

“Little Perpetrators”: The South African Voice of Antjie Krog

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Approaching her seventh decade, poet/journalist Antjie Krog has become a leading public intellectual in her own country through the distinctiveness of her voice, one valued across lines of gender, genre, race, colour, class, language, and philosophical point of view. The voice arises from inside and outside the formerly dominant group—Afrikaners. Raised under Apartheid and having spoken Afrikaans on a farm in the Free State, she earned a degree of notoriety at age seventeen with the publication in her school yearbook of “My Beautiful Land,” a poem that promotes interracial love (see Krog, *Tongue* 123-35). The author later translated this piece into English, and selected it to open the collection *Down to My Last Skin*, which was published in 2000 and represents her verse from the earliest to the then current. Note the poem’s simplicity, a feature that cannot be explained entirely by her youth; rather, it is a deliberate and persistent choice throughout her career as a poet, and it artfully conceals passion:

look, I build myself a land
where skin colour doesn’t count
only the inner brand of self

where no goat face in parliament
can keep things permanently verkramp
[translated in her glossary as “ultra conservative”]

where I can love you,
can lie beside you in the grass
without saying “I do”

.....
where black and white hand in hand
can bring peace and love
in my beautiful land. (*Skin* 11)

Krog has carefully crafted a voice throughout her writing life that in its frank conflictedness and rigorous self-scrutiny repeatedly predicts the possible, always overturning expectations and so always challenging the audience. A multivocal conflictedness appears both in the statements she makes and in the ways in which she chooses to make them.

Krog is now and has consistently been a major figure in Afrikaans poetry. When I interviewed her in April 2010 at the University of the Western Cape (Bellville, South Africa) where she teaches, she said:

I regard myself mainly as a poet and as a poet I can only function in Afrikaans, and the Afrikaans that I use vibrates within ... so it's very much that tradition and the variety of voices within that language. ... And then the prose is also written in Afrikaans in the first place because for me it feels that I can sense the boundaries and work against them. The moment that I write in English I feel at sea (Interview).

Yet she has developed an international audience through her prose work in English, and she has won the major awards in her country for both poetry and journalism (see Kannemeyer 148-52; van der Merwe).

Emphasis in this introduction and interview falls often on translation, for as Krog herself has said to another critic: "I think that in essence South African literature is a translated literature. It's about people who translate themselves from other cultures, and so there's no escaping issues of translation" (Dimitriu 145). That she refers not just to words being construed in another language but, more interestingly, to "*people who translate themselves from other cultures*" (emphasis added) indicates a basic concern with the challenges of mutual understanding. While being committed to translation as a way of being, not just of speaking, in the new South Africa, Krog nevertheless remains aware of its shortcomings. She seems to write in the space between commitment and failure: can Whites translate themselves to Blacks? Blacks to Whites? Afrikaners to speakers of English? Certainly not without affective gestures that seem in her work like love. She asks herself and her wide, diverse audience to risk the vulnerability of the young lovers in "My Beautiful Land," characters who through their forbidden mutual attraction and trust bring "peace and love/ in my beautiful land." Krog herself has curated a highly successful poetry festival involving poets from many African cultures (see Spier).

As a Canadian literary critic, I see the value of Krog's work for a Canadian, and indeed, a North American, audience specifically in her perspective on testimonial in the formation of voice. A kind of speech that witnesses has the power to turn, or to translate, private passion into public use. My study of testimonial theatre, influenced by the writing of Kelly Oliver, and my collaboration on producing the history of a Canadian aboriginal theatre company whose specific mandate is to tell their own stories, drew me to inquire into the phenomenon of witnessing in another country with a large Anglophone population, one that has struggled dramatically on the world stage with issues of appropriation: who speaks, for whom, when, where, in what ways? Oliver's nuanced sense of witnessing describes a central impulse of Krog's work: the unsettling re-examination of the very idea of the self. Arguing that recognition of the Other merely instates a hierarchical relationship, Oliver writes that instead

[w]e must recognize that not everything that is real is recognizable to us.
Acknowledging the realness of another's life is not judging its worth, or conferring

respect, or understanding or recognizing it, but responding in a way that affirms response-ability. We are obligated to respond to what is beyond our comprehension, beyond recognition, because ethics is possible only beyond recognition. (106)

Such an ethics of “response-ability” and responsibility, however fraught, is emphasized in Krog’s South African context and speaks eloquently to issues of representations of difference in contemporary North America.

Though much of Krog’s work is unavailable for purchase in Canada because it is in Afrikaans or, as she says herself, “[b]ecause they say it’s too South African” (Interview), two volumes of poetry and three of prose can be found worldwide: the internationally known *Country of My Skull* (her account of the proceedings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission on which she reported daily for the South African Broadcasting Corporation); a newer book written as a later perspective on *Country of My Skull*, entitled *A Change of Tongue*; her most recent prose work, *Begging to Be Black*; and the volumes of poetry entitled *Body Bereft* and *Down to My Last Skin*. Below I quote very briefly from *Body Bereft* and *A Change of Tongue*.

Krog can be understood as working in a tradition of resistance literature produced by Afrikaners, a tradition that gained momentum in the 1960s through a group of poets called, in Afrikaans, the Sestigers (the word *sestig* in Afrikaans meaning *sixty*), some of whose work was banned by the Afrikaner Establishment (see Kannemeyer; Brink and Coetzee). Her deeply conflicted position as an Afrikaner rooted in the soil of her family farm and her family lineage manifests itself first in her choice of language. As she says:

A term was coined—*Antjiekaans*—out of anger about the kind of Afrikaans that I use. In many ways the impure Afrikaans I use is a deliberate choice because you want to undermine official Afrikaans, and you want to distance yourself from those who use that Afrikaans and incorporate a variety of Afrikaans. This is not to say that you pretend to be Coloured or Black but it is a form of resistance to the formal and correct and accepted official use of Afrikaans. (Interview)

A second overwrought decision for Krog as a writer has involved genre. If we are familiar with her writing we know that her most popular work, both internationally and in South Africa, *Country of My Skull*, has been criticized for—among such other issues as her including literal testimonies without due credit—her veering from reportage into both fiction and personal testimony (see Sanders 56). The later work that comments on *Country of My Skull*, *A Change of Tongue*, complicates generic distinctions much further. When asked to describe its genre in our interview, Krog first laughed and then stated: “I’m now having a conversation for one of the academic journals here about literary non-fiction, and I must say *A Change of Tongue* is the furthest that I have pushed non-fiction boundaries. ... [E]very part in *Change of Tongue* starts with imagining the unimaginable, imagining yourself a giraffe, imagining yourself rain, imagining yourself moon, and imagining yourself vulnerable and Black, and so ja that’s fiction.” Having chosen a language and a form,

or rather having attempted to create her own language (a mix of Afrikaans and English) and her own form (something between journalism and poetic fiction), Krog must then choose what she needs to say. In witnessing racial injustice she moves into testimonial, itself a fraught idiom as its theorists quoted here confirm.

She joins a larger South African resistance movement in her testimonial idiom, one described by Mark Sanders in his highly informed study entitled *Complicities: The Intellectual and Apartheid* as

the alignment of radical white intellectuals (Afrikaner and Anglo-South African) with the liberation movements, the South African Communist Party, and the trade unions. ... [T]he prime instance [of this alignment] is the influence in the 1970s of Black Consciousness and the subsequent nonracial United Democratic Front and its affiliates on Whites in the universities, churches, and the legal profession. (13-14)

Though in no way alone in producing testimonial writing in South Africa, Krog is nevertheless singular in her witnessing voice. Sanders's deconstructive reading describes accurately the voice we hear in Krog's witness literature; indeed, the phrase "little perpetrators" in my title comes from Sanders's reading, a phrase he in turn borrowed from the official report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. "Little perpetrators" acknowledge what he calls "responsibility-in-complicity" (12). He writes: "Responsibility unites with a will not to be complicit in an injustice. It thus emerges from a sense of complicity—not the criminal complicity ... but the actively assumed complicity of one whose silence could allow their crime to go undiscovered" (4-5). Moreover, "To have any meaning, responsibility requires a motivated acknowledgment of one's complicity in injustice" (8). Complicit, Krog is nevertheless not hardened.

The two prominent South African writers who edited a collection of then contemporary South African writing, André Brink and J. M. Coetzee, state bluntly in the introduction that "Underlying almost everything written in Afrikaans today [1986] ... is an intimation of violence and death[,] ... the destruction of the entire known world or a way of life" (13). Though Krog was nurtured as a young artist by the work of exiled and imprisoned South African writer Breyten Breytenbach, she herself, while suffering for her resistance (see especially Part One of *Begging to Be Black*), has never left the country. She looks within motifs of destruction and sees signs of compassion and love. Indeed, her persistent inquiry over the years regarding how to continue to witness and still to forgive, to question and still to trust—oneself and the Other—links Krog's work with that of her generation of Afrikaner resistance writers but also distinguishes it.

Krog said simply in answer to my question about how the personal informs the political in her writing that "[a] poet can feel she has done her politically correct poems, but in the meantime every word she has written is embedded in privilege" (Interview), "every word" including presumably Krog's retelling of the victims' stories and her accounts of her personal life. What seems remarkable about her work is in fact her relentless,

impassioned attempt to use her privilege on behalf of victims at the same time as she interrogates and judges it, an attempt that both unsettles and draws readers in.

Before returning to theories of witnessing, I will give two examples of the “responsibility-in-complicity” that Krog gives voice to. The first is from the collection of poems *Body Bereft* (2006), the great majority of whose pieces were translated by Krog herself. As the title implies, this volume gives imaginative language to the ways that African political realities affect bodies, particularly those of women—the poet’s own, those of other members of her family, and that of a child named Ntombizana Atoo in a “letter-poem” in five parts whose end note reads “Rwanda 2000”:

I will come and claim you from the bones and bullets and violence and aids
from muteness from stupidity from the corrupt faces of men
I’ll gather you from the millions of refugees
from hunger and thirst from the damp of cries
and the stink of tolerated grief
the desperate mangle of dreams
.....
because you have to see differently
for us of the abyss
we all have to balance differently
this continent drifting like a big black plundered heart on the globe
continent that is us
continent throbbing with blood in the vast ventricles of the desert
and forest savannah and stone
forlorn continent
on which so many lost figures commit lost deeds of forlorn trust. (59)

The continent of Africa forms the largest body in *Body Bereft* and then figuratively becomes the single body of a girl; Krog uses imagery of bones and faces, blood and ventricles, hunger and thirst, but also offers the promise of new ways of seeing, of creating balance, of “trust.” The idea of balance in this poem may refer to what she calls “proportion” in my interview with her: “How do you live among such poverty as we find here, and injustice, in proportion ...? You find ways to try to live in proportion with what is around you, in an honourable proportion or scale to what is around you.” This letter-poem becomes a challenge to readers to envision and so enable such balance—“to see differently.”

To contrast with the ordinary diction, normal syntax, clear metaphors and synecdoche of the poem just cited, I will now excerpt a prose passage from the 2003 memoir entitled *A Change of Tongue*, an italicized passage like the ones that begin each of the work’s six parts. As quoted above, Krog states that “[E]very part in *Change of Tongue* starts with imagining the unimaginable,” in this instance the moon:

So the moonlight glides. Loose. Lightly breathing. In silver chevrons the river rapids downstream. ... Then, with the moon, you hit the squat roof of the church, tingeing the corrugated iron with light. You blush down the whitewashed walls. Imperceptibly, the

moon leaves you behind as it sifts across the drag-trails through the dusty streets, the treads of wheels, the tracks of horses. You stay standing in the shadow of the church, with the pale sandstone blocks like huge, still-tepid bars of soap against your back. Around you it rustles. Eucalyptus. Young white trunks denuded by the moon. (161; italics in original)

In using language at least as figurative as that in the poem cited above, Krog speaks in the particular voice that she has found to express connections between public and private, personal and political, a voice translated from her mother tongue, generically mixed, both complicit and morally responsible. She hopes passionately to evoke an as yet unknown, more satisfactory place beyond the unsatisfactory known of South Africa's present and past.

A major and recurring aim in Krog's work up to the most recently published, *Begging to Be Black*, launched in South Africa in November 2009, has been to bring her considerable intellectual, emotional, and creative skills to imagining herself Coloured or Black. But in the recent book she acknowledges that

[w]e cannot imagine the Other because we don't know the Other. During Apartheid we only got to know ourselves and not Black, but now we either constantly interpret them in ways of ourselves or we reject them. ... [T]here's another philosophical framework operating at least in southern Africa that we refuse to acknowledge. ... [H]ow can you think there is one universal moral framework?" (Interview)

"[A]nother framework" refers to an African communitarian philosophy that she describes at length in *Begging to Be Black*, one which claims that what is good for the community is good for the individual; that is, the individual's moral choices should respond to the question of what is right or wrong for the community: "the interconnectedness that we have," as she states (Interview). Describing and analyzing, ruthlessly, passionately, her implication in a murder trial, she concludes: "A deed is not intrinsically wrong; its rightness or wrongness depends on who does it to whom and from which level of status" (101). And so even in her ethical stance Krog attempts to find a position between, and to live out her difficult moral choices in that place.

To return to the theorists of testimonial literature, we hear in the work of Dori Laub, for example, that to witness stories of previously unspeakable trauma is to prevent what he calls the "collapse of witnessing" (80). "To a certain extent," Laub writes, "the interviewer-listener takes on the responsibility for bearing witness that previously the narrator felt he bore alone, and therefore could not carry out" (85). Laub's accounts are drawn from Holocaust memories but can perhaps be related to the stories of egregious brutality recounted during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, stories witnessed, reported on national radio, and then reframed by Krog in her two companion books noted here, *Country of My Skull* and *A Change of Tongue*; Krog herself cites Laub's work. He describes one Holocaust survivor with whom he worked as follows: "Her previous inability to tell her story had marred her perception

of herself. The untold events had become so distorted in her unconscious memory as to make her believe that she herself, and not the perpetrator, was responsible for the atrocities she witnessed. ... [I]n her memory of her Holocaust experience ... she failed to be an authentic witness to herself” (80).

Conflicted and complicit as Krog feels herself to be, she also seems to speak in her generically, linguistically, topically, and philosophically mixed writing the sympathetic voice that successful testimonial requires, perhaps unmarring the perceptions of themselves (to paraphrase Laub) of some who read her. In his thorough and informed study of *Country of My Skull*, Shane Graham praises what he sees as Krog’s “making ... asymmetry visible,” specifically the asymmetry between herself as privileged White and members of the Coloured and Black southern African communities. Admittedly “not cued into the violence as the victims [of Apartheid] are,” which Taiwo Adetunji Osinubi argues thoroughly and persuasively in his article, “Abusive Narratives,” Krog’s voice nevertheless seems somehow to make itself heard across old entrenchments.

Interview with Antjie Krog
University of the Western Cape, 12 April 2010

SH: You make decisions about the level and kind of Afrikaans you use whenever you write. You used very formal Afrikaans in translating [Nelson Mandela’s] *Long Walk to Freedom*.

AK: A term was coined—*Antjiekaans*—out of anger about the kind of Afrikaans that I use. In many ways the impure Afrikaans I use is a deliberate choice because you want to undermine official Afrikaans, and you want to distance yourself from those who use that Afrikaans and incorporate a variety of Afrikaans. This is not to say that you pretend to be Coloured or Black but it is a form of resistance to the formal and correct and accepted official use of Afrikaans.

SH: One critic when you were very young described your poetry as “barefoot poetry.” Is that what you mean by *Antjiekaans*?

AK: The barefootness or barefootedness was two things: I broke out of a whole range of kinds of official and accepted literary forms and then also used ordinary speech rhythm and so on.

SH: The kind of Afrikaans you’re talking about is slangy or ungrammatical or uses terms from other languages.

AK: Because of our hostile Anglo-Boer war history with the English, I’ve been raised to have a special sensibility not to use English expressions and

not to use direct translation from English—we call it *Anglisismes*—and lists and lists of that we were taught at school so that we don't use them.¹ And the way you find the correct one is to say the English one and then you know it wouldn't be like that. Now for me English has never been, and because I'm of a different generation, only the language of White-speaking British people living here. English has been the South African language in which we South Africans are trying to find one another. It's the only language in which we can find one another at this stage. So to use English has become the bridges that you lay down in order to hear one another. So the English words, the slang, the rhythm one incorporates into Afrikaans is also not necessarily a betrayal but a form of reconciling.

SH: Would a Black writer use English?

AK: That's what's so interesting is that Afrikaans has become completely absorbed, much of it. If you watch the film *Tsotsi*—I was astounded when I saw it because it's basically Afrikaans that he is speaking. The sentence structure, the order and most of the words that he uses is Afrikaans words that have been Zulufied. Recently a book has been published here, *Native Nostalgia*, in which Jacob Dlamini is celebrating and crying about the fact that Afrikaans was so regularly used and was so integral a part of township life and how it's becoming less and less so in the Black middle class moving into the cities, that they are losing Afrikaans but that it is still part of the ordinary township people.

SH: By speaking English?

AK: Ja, the middle class.

SH: In your protest or witness work your writing is a little bit plainer than the expressions of celebration and praise. When you protest against injustice—I would call it witnessing, politically—your language seems a little bit less poetic than when you express joy. Would you say that's true?

AK: Ja, but I would say that's general.

SH: It's not just you.

AK: Ja, I think if you are angry you try to be as plain and harsh as possible and especially in this country with its sort of thick skin of injustice. Nothing was more adored than when you were complex. If you were complex they could dismiss you but the plainer you were the more dangerous you were and the angrier you could make people.

SH: So plainness doesn't exclude being eloquent? Eloquent speech has had such an important place in this culture. But it also has to be quite direct.

AK: I am not so sure about the eloquent. You must remember that it's a whole country that actually cannot speak English although this is the language in which we try to find one another. This past week [murder of White supremacist Eugene Terre Blanche] is an excellent example that it's impossible for us to speak to one another because we are all in a second, third tongue that we have not mastered completely and battle to express ourselves in and cannot be subtle and complex in. Ja, so it's a huge mess. So if one is angry and you want to change things, you know, no word should have more than three syllables and the sentence should not have more than eight words. You know: "injury to one is an injury to all." It shouldn't be more complex than that.

SH: We get a strong sense of the forcefulness of the rhetoric from reading the papers.

AK: The forcefulness and the unsubtlety of it is part of the fact that we don't know how we sound. You don't know, "now I'm being offensive, and now I'm too harsh." Actually we should all be speaking with interpreters—simultaneous interpretation—just to realize again that when I look at you I don't necessarily automatically understand what you mean.

SH: Does your first language lend itself more to a poetic style?

AK: What is very remarkable about Afrikaans is, because it's such a young language, you can do a lot of things. You can break up words, you can change words and I know that my Dutch translator would always say "you cannot do that in Dutch" and I would say, "ja but you also cannot do that in Afrikaans but we do that." And he would say but "no no no, it would sound uncivilized in Dutch if I do that." The same with the translation into German and then I do the translations into English and it's many things that you can't do in English. So because the language is so young, it's very flexible, kneadable like clay. You can really, really do wonderful things with it and that is often killed in translation, it gets killed off.

SH: You can't find anything that's equivalent in English.

AK: I will send you a poem in Afrikaans and then a direct English translation and then the official English translation. It's the same with, say, in German—you often can't do what is being done in German with the English.

SH: You've said that you see yourself in the tradition of Afrikaner writing. Do you still? You acknowledge other influences—Europeans and North Americans—but you say you simply couldn't write without the Afrikaner tradition. Do you still feel that?

AK: The tradition of Afrikaans writing, not Afrikaner writing. Ja, I regard myself mainly as a poet and as a poet I can only function in Afrikaans, and the Afrikaans that I use vibrates within and of and because of the vibration in Afrikaans, so it's very much that tradition and the variety of voices within that language. So I cannot even begin to think, "what is English literature, what can I contribute or not or who was saying what?" It's vast. And then the prose is also written in Afrikaans in the first place because for me it feels that I can sense the boundaries and work against them. The moment that I write in English I feel at sea.

SH: Who is your audience?

AK: During most of my poetry life until 1994 you didn't want Afrikaners to understand or like your work, so in that sense I deliberately made my poetry volumes complex. So it was in a way a very lonely kind of space because who then are you? If people ask me, "for whom are you writing?" I was quite convinced that I'm not writing with an audience in mind. I used to say that I have something I need to say and I'm trying to say that as clear and as well as possible, and also as complex because it's a complex country in which we live.

But since '94 I realize that was perhaps not quite the full truth. You don't have an audience in mind until you have to make a language choice and I didn't realize that, because writing in Afrikaans was such a natural thing. I didn't see it as a choice. I just thought, "I'm breathing." But now when I think, "ja, this must be translated into English or I'm writing this in Afrikaans to be translated" I'm realizing I am now wanting to be in English because I want to react to what is becoming the South African voice, and I want to be part of that. I respond to particular things that I hear and pick up. And now it's not so much that you have an audience in mind but it's that you have a sound in mind.

SH: Because of what you want to say there's a sound associated with it that is either more appropriate to Afrikaans or to English?

AK: If you close your eyes now and I say, "how do you hear the South African sound, what is it that you hear since you arrived?"

SH: I have a strong sense of Cape Town being a place where a lot of immigrants live alongside those who've been here longer.

AK: But it is a sound.

SH: Literally?

AK: No it's ... before 1994 the sound was a White sound and now it's no longer that; it's Black. Although the newspapers have a very English

sound, there is a South African sound. If you're in the streets and you operate and you go in taxis and you visit things you become aware there is a real South African sound and it's within that sound that one wants to place yourself and your voice. You want to be part of that South African sound and the problem currently—because we don't have translation—is that when you write in any of the other languages, whether it's Afrikaans or Zulu or Xhosa, you only meet other Afrikaans speakers or other Xhosa speakers and it's like a cul de sac and you're just there. And I've been pleading that we develop a very, very strong translation culture so that people can write in their mother tongues and still be translated and become part of the South African voice so it's not only those who can use English, however bad, that become part of that sound.

SH: Can you describe the sound?

AK: The sound is bad English but it has different genders and pasts. It's a fantastic variety.

SH: In *Down to My Last Skin* you had to make some choices about which poems to include. They're selected from previously published volumes. Did you choose the ones that seemed to lend themselves best to English translation?

AK: Yes.

SH: Because of the theme?

AK: No. At the stage where I started to translate them I had published I think eight or nine poetry volumes in Afrikaans and they had won the major prizes so it was right from being a school child kind of poem up to the long epic about Lady Anne Barnard. It was hard to choose because it was the simpler ones that translated more easily and many of the short of thicker ones also needed the volume context, needed the title context, needed a lot of things to regain something of their original power. So I just went ahead and saw what worked. It's so interesting to start, say, with the children poems right from the very young ones until now for the grandchildren, how it moves, and politics starting in Apartheid, where it is now, love poems that start right with the first poems for my husband when we were sixteen and now when we are sixty. How do you operate? So it was very interesting for me, that exercise of compiling a selection.

SH: That's a new collection?

AK: Ja, it came out last year.

SH: *Begging to Be Black* [her most recent prose book] is not yet released in Canada. [Editor's note: the text was not available in Canada at the time of the interview, but it is now.]

AK: It was published here last November [2009]. I launched it. *Country of My Skull*, *Change of Tongue*, and *Begging to Be Black*, all of them were first written in Afrikaans, but it [*Begging to Be Black*] is not published in Afrikaans. It was a commissioned book and I said "I can't write it in English" and the publisher said to me "write it in Afrikaans and then translate it" and so that's how it was then published. I mean, I cannot write in English. For some strange reason, academically I write in English and I think it's precisely because the vocabulary that I know is English, the academic vocabulary.

SH: I'm moving to *A Change of Tongue* which is very little known in Canada. If you had to describe the genre of it . . .

AK: [laughter]

SH: So you're going to make me do that??!!

AK: I'm now having a conversation for one of the academic journals here about literary non-fiction, and I must say *A Change of Tongue* is the furthest that I have pushed non-fiction boundaries. In *Begging to Be Black* I've moved back from pushing it because every part in *Change of Tongue* starts with imagining the unimaginable, imagining yourself a giraffe, imagining yourself rain, imagining yourself moon, and imagining yourself vulnerable and Black, and so ja that's fiction. And then the way in which the book is structured is the closest to fiction. Then the question is, which parts are true and is there then such a thing and what about the integrity of the content. So it's interesting . . . but I find it useless.

Begging to Be Black goes further to say, "okay, I cannot imagine myself Black and why is that?" And am I not dishonest by pretending that I can imagine myself Black and then I imagine Black as only another version of myself or the opposite of myself? More damage is done that way than to say, "let me hear what Black is saying; let me write non-fiction about how I understand it; and when we come to know one another as we are, then we can start imagining." I think Black can imagine us like women could always have imagined men. Men imagined women but only in terms of themselves. It's only after enough texts appeared written by women that I can say now, ja, I think Coetzee is highly successful in imagining a woman, an older woman, but you'd have to read South African texts successfully imaging Black.

SH: Mainly what's written about your work in Canada is about *Country of My Skull*.

AK: That is the only book that has been published overseas, in the States and in England. None of the others. Because they say it's too South African. Whether *Country of My Skull* is not South African ...

SH: In the Afrikaner literature I've been able to read—what's published in English—I'm struck by the number of times the word *paradise* appears either in the title or the text itself, especially *paradise lost*, or words like that. I'm thinking of *Promised Land*, for example, Karel Schoeman's novel. Am I right?

AK: Ja, you're right. I have not thought so about it but you're absolutely right. And of course it is the sense that Afrikaners built for themselves a paradise, and the paradise is always a farm, and on that farm you are the sole master, and you can be God. You can make the perfect garden, you can keep people out that you don't want there. Ja, and we are all suffering from a loss, and it's a loss not only of political power but it's a loss of being in control of spaces. And even the Afrikaans language—sixty percent of the speakers are not White. So suddenly within Afrikaans it's also no longer your space.

And currently this past month there's an intense debate going on about the survival of Afrikaans. Breyten [Breytenbach] has been quoted saying, "the language is dying," and he's privileged to see in his lifetime a language die. And Coloured people are saying "yes it's *your* version of the language that is dying. Our version is growing and is becoming better." There's now a big play on at the Baxter [Theatre, University of Cape Town], *Afrikaaps*, saying that that thing is taking Afrikaans in another direction. So everywhere Afrikaners—and it's quite important then to make the distinction between Afrikaans speakers (and that would then include a majority of Coloured or non-White people) and Afrikaners that are White So it's a loss of many things. Also the Church has been forced to integrate, change its language, etcetera.

It's also safety. You no longer feel safe, not even in your house. You no longer feel wanted or liked while for many years you told yourself and the rest of your country, "you are essential; if it wasn't for you there wouldn't have been such order; there wouldn't have been enough food; we wouldn't have been so safe, etcetera." And now you've also lost that.

SH: I do have a sense reading your work and other contemporary Afrikaner novelists of a community being threatened, looking back to a place that was yours, and yet at the same time much of your own work is about opening up and communicating with the other. That's an important tension in your work. Nobody writes it better.

AK: The moment that one realizes that it's a sham, that this paradise never existed It was a sham; it was fake. It's like you sit in a restaurant and you feel you're outside and yet the walls were murals, pictures of outside, and you thought, ja this is my paradise, and in the meantime it was just

four walls closing off and excluding everybody. You want at least before you die to live in the real country, in the real place. And when you start looking around you see, okay, but you are in the minority. You don't understand the majority. They think differently. They have the particular framework that I'm doing in *Begging to Be Black*, another *moral* framework that says this is right and that is wrong. It's not your framework.

And how to live as a powerless White person. It's what we should learn because we are not the majority. And we still have too much power for our numbers. And you must give up that and see, now, what is there then here that you can feel close to and at home with, and if you don't I think one should then leave. You cannot live here in an enclave and on the continent live in an enclave and protect things that you have imported from elsewhere here. Well I don't want to live like that.

And the more I go to Europe—I have for some strange reason developed a big readership in the past four or five years in Holland—but every time I go there I see more and more Moroccans and Turks moving in, and the Dutch's whole framework is being more and more splintered, linguistically, religiously, morally. And the same in the States. I'm sure it's the same for you. And so there will come a time when one finds oneself in a minority. You will still have financial power but even that will become less and less safe. Is that the enclave that you choose or do you decide, "I want to live in a real country, or a real space, and with integrity." How do you live among such poverty as we find here, and injustice, in proportion, so that it's not outrageous how you live? You find ways to try to live in proportion with what is around you, in an honourable proportion or scale to what is around you, with integrity towards what is around you.

SH: Writing can help people learn how to live that way?

AK: That I don't necessarily know. I just know that this is what I'm trying to work out.

SH: Oddly, I see you primarily as a love poet. Do you ever see yourself that way?

AK: Ja, I do write about it. Ja.

SH: The combination of being political and being a love poet is one reason that you might be found difficult for readers who don't live here.

AK: It is because we all suffer from this division between public and private and that politics is public and the other one private. One of the marvellous things about living here is that all the questions are being asked at the same time here. So that love poetry right from the beginning is also political in a way because you bring the body. In *Body Bereft*, to

put a White body on the cover—I wouldn't have done that twenty years ago. But the fact that I felt it can be done and I want it to be done, is to say that in many ways the White body has lost its pedestal and its power. And it's also an older female body, so it says it's there with its vulnerability. So it's highly political. Although it's love poetry, for me I'm politically busy.

SH: How do the public and private connect or not connect in your work? You're saying that even the most private poems are affected by politics. I would say that your political position comes from who you are and where you are. For example, in the aging poems you also describe the continent as "forlorn," so those clearly connect what's out there with what's in here. We might assume that the personal and the political will be more connected in countries with issues larger than those we face in Canada.

AK: I'm wondering about that because in a world context My work is against a background of poverty. If you see what I can see, and I'm concerned about breast cancer, but it is part of a highly privileged life, so it carries with it its own politics. If I may say so, I think it's much more difficult to give account for one's privileged position than to imagine yourself poor and powerless. I don't think you shouldn't—I think you should—but you can also feel you've now paid your dues.

SH: You've paid your dues after trying to imagine yourself poor?

AK: One can begin to feel that, yes. A poet can feel she has done her politically correct poems, but in the meantime every word she has written is embedded in privilege.

SH: If I had to summarize your work in a clause I'd say it's about being as fully alive as possible, not cutting off or anaesthetizing parts of ourselves. You don't seem to do that. Your spirit stays alive. Would you describe yourself as a religious writer?

AK: I've been raised religious and in *Begging to Be Black* there's a part where I go to a missionary church in Lesotho and I say, "why does religion only make sense to me when it sides with the poor, when it forgets about its power and starts to care?" During the Apartheid years religion played an extremely important role for me in providing an alternative space to be with the underprivileged because we left the White church and we went to the Coloured church in the small town where I lived and so every Sunday we had a whole neighbourhood in which you were not actually allowed to be, you could be because you were in that church. Through Tutu it still made a lot of sense. But I mean these days it seems to me that religion is responsible for about eighty to ninety percent of the mess of the world and distortions and self-righteousness, and I have this feeling that God is like a woman who is breastfeeding a baby, and the world is this baby, and it suckles at the nipple, and it thinks "this is God;

this nipple is God,” and if someone else says, “no but what about the areola?” then you say “no no no it’s the nipple,” and someone says “ja but what about the little hole in the middle,” “no we say it’s the nipple,” “and now we completely understand God because look here is the nipple and it’s translated and here comes the milk.” And in the meantime beyond that nipple is a complicated breast, just the functioning of it, behind that is lungs and a heart, behind that is a whole body, behind that is a brain. So we don’t have a fucking clue. And we’re fighting about the nipple. Ja, so, I don’t believe in Christ as a saviour of sins. I don’t believe in sin. I believe in trying to live a good life. And a good life means not to harm others and other things. *Begging to Be Black* deals then with the interconnectedness that we have and that is basically an African religion or belief.

SH: I want to talk about our own Apartheid in Canada, about aboriginal people having to live on reserves. We now have our own Truth and Reconciliation Commission to deal with abuse of aboriginal people. Your work would really teach us a lot about facing that violent past, about unacknowledged shame. What could you teach us?

AK: There was a conference here in December [2009] put on by Pumla Gobodo- Madikizela about the Truth Commission ten years later and there were people from Australia and people from Canada. I ended up in one of those sessions and I was just thinking “why is it that these three countries are not having a conference on reconciliation?” Because there’s a difference to “I forgive you” or “forgive me” or “say you are sorry” or “I am sorry” or reconciliation about *wiedergutmachen* [make good again]. Canada has made up or is trying to make up for what it did. Australia has said “sorry.” *Sorry* is such a silly word; it’s such a shallow word, but they’ve said it. And I’m wondering, how do they explain why they don’t say “please forgive me” but then someone else said you put an onus on the other to forgive you. At least when you say you’re sorry, you don’t burden the other one with a response. And I was thinking, “but that’s exactly what reconciliation should be.” Remember, that we here in South Africa have neither said I am sorry or forgive me! So we have such a lot to talk about in the three countries. But we don’t. We’re busy with Germany or we’re busy with Zimbabwe, and I think you’re busy with the States. When people say they should make up for the slavery and pay out African Americans, I think, ja, people should make up for slavery but repay Africa. It’s a pity that we don’t talk.

SH: Can we imagine the Other?

AK: We cannot imagine the Other because we don’t know the Other. During Apartheid we only got to know ourselves and not Blacks, but now we either constantly interpret them in ways of ourselves or we reject them as being unfathomable, mindlessly corrupt, and immoral, and that to me is

a huge injustice. This continent is constantly trying to explain what it is and we just sort of wring the words and decide how corrupt they are.

And there's another philosophical framework operating at least in southern Africa that we refuse to acknowledge. We come from such a fractured morality anyway where it was okay for Whites to kill Blacks. For Black people it's okay to steal from Whites but not [sic] from Blacks so how can you think there is one universal moral framework? I keep on being surprised about the disillusionment of people who stay here. Because it feels to me ... one's involvement before 1994 in the townships made you aware of the weaknesses and the horrors and the disperse-ness and the mess, the morass, and the marvellous, wondrous surviving goodness as well. So how is it possible that people thought there was some perfection that was created during Apartheid in the townships and now after the liberation this perfection would simply take over? How could it be? If Zuma has four years of schooling, exactly whose fault is that?

SH: Would you be able to talk about what you're writing now?

AK: *Begging to Be Black* took a lot of my energy and it's the book in which I have risked the most, so I was extremely nervous when it came out. But it went well and that's fine. So I think I want to go back to poetry in Afrikaans. *Begging to Be Black* created and still does a lot of discussion among Black people and among White people. It did what I hoped.

SH: Is there anything more you'd like to say to Canada?

AK: [laughter] How is it that you have the best poets? For a small country to have such a high literary quality in poetry—it's amazing.

SH: [laughter; bafflement]

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Note

1. For a definition of “Anglisisme” (after the English Anglicism and the French anglicisme), see Jan Kromhout, *Hippocrene Practical Dictionary: Afrikaans-English/English-Afrikaans*. Revised and expanded. New York: Hippocrene, 2006.

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