us about the many ways in which this question can be answered. "Who speaks?" Michel Foucault has taught us to ask; *his* response was to

elaborate a complex grid of *régimes du savoir*, a vast repertoire of modes of objectification and differentiation “by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects” (208). The linguist Emile Benveniste, for his part, has given over the task of subject constitution to language, and the Marxist theorist Louis Althusser has reassured us that we will always be ideology’s interpellated children: “*all ideology has the function (which defines it) of ‘constituting’ concrete individuals as subjects*” (171). Althusser understands ideology to be “the system of the ideas and representations which dominate the mind of a man [sic] or a social group”: that is, ideology is a representation of “the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (158, 162). His view of ideology as constituting the subject through the medium of representation has important implications for our understanding of the role played by narrative in naturalizing, and thus rendering invisible, the workings of power: “among the powers of the powerful is the embedding of structures of seeing, feeling, knowing, and telling — including the telling of stories — that repeat the narratives of dominance” (DuPlessis 196).

This view of subjectivity as inescapably formed through ideological intervention has been modified and expanded by theorists such as Anthony Giddens and Teresa de Lauretis, who posit a more dynamic relationship between ideology and identity, structure and agency, dominance and resistance. For the purposes of this paper, I wish to retain a modified understanding of the individual subject as pre-appointed by what Althusser calls “ideological configuration[s]” (176) yet capable of acceding to agency (Paul Smith 17) and engaging in oppositional politics (Felski 55). Such an understanding of the subject as a “site of excessive and oppositional solicitations and markings” (Gilmore 20) recognizes that while the activities of human beings are grounded and constrained, the determinants of such activities are multiple and often contradictory, and cannot be reduced to a single, overriding explanatory cause. Moreover, individuals are not only subjects of dominant signifying structures; they are also participatory agents in institutions and discourses of power, and thus potentially capable of mediating, contesting, and transforming those systems (Gagnier 10–11). Narratives — including self-narratives — are instrumental in such struggles, for if ideological interpellations happen through “*representations* by which we construct and accept values and institutions,” these interpellations can also be critiqued and resisted through the same narrative medium (DuPlessis x; emphasis added). If “what’s taught is what’s known,” to cite a

contemporary Canadian resisting subject (lang),<sup>1</sup> then one could also unlearn and teach oneself differently; as DuPlessis puts it, "One of the major powers of the muted is to think against the current" (196). Resistance, Foucault has suggested, often takes the form not of discovering who we (really) are but of refusing what we are (presumed to be), so that we can imagine and promote "new forms of subjectivity" (216).

In the critical literature on personal writing in Quebec, this interest in the dynamic interplay between subjectivity and ideology has often been articulated in terms of the ties that bind individuals to their (national) collectivity. Pierre Hébert, in an essay entitled "Pour une évolution de la littérature personnelle au Québec: L'exemple du journal intime," comments on the potential of the form to bring about a powerful integration of the personal and the collective. In personal narratives, the subject can declare "J'existe, donc nous sommes" (37): "I am, therefore *we* are."<sup>2</sup> Yvan Lamonde, in the introduction to his important bibliographical study of personal narratives in Quebec entitled *Je me souviens: La littérature personnelle au Québec (1860-1980)*, speaks of personal narratives as vehicles of individual and national self-definition. Personal writings foreground the function of memory as a bridge between self and other, and show the relationship between personal history and collective experience to be one of mutual implication: personal consciousness feeds on, and is shaped by, the experiences of the group, while one way of reflecting on the character of the group is to investigate the collectivity's experience of subjectivity. Hence some of the questions that motivate Lamonde's inquiry: "Quelle expérience collective les Québécois ont-ils fait de la subjectivité? . . . Comment une conscience historique s'est-elle profilée sur des consciences individuelles?" (15).

As Lamonde's critical project demonstrates, one means by which a collectivity can claim for itself a distinct character — on whatever grounds, be they religious, ethnic, linguistic, national, or gender specific — is to mobilize and appropriate the life histories of its members. These narratives become, in turn, cherished repositories of the collectivity's past and present experience, icons and proofs of its separate and unique identity. The other side of the autobiographical coin, of course, is that the same categories of group affiliation (religious, ethnic, linguistic, gendered, etc.) function as necessary identity boundaries within and against which individual consciousness is constructed and developed. A similar view of the reciprocal relations between subject constitution and group identity is put forth

by Françoise Van Roey-Roux in *La littérature intime du Québec*. Van Roey-Roux views personal writing as an important contributing factor to a nation's sense of itself, and as instrumental in the transmission and protection of its culture and traditions: "à travers les écrits personnels, c'est toute une société qui se dépeint et se raconte" (7). Personal narratives are like links in a chain, providing a sense of cohesion and continuity that is particularly important to a society experiencing itself as threatened and endangered: "Cette mémoire collective est aussi le principe de cohésion par excellence du groupe. . . . Ce sentiment est d'autant plus puissant que le groupe se sent plus menacé" (14). On the other side of the equation, collective memory and group identity form, inform, and complete individual experience: "C'est grâce aux souvenirs d'autrui que l'individu complète son expérience personnelle, pour se rapprocher du groupe auquel il appartient" (8).

While the harmonious integration of self and community might characterize the lives and life narratives of some subjects, others will experience the social grid — the identity structures of family, nation, class, or gender — as alienating and oppressive. What recourse do such subjects have? What self-narratives might they construct? What accepted truths might their disclosures give the lie to?

## II: Writing Aslant

In what follows, I draw on Angeline Hango's 1948 autobiography *Truthfully Yours* in order to address some of the issues involved in the mutual implication of individual consciousness and collective (or interpellated) identity. Although it is not my intention here to claim representativeness for *Truthfully Yours*, Hango's autobiography, published almost twenty years before Claire Martin's better-known account of her life during approximately the same period (Hango was born in 1909, Martin in 1914), touches on many of the sentiments and experiences recorded — albeit in a different expressive register — in *Dans un gant de fer* (1965) and *La joue droite* (1966). Van Roey-Roux argues that a defining characteristic of personal writing in Quebec is the desire to capture and pass on a cultural tradition: "Le désir de laisser un héritage culturel est une des dominantes de la littérature intime québécoise" (8). Hango's ironic narrative forces us to pause and reflect: what cultural heritage does Hango wish to bequeath to her readers?<sup>3</sup> Or, to pose the question

differently, how does she resolve her initial dilemma: "whether I am going to tell you about the life and customs of my ancestors or my life story" (77)? It is the pull and tension between these two stories (and the psychological and social forces they represent) — between the individual's life story and the collective or ancestral matrix (the grid of ideological interpellation) — that interests me here.

Hango's unnamed autobiographical persona is a subject whose experience is one of multifold marginalization. She is a French Canadian — from "Lake St. John," as she puts it (4) — writing in English, the language of the powerful minority. She is a small-town Quebecker who evokes with nostalgia the happier but now lost rural existence of her grandparents. A child of poverty (her parents having failed in their bid to enter the ranks of the middle class), she suffers humiliation in the Catholic convents to which her family cannot afford to send her but does so anyway. She is a girl-child socialized to idealize delicate femininity and matrimonial harmony, an education that ill prepares her for the realities of domestic violence and abandonment she will have to face. The extent to which Hango internalizes these fantasies is evident, for example, in the fact that although brought up by a working mother — "We could not depend on papa . . . because of his drinking . . ." (45) — Hango the adolescent and young woman often indulges in romantic daydreams in which she imagines herself vulnerable and helpless, being rescued by a dashing lover.

This mismatch, or lack of fit, between the fantasies Hango had been socialized to believe in and her lived experience produces a particular effect, which contemporary readers evidently perceived as humorous, for *Truthfully Yours* was awarded The Stephen Leacock Memorial Medal for Humour in 1949.<sup>4</sup> The humour, however, can barely mask a reality that is rather dark and painful. The reality of Hango's family life is one of abuse, fear, and homelessness. Hango writes:

A lot of my childhood recollections are unhappy. Papa drunk, in a rage, and we afraid of him. . . . Drinking made him cruel, unmanageable, loud, quarrelsome and unusually strong. I remember trembling a whole evening, . . . hidden in the corner behind the piano with maman and my sister. . . . Papa really was not safe when drunk, and he was drunk often. . . .

When drunk papa often struck maman and he would swear and push furniture around, and want to fight everybody. (25)

The playful tone with which Hango concludes this chapter — she remarks, “This proves that a woman can get used to anything from mice to men, except a drinking man” (30) — adds poignancy to the account, revealing a determination to fight vulnerability with the distancing mechanisms of humour and irony. Humour indeed remains one of her personal strategies of resistance: it allows her to exercise a certain measure of control over a life in which she initially had little, and it likely makes her story more palatable to readers who might otherwise react with the discomfort and guilt the privileged experience in the face of those outside their gates.

Hango herself offers us a suggestive image of her subject position, one that recalls Barthes’s characterization of a subversive position as that from which one views the dominant doxa “*aslant*”; to write *aslant* is to use a “voice *off*” from the margins, to suggest through interpolations (Barthes 73). At the conclusion of a chapter in which she describes, in great ethnographic detail, a French Canadian *veillée* in her grandparents’ small village, Hango reflects on her autobiographical project in the following terms:

I see that I am writing this book the way my little boy builds his shacks. . . . [H]e builds his walls downwards from the roof. . . . The more walls he puts on from the top the more slanting the roof gets. . . . [I]n the end I am afraid that the structure does not look exactly like the dream house it was going to be. I am going to have to put a beam under this roof *before it slants too much*. . . . (77; emphasis added)

The chapter is itself an exemplary illustration of Hango’s “slanted” discursive practice: although the walls of her narrative structure support the roof doxa (the “dream house” of ancestral customs), they do so in such a way as to slant/undermine the whole edifice. The nostalgic evocation of communal traditions is undermined by many markers of personal and collective alienation, not the least of which is the fact that in Hango’s account, all that survives of the ancestral language are some token phrases (*créatures, postillon, M. le Curé, la visite, des gîgues, Lait des Dames, pâtés à la viande*).

Hango’s *aslant* angle of vision is apparent from the autobiography’s opening lines. *Truthfully Yours* opens with a rather comical yet unsettling catalogue of different modalities of representation and self-representation, modalities that, in their very proliferation, attest to the precariousness of notions such as reliability, authenticity, and

truthfulness in self-disclosure. This is how Hango greets her reader: "There are the things that you want to hear yourself say, there are the things that people expect you to say, and there are the things that you wish you had said. There are the brilliant things that only come to you the next day, and there is the voice that recalls the things you should have said, if you had been truthful" (3). She then proceeds with her first confession — "I had an awful habit of saying the things I thought I should say rather than the truth" — and follows it up with a reassuring promise to her reader: "In this book, however, I intend to tell the truth, all the truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me!" (3). Her first presumably truthful disclosure is quick to come, and it concerns her reasons for lying. Lying, or "fibbing," as Hango prefers to call what she regards as an *involuntary* telling of untrue things (as opposed to purposefully lying with the intent of hurting someone or excusing oneself), is a way of compensating for the "lack of this or that," a way of wilfully forgetting the disadvantages that are one's lot and not of one's choosing, and a way of reinventing oneself: "I had always been ashamed of the place I was born in [Lake St. John], thirty-nine years ago, because in my childhood it did not compare well with the places other little girls had been born in, and I have been in competition with everybody about everything for most of my life" (4).

This is the "structure of feeling" that characterizes Hango's life, the logic that lends coherence to her tale: being a disadvantaged contender in a never-ending "competition with everybody about everything." This condition of continual strife arises out of the poor fit between the valorized scripts of her society, her own place within the social grid, and an experiential reality at odds with the validating ideological models, or *lieux communs* (Angenot 118-19), of her culture. Measured against the norms of the socially sanctioned life trajectories, her life appears marginal, deficient, failed. There are four broad areas in which such gaps are most pronounced, four ideological grids that spell out Hango's exclusion. First is the grid of class: her poor, working-class family occupies the lowest stratum in a three-tiered hierarchy, with the wealthy professional class on top. Second is the grid of national and ethnic identity, another tripartite hierarchical configuration (American, English Canadian, French Canadian), which relegates Hango to what she perceives to be the lowest rung on the social ladder.<sup>5</sup> Third is the middle-class model of "familialism and romance" (Gagnier 48) — the narrative of the happy family — from which she is excluded by being a casualty of

an impoverished family further torn apart by an alcoholic and at times abusive father. And fourth is the narrative of female bonding and solidarity: Hango's relationships with other females — including her mother, her sister, and the nuns and girls at the convents where she boards — are sources not of comfort and support but of further conflict.

And yet she prevails.

### III: Lies of Interest

These lies [of interest] are very various, and are more excusable, and less offensive, than many others.

— Amelia Opie (93)

Framing Hango's autobiography are the twin afflictions of shame and envy, born from her acute sense of the inescapable destiny to which the circumstances of her birth doom her in a class society. What Hango desires she cannot, by definition, ever have: "It seemed that everybody around me was born in Montreal or Toronto, or even New York. How I envied them! Why people always asked me where I was born, I don't know" (5). There is no escaping the collectivity's identity grid, its interpellating class code: people always ask about one's birthplace, the better to hail — or nail — one (not even rendering the name Lac St. Jean in English can redeem her). This much Hango knows: that to have been born in Lake St. John is to have been irrevocably assigned an inferior social position, which neither acquired wealth nor acquired social graces can ever correct. The few families in the village who own beautiful homes are not less pathetic for their attempt to use "means to get refinement" (5). Hango's predicament is rendered even more problematic due to her gender, for it is even less desirable for a girl to have been brought up "all over the Province of Quebec and some of the places were very small and backward. . . . I thought that a girl should be brought up in one place, unless her father was an engineer" (5). So Hango rewrites the story of her beginnings, telling "everybody that I was brought up in Quebec City" (5).

In *Illustrations of Lying, in All Its Branches* (1827), a work that probes the moral and psychological aspects of lying, Amelia Opie devotes a chapter to what she classifies as "lies of interest." She defines such lies by the disadvantaged social position of the liar: lies

of interest are told by the relatively powerless (children, servants, the poor), who do not enjoy social or financial "independence" (94). Opie finds these lies to be more excusable and less offensive than other kinds (such as lies of vanity, of fear, of convenience, of malignity, etc.) because they are committed in "self-defence" (282). Much of Hango's lying could easily fit into this category; to escape the trap of social marginalization, Hango uses what might be the only strategy of resistance readily available to a six-year-old. Philip Stratford observes a similar survival tactic in Claire Martin's autobiographical *Dans un gant de fer*, in which the young child's "defensive lying and tall-tale spinning" can be seen as "compensation for multiple frustrations, as battle tactics, as dogged contrariness and as sheer zest for invention" (vi). "Our fibbing," Hango writes (referring to herself and her younger sister, her only sibling), "began in convent life. That was the only way we could hold our own with our little girl 'fiends'. Little girls are very inquisitive and rather cruel, especially if they are well off and they sense one does not have as much as they do" (18). In her plainspoken, colloquial manner, she describes the painful expulsion from the happy innocence or blissful ignorance of childhood. In the early years, a child might be oblivious of the social conventions that define his or her position in the world; soon enough, however, if that position is an underprivileged one, he or she will come to a consciousness of deficiency and alienation. Writing from the margins of poverty, Hango rewrites the biblical story of expulsion from the Garden of Eden. In the beginning,

We played in the garden a lot. At night a nun would hold our hands till we went to sleep. They were very kind and I think we were fairly happy till we grew a little older and began to realize that there was something peculiar about us. We did not have a home, or rather our home kept changing places, and already we had been to several different convents. We became conscious of the fact that we did not have as much as other little girls and developed quite a dose of inferiority complex, and that was camouflaged by fibbing. (18-19)

In Hango's narrative, the serpent in the garden of childhood is material want and the social stigma attached to it. The most tragic consequence of this shameful fall from respectability and social acceptance, however, is the loss of a sense of dignity, self-worth, and belonging.

Hango's foregrounding of the psychological toll exacted by poverty, of the longing and envy it breeds, can be better understood in the light of another autobiographical investigation of a working-class girlhood, Carolyn Kay Steedman's *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives* (1986). Her work, part biography (her mother's) and part autobiography, part history and part theory (drawing on critical discourses ranging from Marxism to psychoanalysis), develops an idiom with which we can better appreciate narratives such as Hango's. In Steedman's autobiography, as in Hango's, the story that has to be told is an awkward one, for it is "about lives lived out on the borderlands, lives for which the central [middle-class] interpretative devices of the culture don't quite work" (5). Two central preoccupations of Steedman's text immediately resonate with Hango's. The first is what Steedman calls "the politics of envy" (7). She contends that feelings of exile and exclusion, of material and political envy, are a feature of many lives lived in poverty, and she wants this envy to be both *understood* and *validated* in political and psychological terms. She challenges the customary moral rejection of envy as an improper coveting of that to which one has no right. The poor know they have been refused entry to their "rightful place in the world" (112), and their envy is a political and psychological response to "the impossible unfairness of things" (111). Hango, too, is no stranger to feelings of resentment, which becomes more acute the more contact she has with privilege. The adult Hango reflects: "I am grateful for the education and culture I was given but I don't think that it was fair to have us attend convents that we could not really afford — convents attended by little girls of well-known parents and grandparents, with fur coats, wrist watches, dressing gowns and allowances. We had none of these and the lack of those things probably made the little girls ask questions" (19).

Steedman's second concern is to show that the experience of poverty is often also the experience of a familial situation that is incongruous with a dominant middle-class model. In her family, as in Hango's, both father and mother have been denied the respective privileges promised by a patriarchal capitalist society: the privileges of money, status, and power to the man, and the privileges of "fine clothes, a house," and marriage to a prince charming to the woman (106). In the case of Steedman's mother, she does not even succeed in securing a husband in exchange for the two children she gives him; the deal pays off only minimally, because he never marries her and

provides only inadequate child support. From this situation arises one of the most painful and compelling of Steedman's insights. Uncovering the emotional costs of poverty, Steedman identifies the layers of rejection that originate with the sense of being propertyless and dispossessed. At its most horrifying, this rejection is visited upon the children of the poor; Steedman writes of herself and her sister: "We were born, and had no choice in the matter; but we were burdens, expensive, never grateful enough. There was nothing we could do to pay back the debt of our existence" (17). "Never have children dear," she remembers her mother telling her repeatedly, "they ruin your life" (17). Steedman sees her mother's inability to love her — to properly mother — as a refusal to reproduce herself and the circumstances of her exile. Her autobiography is an attempt to heal the emotional devastation caused by the absence of maternal love by understanding the ruinous effects of poverty on her mother. Similarly, in *Truthfully Yours*, Hango confronts the knowledge of her mother's rejection of her (to which I will return), and seeks both to explain/justify such rejection and to exorcise the guilt (over the very fact of her existence) this rejection has bred in her: "maman . . . was exhausted keeping house and looking after us. . . . She had a sad life and I am afraid we were no consolation to her. But that was not our fault. We were brought up *as if* we were rich and we were not expected to do any housework" (78; emphasis added).

Hango's life narrative unfolds under the sign of a multifarious "as if": because the givens of her life appear to Hango to be both arbitrary and undesirable, her response is to wilfully fabricate an equally arbitrary — but now desirable — identity and destiny for herself. She lies to everybody, and she lies about everything: she tells her convent friends that her parents came from the United States (20) and that her rich grandparents, "physicians on both sides," have maids in the city and fancy summer houses in the country (49); she tries to convince her friends, and indeed herself, that a patched-up coat her mother produces one winter is a real fur coat (21); she subsequently tries to lie to us about other fur coats she has had, then recants, "That is a fib" (24). Dire material circumstances often force mother and daughter to lie just to get by: Hango learns to lie about her age when taking a train so she will not have to pay a fare (86), and she lies about a bogus raffle for the poor her mother devises to raise some cash (62). Hango's mother seems, indeed, to function in this autobiography as the prototype of the lying self; while Hango is critical of her mother's dishonesty (58), her account often features the mother

as a mirror in which the daughter sees herself reflected. When a train conductor tries unsuccessfully to move her mother to a second-class coach (for which she has a ticket), she insists on staying in first class and even challenges him to write to her at her New York address; Hango's comments could just as aptly serve as her own motto: "that was her story and she was going to stick to it" (87).

Her marginalization reveals to Hango the workings of interpellating discourses, making evident fissures in the founding mythologies of the social order. It is by using these cracks as openings that she will try to escape the tyranny of the grid. Lying, she strikes back.

#### iv: Lies We Tell Ourselves

[T]elling the truth is about how to put the broken bits and pieces of the heart back together again.

— bell hooks (29)

If fibbing or fabulating is her principal strategy of resistance, it leads Hango to lie both to herself and to others (her readers included). Her response to the gendered ideological construct of "the happy family" is a case in point. The reality of Hango's family life — an alcoholic and abusive father who leaves them destitute, a distant yet intrusive mother — gives the lie to an ideological script that glorifies marriage and motherhood as one of perhaps only two honourable fates open to women (the other being, in this context, convent life). At times, Hango's reaction is a complex mixture of contradictory impulses. Throughout the narrative, this ideological script, while embraced as desirable, functions mostly as a source of anxiety and obsessive worry; the fear of remaining "an old maid" rules Hango's life as a young woman, depleting her emotional resources, dictating and limiting her life options. Describing the ways and customs of her mother's generation, Hango observes that for a farm girl to be a success in life meant to be married "before she was an old maid of twenty years old" (10). By the end of the autobiography, it is evident that the ways of an urban society a generation later are not much different. Reflecting on her relationship with a man she does not love, Hango writes: "I was wondering what I would say to him if he asked me to marry him. I was so afraid of remaining an old maid that I had always thought I would marry the first one that asked me . . ." (126-27).

The last chapter of the autobiography opens with Hango's sense of shame and failure as both a classed subject and a gendered subject:

It seemed to me that females, if they were not wanting to know where I was born, were inquiring whether I was younger or older than my sister, and being older than my married sister branded me as a sure prospect for an old maid. . . .

To me, being an old maid was a disgrace. It was being unwanted, and you can be sure that all the married females shared my views on the subject, or I shared theirs. I was feeling quite depressed, but resigned. After all, I could not ask a man to marry me, that was not done yet. *Then, there was maman and her marriage.* That had not been very successful. (133-34; emphasis added)

The passage captures for us the various strands and strains of the life narrative Hango is struggling to weave into a coherent and meaningful whole. Social conventions link love and status (for a woman) to marriage, yet prohibit her from actively pursuing this goal; social norms label spinsterhood a disgrace, and in the absence of other "views," one has little choice but to share "theirs." And then, "there was maman and her marriage": challenging the logic of the social script is the lesson Hango has drawn from the example of her parents' disastrous marriage. It is a tentative challenge, however, and quickly withdrawn. When, in the autobiography's closing pages, Hango receives word from her mother about yet another attempted reconciliation, she continues to cling to the myth and its promise of social acceptance and status: "I began to dream that they would start all over again . . ." (134); she hopes her mother can "become a married woman again, a woman married to a man who did not drink any longer, with a status in life" (135).

At the surface of the narrative, Hango's characteristic response to the disillusionment and failure of her parents' marriage is one of complicity with the ideological script. Upsetting this calm surface, however, are eruptions of various kinds, ranging from bold fantasies, to disturbing disclosures, to milder ironic twists. At one extreme, Hango imagines her mother daydreaming about a future in which she and the girls will enjoy a good life living on the ten thousand dollars of insurance they would collect upon the father's death (18). In a lighter tone, Hango both confesses and undermines her complicity with the romance plot. As a schoolgirl, an adolescent, and later

a young woman, she repeatedly succumbs to the allure of romance; it is the black hole into which her troubles disappear, a charmed state that allows her, momentarily, to suspend knowledge of the many disjunctures in her life: "There was not a man around that I was not in love with" (93). In her romantic daydreaming, she imagines herself vulnerable and helpless, being rescued by a dashing lover. The adult narrator's consciousness, however, provides the autobiography with a comic and ironic tone. In one instance, a fantasy about being rescued from the burning house by the baker who delivers bread every morning is interrupted by thoughts about the messy state of her hair, revealing the origins of such fantasies in fabricated media images:

It became a little awkward at that point. I should have looked very beautiful with my hair a charming mass of curls like Ruth Roland's (heroine of the serial movie days) but the fact is that I had straight hair and furthermore it was put up in rags. I hurried to remove the rags and stuff them under my pillow. Then I went on with my dream. He would take me in his arms and carry me away. (94)

Much more unsettling evidence of the real dangers faced by girls and women is found in the numerous incidents of sexual molestation or near molestation Hango recounts. In each case, she can only respond with silence and passivity, her limited ability to deal with this reality due only in part to her young age. The shame and embarrassment that paralyse Hango on these occasions arise directly from a gender ideology she has internalized and from taboos she has been taught to protect. A male teacher in a private language school she attends would arrange for her to sit alone "in a small room and [he] would come and bend over my work and just about put his arms around me"; when the school later closes, all her mother communicates to her is that "The teacher had disappeared, and so had a young girl" (101). Another incident, which similarly has to remain a secret, takes place at the railway station:

The place was deserted and the old station master was talking with us in the doorway and I still remember the searching look he gave around the room before he put his arm around my slight waist and just about crushed me to his body. It only lasted a moment but it had made an impression on me. I did not know why, but I did not like it and *I knew I must not tell.* (92-93; emphasis added)

This pattern of inappropriate and exploitative sexual advances by older men toward the adolescent Hango recurs in a number of incidents involving men with whom she believes herself to be infatuated. While Hango, as narrator, appears reluctant to recognize the significance of these episodes (as yet another challenge to romantic notions), her own narrative betrays her, exposing a rift between her experience and the (internalized) ideological constructions through which she tries to make sense of that experience. Ostensibly "amusing," these incidents invariably elicit in her a complex and disturbing response that includes feelings of shame, an inability to articulate (to herself) the source of that shame, and a self-imposed silence regarding what happened. The incidents also never fail to summon the spectral (and specular) figure of the mother.

"Maman" is always there, at the beginning and the end of these unsettling mininarratives. At the end, because the imperative of silence seems to originate with the mother; however much Hango does not "like it," she knows she "must not tell" maman. At the beginning, because Hango blames her propensity for falling in love on the absence of maternal approval:

I had a feeling that maman thought nice things were wasted on me. . . . Maman should have raved about me instead of joining everybody else in raving about my sister. In short, I had an inferiority complex that lasted me quite a few years and I think that that explains why I fell in love with every man I came in contact with if he as much as smiled at me. (100)

Her explanatory logic here reveals a psychological configuration that recent psychoanalytical theories of the self have sought to elucidate. In the absence of appropriate "mirroring" (the approving gaze of the other), the self will experience an "unfilled hunger for validation . . . , like an open wound" (Johnson 190). Such a "narcissistic deficit" (190), compounded by female socialization, produces needy subjects in pursuit of the "love life" (Hango 91), a pursuit that, not surprisingly, takes some sinister turns in real life. When Hango becomes infatuated with an eighteen-year-old uncle, she goes up to his room to "talk to him," ends up being caressed in his bed, and is left with a "sense of shame" that hovers over her recollections so many years later: "It is difficult now to explain . . . because at that time I was so innocent" (92). Another infatuation, this time with her dentist, ends in a similar manner: "Once he blew that little syringe-looking affair

down my bosom instead of on my tooth and I was embarrassed, but I giggled and blushed . . . ; *but I also knew that I would not tell maman that*. I never saw him again" (96; emphasis added).

In "not tell[ing] maman," Hango engages in what Amelia Opie calls, in *Illustrations of Lying*, "passive lying": not telling the whole truth (7). As we contemplate the meaning of such lying, we come inevitably (as Ann Oakley promised we would), to the subject of yet another truth. Hango's dedication reads: "To my mother, who resembles Maman only in her devotion to her children, this book is dedicated with love." A mother's love, however, is the conspicuously missing centre of this autobiography, just as silence and an awkward reserve between mother and daughter appear to be the truth the autobiographer seeks licence to tell:

there has always been an awkward reserve between maman and us. We have never been able to overcome that. It is hard to explain, but for instance maman has never caressed me that I can remember and we both are embarrassed, she more than I, when we kiss each other. . . . There has never been any affection between us although I am a very affectionate person, and maman always has a nervous laugh if she has to kiss me. (118)

In marked contrast, Hango describes the ease with which she discusses everything with her own children: "There is no awkward reserve between us. They consult me and I answer their questions" (120). As a mother herself, she not only exposes the "white lies" (Opie 282) of a discourse that idealizes self-denying maternal devotion but also offers her own version of the truth: "A mother should not deny herself for the children to the point of thinking that when they are grown up she can sit back and it will be their turn to sacrifice themselves for her, because it does not work out that way" (90).

The truth — about Hango as mother, for example — is something about which we can never be certain in this autobiography. She forewarns us about the many inflections of the real (see 3), and her narrative indeed proceeds by moving freely between the different representational registers. It is often difficult to tell whether a given detail tells the truth of societal expectations and norms, the truth of wishful thinking, the truth of a great pain, the truth of a deliberate attempt to deceive (or conceal), the truth of self-delusion, or some other truth. Throughout the book, for example, there are a number of disconnected, brief, and vague references to Hango's husband and children — no names, no specifics of time or place. These vignettes

appear suspiciously generic and formulaic, and read like veiled attempts to claim the script (of romance and domesticity) as one's own success story. In one fairly typical instance, Hango interrupts her recollection of the unhappy Christmas and New Year's Eve experiences of her childhood to shift to the present tense of narration:

Christmas eve is wonderful. I still like to spend it in a peaceful family way. I like to fill up the stockings in the evening after the children are in bed, and prepare food for the *réveillon*. I like the feeling of the house being stuffed full of mysteries . . . , and I like . . . the sweet look that everyone carries around because they are happy at giving as well as receiving. . . .

And I love to come back home with my husband and our family guests and go into the living room. . . . (33-34)

The authenticity of this idyllic narrative interjection is nowhere validated in the book, and is indeed put into question by the framing childhood narrative that proceeds to describe the sadly ironic New Year's custom, in Hango's parents' household, of asking for the father's blessing and giving him a letter of thanks as the male head of the family. In the context of the father's violence and abdication of responsibility, the rituals are experienced by both the adult narrator and the young child as pathetic lies. What to make, then, of Hango's conscious or unconscious decision to embed her (rather disembodied) account of a blissful familial present in such an unequivocal demonstration of familialism as sham? Depending on disposition, we could see in Hango's glowing family portrait a moving testimony to a faith that persists despite a punishing reality, or a self-deluded fantasy, a refusal to learn from the lessons of experience.

#### v: Winding up the Story "in a Favourable Manner"

In *Subjectivities: A History of Self-Representation in Britain, 1832-1920*, Regenia Gagnier comments on the price paid by working-class subjects who attempt to model their lives and life stories on dominant middle-class ideologies: "[the] gap between ideology and experience leads not only to the disintegration of the narrative the writer hopes to construct, but . . . to the disintegration of personality itself" (46). The noncorrespondence between Hango's lived experience and (internalized) societal standards and expectations indeed compels her to engage in forms of deceit and self-deceit that are potentially

incapacitating. Dissimulation, as bell hooks has argued, while a necessary survival strategy under certain oppressive conditions, also tends to exact a high price; deception leads to the fear of being found out and the burden of maintaining lies, and self-deception breeds destructive illusions that deprive us of the means to face reality, fostering a state of denial (24). Carried into the realm of interpersonal relationships, lying erodes intimacy, trust, and ultimately self-regard (Lerner 15).

While *Truthfully Yours* documents a sense of alienation from self and others of which “fibbing” is both symptom and cause, it does not manifest the kind of narrative and psychological disintegration Gagnier finds in some of her working-class subjects. Rather, Hango’s fibbing seems not only to allow her insight into the way “truths” are fabricated and naturalized but also to provide her with the means to fashion more promising personal truths by which to live. The following could serve as illustrations of this point. Much of her fibbing is designed to cover up a reality she finds shameful: her parents’ “lack of education,” for example, or their “atrocious” table manners (10). Her shame is doubled and tripled by her father’s excessive drinking, which costs him job after job and forces her mother to work outside the home, thereby depriving the family of any social life: “Before the first World War, it was a disgrace for a woman to work at anything that was remunerative unless she were a widow with children and no money. . . . The fact then that maman sewed for others was something else that we were ashamed of” (53). Hango herself has to contend with this sense of the shamefulness of paid female labour — which relegates a woman to an inferior social cast and detracts from her “womanliness” (also documented by Bradbury 169–81) — when the time comes for her to provide for both herself and her parents. When that happens, however, a shift in perspective is quick to follow, a shift that involves the emergence of a new narrative of the self and an ethics that contests the formerly held middle-class conceptions of class and gender. With the rewards of gainful employment comes an appreciation of individual self-sufficiency and the independence it enables. Hango writes, “Earning my own living was exhilarating” (130); “I was very careful not to ask anything from anyone. I knew it was better to find things out for myself than to advertise my ignorance” (129). This newfound correspondence between her lived experience and a value system that reflects it positively proves healing and self-affirming: “. . . I was getting to be independent, and it did feel good” (131–32).

Another way in which Hango restores a sense of dignity to her life is by reconstructing a narrative of the collective past. In her retelling, her family's losses and deprivations are recast as the inevitable consequences of historical shifts beyond her family's control, such as the shift from rural to urban existence taking place during her parents' generation. Thus, her mother's illiteracy and vulgarity are understood against the backdrop of a hard rural life that deprived her mother of formal schooling while training her in skills that, once valuable and even indispensable, have now been rendered obsolete by urban life (9). Here we see how an appeal to collective history can have an emancipatory potential for the individual. Hango regards her mother's deficiencies as representative of the circumstances of a particular group, while also recognizing that, within the context of that group, these "deficiencies" actually constitute positive attributes: her mother does not have formal schooling, but she is accomplished in the many skills that distinguish a farmer's daughter. Hango's perspective, however, is unstable and shifting, so the shame persists: "All this sounds perfectly all right on paper and it seemed nothing to be ashamed of. They were honest, hard working, God-fearing people, and they were not ashamed of their lack of education, but my little sister and I were very much ashamed of that fact" (10).

Overall, *Truthfully Yours* succeeds in claiming a measure of dignity and happiness in the face of an oppressive personal history. To accomplish this, Hango often deploys a particular angle of vision: looking beyond the recent past, she reaches simultaneously into a more distant past and a tantalizingly promising future. Thus, she reads into her grandmother's family history a happiness she did not know in her parents' home,<sup>6</sup> and she projects into the narrative present a domestic bliss of which we are allowed only fleeting glimpses. As readers, *we* are now the ones destined to remain outside the gates.

## vi: The Truth

[I]dentity [is] a network of representational practices in which the production of truth is everywhere on trial.

— Leigh Gilmore (19)

Hango's autobiography opens with the admission that she is a fibber, although not a liar: "a liar plans the things he says and does it for a

purpose. . . . In my case, the things untrue that I used to say . . . just popped out of me" (3). For her, the bridge over the abyss of self-reflection is an ongoing dialogic exchange between "that voice from within . . . telling me what I should have said" and that other, audible voice which speaks untruths (3). The lies she tells, we note, are of both varieties; some are planned, and others indeed pop out of a place less amenable to conscious manipulation. Both kinds of lies, however, reveal to us truths about Hango as an interpellated but also a resisting subject; as Liz Stanley observes in *The Auto/Biographical I: The Theory and Practice of Feminist Auto/Biography*, "a lie can often hold more truth than the truth" (51).

We could say of Hango's autobiographical persona what Timothy Dow Adams says of Richard Wright's in *Black Boy*: Hango's inability/unwillingness to tell the truth is her "major metaphor of self" (Adams 69). Her lies fulfil many of the functions Adams discusses in *Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography*: like the fibs of children trying to avoid what they see as irrational punishment, her lies both seek to escape a punishing reality and, in their "embarrassing . . . transparency" (Adams 83), pose a challenge (give the lie) to a mystifying and hypocritical dominant ideology. Such lying, then, is both adaptive and resisting. As self-deception, it fulfils an adaptive function, for as Morris Eagle has argued, in circumstances in which self-knowledge and truth cannot be used constructively, and do not lead to alternatives that are more satisfying and meaningful than one's current way of life, "one may be better off with one's 'pipe-dreams' and self-deceptions" (93). It also enables the homeless Hango to "make a home for [her]self, on paper" (Alfred Kazin, qtd. in Adams 83). As calculated self-invention, moreover, lying is a strategy of resistance through self-(mis)representation, a strategy Hango shares with other devalued or colonized subjects. In this regard, *Truthfully Yours* recalls Colette's "lies, half-truths, considerable secrets" (Slawy-Sutton), the "tall tale[s]" Gertrude Stein uses in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* to resist "culturally provided identities" (Sidonie Smith 406), and the "arts of feigning and faking" depicted in certain postcolonial texts not as symptoms of false consciousness but as "resistance to a falsified social situation" (Miller 83).

Her initial promise notwithstanding, Hango never ceases to lie, not even to us, we suspect, given her tongue-in-cheek admissions throughout the book that she has just "fibbed" again.<sup>7</sup> The autobiography ends with one last "little lie" she tells Peter (possibly her

future husband) about her family, and her direct plea for forgiveness and acceptance of the practice that has defined her life and her narrative: “. . . I thought that after all *I was entitled to wind up my story in a favourable manner*” (144; emphasis added). Looking up at Peter, to whom she has just confessed her lying (while continuing to lie, as she has just confessed to us!), a “happy and confused” Hango (happy because he kisses her for the first time, confused because she is as tangled as ever in her lies) asks: “You like a liar, yes?” (144). The last words in the autobiography are spoken by Peter, who, standing in for us, reassures Hango: “I don’t like a liar, no. But I understand” (144). I think we do too.

#### NOTES

The larger context for this essay is a project on discourses of subjectivity in women’s writing. Support for this research has come from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and from Concordia University Faculty Development Research Grants.

<sup>1</sup> k.d. lang’s poem poignantly defamiliarizes one of the topoi discussed in this paper, that of the “family tradition.” The refrain goes:

a family tradition  
the strength of this land  
where what’s right and wrong  
is the back of a hand  
turns girls into women  
a boy to a man  
but the rights of the children  
have nowhere to stand

<sup>2</sup> Hébert identifies three stages in the evolution of personal writing in Quebec, which he relates to the historical experiences of colonization, resistance, and emancipation. He argues that an initial valorization (necessary for survival) of collective identity over individual identity was followed by a transitional phase in which emergent voices expressed themselves as alienated from the collectivity, leading, in the final phase, to a truly emancipated form of writing that allows for the integration of the personal and the collective.

<sup>3</sup> The desire to view Hango’s autobiography as unproblematically representing cherished French Canadian traditions is apparent in the few reviews of the book I have been able to locate. B.K. Sandwell, reviewing for *Saturday Night*, writes: “it is French Canadian to the marrow”; Jean-Charles Bonenfant comments: “on trouve dans le livre d’Angéline Hango un bouquet de traditions

canadiennes-françaises. . . . Le Canada français a donc fait à la littérature canadienne d'expression anglaise un don précieux" (166-67).

<sup>4</sup> The *Saturday Night* review mentions that *Truthfully Yours* also won "a \$500 award in the Oxford-Crowell competition" the year it came out (see Sandwell). This evidence of the book's contemporary success makes its subsequent fall into obscurity all the more intriguing.

<sup>5</sup> As the following demonstrates, the grids of class and national/ethnic identity form one interlocking pattern: "In the French Canadian convents that we attended there were three different strata of society. The highest was composed of girls of professional or artistic parents with wealth. Girls whose fathers were physicians whether rich or poor, and country doctors sometimes were, belonged to the upper stratum. Also included in that group were American girls, regardless of means. The second clique was composed of girls of merely wealthy parents, such as merchants, and poor professionals except physicians. The lower stratum was composed of anyone else who attended the convent and who did not occupy a private room" (Hango 47).

<sup>6</sup> As in Martin's autobiography, it is the world of the grandparents that offers the comforts of tradition and familial happiness. Five years Martin's senior, Hango paints a generational picture much like the one portrayed by Martin: "Grandmother, her sisters and sisters-in-law . . . were much more daring than Mother ever was. Their own grandmothers, to judge by the anecdotes I heard about them, were even more so. At the other end of the scale, my generation began to throw off the yoke. My poor mother and her contemporaries lived through what was really the most suffocating stage of the feminine adventure" (Martin 4).

<sup>7</sup> We cannot even be sure about the authenticity of Hango's chosen genre. Emblematically, the book opens with two contradictory narrative gestures: a personal statement that declares autobiographical intent, and a dedication that disavows autobiographical content.

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