



# Living with grace on the earth: the poetic voice in Antjie Krog's *A change of tongue*

A. Polatinsky  
Wits Institute for Social & Economic Research  
University of the Witwatersrand  
JOHANNESBURG  
E-mail: ashlee.neser@wits.ac.za

## Abstract

### Living with grace on the earth: the poetic voice in Antjie Krog's *A change of tongue*

*"A change of tongue", Antjie Krog's second creative non-fiction, articulates experiences of the postapartheid quotidian in two tongues: that of the journalist and that of the poet. This article examines Krog's various instantiations of the poetic voice, and argues that the site of the body is crucial to Krog's understanding of how languages and landscapes are translated into human experiences of belonging, alienation and self-expression. The voice that is inspired by, and best conjures these acts of somatic translation is the poetic voice, Krog suggests. The article argues that Krog endows the poetic tongue with particular capacities for synaesthetic perception and for modes of imagining that surrender many of the limitations we ascribe to other registers and grammars. Despite the profusion of challenges and setbacks expressed by the evidence-oriented journalist, the three poetic strands in the text, which are identified and explored in this article, provide a space of meditation and of refreshed language in which processes of hopeful revivification can occur.*

## Opsomming

### Om die aarde met welwillendheid te bewoon: die digterstem in Antjie Krog se *A change of tongue*

*"A change of tongue", Antjie Krog se tweede nie-fiksiewerk in Engels, verwoord alledaagse postapartheidservarings in twee perspektiewe, naamlik dié van die joernalis en dié van die digter. Hierdie artikel ondersoek gebruiksvoorbeelde van die dig-*

*terstem in hierdie teks en voer aan dat die terrein van die liggaam bepalend is vir Krog se begrip van die wyse waarop tale en landskappe in menslike ervarings van geborgenheid, vervreemding en selfuitdrukking vertaal word. In die teks suggereer Krog dat dit die digterstem is wat sulke dade van somatiesse vertaling ten beste inspireer, en wederkerig hierdeur geïnspireer word. In hierdie artikel word betoog dat Krog aan die digterlike tongval bepaalde vermoëns vir sinestetiese waarneming sowel as verbeeldingsvorme toeskryf wat baie van die beperkings wat ons met ander registers assosieer, oorkom. Ten spyte van die talle uitdagings en terugslae wat die bewysgedrewe joernalis voorhou, skep die drie digterlike lyne in die teks 'n ruimte vir meditasie en verkwikte taalgebruik waarin bemoeidigende hergeboorteprosesse voltrek kan word.*

## 1. Introduction

A benthic creature which swims flat, on its side, the flatfish exhibits a remarkable capacity for adaptation. In the early part of its life, its view of the world is bifurcated by its having an eye on either side of its head, one of which looks constantly at the seabed. Gradually, this sand-ward eye migrates across the fish to settle next to the eye that looks upward, towards the fish's less predictable ocean environment. This extraordinary capacity, which changes the flatfish's apprehension of its environment, has offered Antjie Krog a rich symbol for the idea of transformations, mediated through the body, that result in new ways of being and seeing.<sup>1</sup> Used most extensively, both in picture form and as a poetic symbol, in her collection *Lady Anne* (1989), the flatfish recurs in Krog's writing as a key to her preoccupation with various kinds of transformation, including translation, political transition and the act of writing itself. In her second creative non-fiction,<sup>2</sup> *A change of tongue* (2003), the flatfish occupies the place of the cover image where it interacts with the text's title to remind us of the unexpressed but implied Afrikaans word for the fish: *tongvis*. By suggesting this act of translation as a bridge between the title and the picture beneath it, the change of tongue

---

1 See Christine Marshall's article (2007) on the emblem of the sole and its relation to Krog's translation project for a discussion of one of the uses to which the symbol of the flatfish is put in Krog's writing.

2 The term *autofiction* might be used to describe these texts, as might *faction* (a portmanteau of *fact* and *fiction*), but I prefer *creative non-fiction*, because it conveys so well the combination in Krog's writing of the modes of the poet and the journalist. Krog herself suggests that she writes "fiction bordering fact" (Krog, 2007:41).

announced in words is mapped onto the symbol of the transforming fish to suggest that changing one's tongue changes the way one sees the world and facilitates one's adaptation, however asymmetrically, to one's environment. The change of tongue to which we are first alerted by the cover, if we are able to call up the word *tongvis*<sup>3</sup> is a translation from Afrikaans into English.<sup>4</sup> But there is another change of tongue suggested by the cover image when we consider how vividly the picture of the flatfish calls to mind Krog's poetry collection, *Lady Anne*, that is, the change of tongue represented by the poetic in Krog's prose.

This article focuses on Krog's deployment of the poetic voice in *A change of tongue* as an important site of personal transformation and adaptation. There is a large and established critical literature on Krog's Afrikaans poetry with which I do not substantively engage here, and it is not the purpose of this article to contend with Krog's poetry collections, either those in Afrikaans or those that have recently appeared in English, although I try to be aware of the relationship between these collections and instances of their translated quotation in *A change of tongue*. Rather, I am interested in the poetic voice as it erupts into and transforms Krog's prose. This article constitutes an exploration of what Krog tries to achieve in her poetic changes of tongue; it does not assess whether she is successful, nor does it express an opinion on her underlying theory of the poetic or on her implementation of this theory in her poetic writing. Instead, I hope to show that for Krog the poetic is a mode which enables transformative communication between the body and its environ-

---

3 Krog's use of intertextuality includes a movement between English and Afrikaans texts. Phil van Schalkwyk (2006:116) notes, for instance, that *Country of my skull* concludes with a poem in English that exists in an Afrikaans version as the eighth in a cycle of poems in *Kleur kom nooit alleen nie* (Krog, 2000a). Fragments of poetry in English in *A change of tongue* likewise refer back to poems in *Kleur kom nooit alleen nie*. Louise Viljoen's article (2003) on Krog's journalism and poetry about travelling is useful as a supplement to the sections of *A change of tongue* about Krog's journey to the Richtersveld and to West Africa.

4 Krog's creative non-fictions (*Country of my skull* and *A change of tongue*) were published first in English although they were written first in Afrikaans. The English translations remind us constantly – in the rhythms of their prose, in their allusions to and quotations from Krog's Afrikaans literary career, and so on – of the Afrikaans originals always at their backs. Stephan Meyer expresses this connection well in relation to Krog's translations of her own poems into English when, reminding us of Karen Press's interview with Krog (2000:14), he remarks that Krog produces "an English which has not unmoored itself from its Afrikaans origins" (Krog, 2002:5).

ment. In this way, I suggest, Krog considers the poetic as her means of fulfilling the aspiration that we might learn how to "live with grace on the earth" (p. 321).<sup>5</sup>

## 2. The poetic

Krog's creative non-fictions, *Country of my skull* (2002) and *A change of tongue* (2003), speak in two voices: that of the journalist and that of the poet. These two voices are not entirely discreet, although it is evident that the poetic voice has considerable autonomy from the journalistic voice, while the journalistic is frequently overlaid with, or interrupted by, the poetic. Despite the narrator's part-identity in each of the books as a questing journalist, the author's signature – Antjie Krog – on both suggests her emphasis on the poetic, for it is Antjie Krog who publishes poetry collections and translates literary works, while it is Antjie Samuel who reports for the SABC. Krog's identity is intimately connected to, expressed through, and to some extent generated by her work as a poet. Not only is it as a poet that she grapples with and gives expression to her identity, but it is also as repositories of her interior that she considers her poems. In "Skryfode", Krog (2000a:1) writes: "om te skryf moet ek myself binne kom / deur my te buite gaan" – the writing of poetry engages her in an act of introspection from which she emerges into text with what she has mined from her "innerlike reis" (Beukes, 2003a:5). Writing about "Skryfode", Beukes (2003a:5) remarks that "die spreker se identiteitsoeke hand aan hand gaan met 'om te skryf'". This imperative – to write as a way of finding and fashioning the self – generates in Krog's work a poetics concerned with the relationship between interior and exterior, surface and underground, and with how the boundaries between these spaces might be transcended to produce the shared place of text and identity.

A theorist whose poetic prose reveals a practice and philosophy of writing that overlaps considerably with Krog's is the French author, Hélène Cixous. In what seems an echoing or foreshadowing of Krog, Cixous (2005:189) declares:

My business is to translate our emotions into writings. First we feel. Then I write. This act of writing engenders the author. How does one write the genesis? Just before? I write on writing. I turn on the other light.

---

5 References containing only a page number refer to Krog (2003).

Cixous and Calee-Gruber (1997:1) argue in words which might have been Krog's that, "What is most true is most poetic." By this they mean that

[A]ll that is stopped, grasped, all that is subjugated, easily transmitted, easily picked up, all that comes under the word concept, which is to say all that is taken, caged, is less true. Has lost what is life itself, which is always in the process of seething, of emitting itself, of transmitting itself. (Cixous & Calee-Gruber, 1997:4.)

This tension between the attempt to grasp and assess, and the signification of process, transmissions and "hidden transformations" (Krog, 2007:38), is precisely the contention that happens between the journalistic and the poetic voices in Krog's creative non-fiction. For Krog as for Cixous, the poetic allows one "to see what is secret ... what is hidden among the visible" (Cixous, 2005:139). Journalistic truth, however subjectively reported, is judged on the evidence from "out there" that it evinces, as well as on its capacity to construct a coherent, substantiated narrative in retrospect. By contrast, the poetic truth to which Cixous and Krog express fidelity originates with the writing self; its relationship to time is most intimately with the instant of writing, and its "evidence" and instrument is the body by which it is written. Cixous (1999:211) argues that

... poets, who are *the prophets of the instant* and who, at lightning speed, want to write, write, *before*, in the still-boiling time before the cooled fall-out of the narrative when we feel and it is not yet called such-and-such, this, him or her.

The poetic in Krog's writing is likewise that space in which the instant is translated into a language that, because it wants to express the inexpressible fullness of the moment of experience, is not subject to the same rules of logic and grammar to which journalistic prose must adhere. In this sense, the change of tongue in Krog's title refers also to the text's shifts into poetic tongue. The conventions of grammar and linguistic logic which mark the journalist's prose distil experience into language: they extract out of the plentitude of the moment, and they institute a delay between the event and its expression in text. The poetic for Krog and for Cixous holds out the possibility of maintaining intimacy with the instant: using the language of the lover, Cixous (2005:195) remarks that poetic writing enables one "to touch the body of the instant with the tips of the words". The instant in which the poetic arises is also, and inextricably, an embodied moment for both Cixous and Krog, and the intimate trace of the poet's body remains in the text that results. For

Cixous, poetic prose emerges from the body of the writer as a gestated being that has been hoped for: "There comes the time of imminence. A desire to write rises in my body and comes to occupy my heart. Everything beats faster. The entire body readies itself" (Cixous, 2005:192).<sup>6</sup> This poetic being that is born into text has its genesis at the intersection between the writer and her world: "It is not me, it is at the crossing of my thinking body and the flux of the living events that the thing is secreted" (Cixous, 2005:192). Expressing herself more fulsomely on her relationship to her writing, Cixous declares:

Life becomes text through my body. I am already text. History, love, violence, time, work, desire, inscribe it [the text] in my body, I make my way to where the 'fundamental language' can be heard, the body in which all languages of things, of acts and of beings are translated, in my own being, the entirety of the real worked into my flesh, captured by my nerves, by my senses, by the labour of all my cells, projected, analysed, re-composed in a book. Vision: my chest like a tabernacle. Open. I enter inside myself with my eyes closed, and it is read. This reading is carried out here by the being-who-wants-to-be-born, a *pulsion*, something that wants at all costs to get out [...]. (Quoted in, and translation from the French by Duren, 1981:48.)

The idea that the poetic arises from the inside of the body or from underground, a space of origination to which Cixous also points, where hearing is privileged over seeing, is strongly echoed in Krog's writing on the poetic.<sup>7</sup> Answering her own question about how one begins a poem, the speaker in "two years this month" replies: "I split my ears inward / tap against the inner sides to intercept tremors / desperately I flog every wound" (Krog, 2000b:52). For Krog, the capacity to hear is crucial because the poetic is a function of the tongue's capacity to translate sound. In order for the tongue to produce poetry, the ear must hear what is inside the body. In "Writing ode", the speaker argues that to write "one has to leave the daylight / the drag of fabricated voices / and go underground". There

---

6 A notable similarity between Cixous and Krog is their awareness that the poetic traditions out of which they have emerged are dominated by men. Both writers consciously reclaim the female in their poetics. Krog's poetic focus on the "New Woman", she who has experienced a rebirth in body and text, is the subject of an essay by Marthinus Beukes (2003b).

7 Cf. Taljard's article (2006) on *Kleur kom nooit alleen nie* in which she discusses the liminal, or underground space in Krog's poetic practice.

“one touches down the damp inside / one gropes through the groundless dark / to find one’s voice / to hear the sound of a poem” (Taljard, 2006:33). After one has heard this sound, “the text shudders into its unfettered form underground” and the writer “cuts it neatly loose and takes it up” (Taljard, 2006:35). These acts of creation which occur underground or within the body and must then be brought to the surface recall the epigraph to *A change of tongue* which explains Noam Chomsky’s (p. [1]) transformational rules:

Transformational Grammar has stipulated two levels of syntactic structure: deep structure (an abstract underlying structure that incorporates all the syntactic information required for the interpretation of a given sentence) and the surface structure (a structure that incorporates all the syntactic features of a sentence required to convert the sentence into a spoken or written version). Transformation links deep structure with surface structure.

If Chomsky’s words express the transformative principle at work in language, they also express, in Krog’s quotation of them, the operation of the poetic as a process of transformation through which the sounds mined from the interior or the underground are made to speak through text to the world at the surface.

### 3. Poetic voice in three strands

As well as the many instances of poetry and poetic voice scattered throughout the text, there are three large poetic strands in *A change of tongue*. Two of these strands make poetry and Krog’s identity as a poet, principal subjects of enquiry. The first is a series of chapters, indicated by the lower case (“chapter one”, etc.), that are interspersed among the upper case Chapters which bear the journalistic, present-day enquiry. The lower-case chapters provide an episodic encounter with a third person focaliser, an aspirant poet coming to (poetic) terms with her environment and her literary craft. This third person focaliser is, quite evidently, a version of the young Krog: the poems reproduced in the episodes are those the extra-textual Krog wrote as a young poet; the literary achievements charted describe the author’s early rise to prominence in the Afrikaans poetry community. The second poetic strand in *A change of tongue* explores Krog’s efforts to adapt her poetic repertoire to new and alienating places: she recounts her excursion to the Richtersveld to discover whether, after a prolonged period of intensive journalistic work, she can still produce poetry; she also describes her participation in a poetry caravan in West Africa, where the poet’s appearance, lan-

guage and poetic tradition seem to isolate her from the vibrant performance traditions in which she is called to perform. The third poetic strand comprises a series of italicised poetic interludes that seam through the text as a whole. These interludes adapt, and extend the philosophical premise of, an oral narrative told in the poetry caravan. This third strand, I shall suggest, invites the reader to experience belonging through the body and its transformational capacities, and more than any other strategy in the book enacts what Krog proposes is a major transformative function of the poetic.

### **3.1 Portrait of the artist**

The lower case, episodic chapters relate a portrait of the artist as a girl, and express the young Krog's desire to translate her body's sensuous experience of landscape and beloved into language. The first episode begins: "To melt into blue. To translate longing into the light blue loosening of sound. To stand looking up at the boy on the steps – and be born into blueness" (p. 33). This essence of blue is discovered first in the boy's eyes; it then magnifies and grows pervasive as the enviroing colour which induces a body response of "loosening", a sensation which consistently in Krog's poetry and poetic prose signifies ease and belonging. The questions produced by the first and second episodes, in the wider career quest they suggest, give the lower case chapters their function: "How does she write the blue? How does she write the boy?" and, "[t]hrough the classroom window she notes the airy amphibrach of birds against the sky. How does she write the stars suddenly in her mouth? The warmth. How does she write light?" (p. 34). Subsequent lower-case chapters pursue a composite answer to the question of how she shall come to writing. The young girl must first discover how to observe with keen attention and how to experience in her body what she observes so that her internal experience can be returned to the level of the surface where language translates sensation.

The environment in which she develops her powers of observation and experiences connection most keenly is that of the natural world. In chapter five, she explores a neglected garden on her grandfather's farm. Her senses are instantly captivated by the "luscious undergrowth, ferns, moss, overripe fruit, rotting leaves ... the frank flavour of coppery figs, the leaves rough as sandpaper" (p. 49). Venturing further, she discovers that "[i]n the middle, a white stinkwood soars above the other trees and sprays out blue". It is in relation to this tree that she learns her body's capacity to translate the external into a transformative inner experience: "She folds her body intimate-



ly around the pale, smooth trunk. Embraces its coolness, flattens her arms along the branches, heaves her head behind leaves. She becomes tree and bursts upwards to sky” (p. 49). In this example, body interacts with tree so that the altered consciousness described in the girl’s becoming tree is a function not merely of imagination but of an embodied imagination. Other experiences in the chapters suggest that a poetic sensibility can enable moments of healing merger with one’s environment by an act of transportation that is not bodily in a material sense but that “meditates” the body into its environment, in so doing shifting the body out of its previous relationship to the place it is in: for example, the girl and her family are driving one day when, in order to escape the “breath and need” with which the car has filled up, she imagines herself floating above the car, observing her family’s insignificance in a land of vast expanse. “Then she flattens herself up against the mountain. Her gigantic cheek caresses the rock. Over the sunflower fields she turns the breasts that must still come to the sun.” (p. 64.) It is, as I shall discuss later, to provide similar moments of profound empathy with place and other that Krog composes her poetic interludes. In all of these examples, the poetic is a way of experiencing in the body that imagines the dissolution of physical boundaries between oneself and objects in the world; it is also, flowing from this imagining, a way of setting forth in language a differently conceived relationship between the self and its environment.

Another path to writing for the girl of the lower-case chapters is to be found in her introduction to Afrikaans poetry. Her mother, Dot Serfontein, is a well-known Afrikaans writer and a great lover of poetry. The first time Dot recites poetry to her daughter, the girl’s response is as vivid and significant as her experience of the tree on her grandfather’s farm had been: “She feels as if she is somewhere else. Something else. [...] not her mother, not herself, but in another realm” (p. 61). Like the natural world when accessed through body and imagination, poetry transports and transforms. Mother and daughter experience their most exhilarating and intimate moment in each other’s company when they read the work of a new Afrikaans poet, Breyten Breytenbach, whose writing requires them to consider its performance qualities. Inspired by this literary heritage, the girl begins to compose her own poetry and discovers both her talent for the form and her own belief that place should belong equally to everyone. Increasingly, she experiences the writing of poetry as an act of transcribing what her body produces: “Daily she experiences attacks of verse. The poems float in her like driftwood. She picks them up as she hears them” (p. 134). When Krog recounts her

journey to the Richtersveld to write poetry, an episode I discuss later, she considers the differences between poetry and novels. Novelists, she argues, "create and oversee a landscape, poets mine a vein of sound" (p. 250). Poetry arises, Krog's shifting images suggest, within the poet's body: "It strikes you like the urge to take a dump. And when you say, not now, not this morning ... you end up with nothing more than constipated pebbles" (p. 250). Poetry requires that "if it comes, it is there, and you have to be available"; "you must be able to cleave your ears into that place, that pulsating entrance, that thin membrane where you can hear the stirring" (p. 250). If, as these lines suggest, poetry is a product of the body, its making is intimate and solitary.

While *A change of tongue* expresses its author's desire to belong to land and community, the poetic voice of the text argues for the poet's alienation. This argument is introduced in the lower-case chapters which chart the aspirant poet's alienation from the world of her peers, and suggest the idea that the poet is a conduit for language that translates her world for the paradoxical reason that she is to some extent separate from that world, that she is to that world an intimate stranger. Despite Krog's relentless pursuit of belonging, and of the approval of her fellow South Africans, she always constructs her identity as a poet in terms of marginality and the inward turn – insight, beauty and the healing potentials of the poetic tongue are hers to translate into writing because her poet self is alone, connected only to place and to the words produced by her body when it loosens into the language of place. But there is only a seeming contradiction between belonging and this form of marginality, for the argument of the poetic voice in *A change of tongue* is that we must heal into belonging not only at the external level of interaction with others, but also internally in our bodies and in our bodies' contact with place.

In *Country of my skull*, Krog (2002:210) writes her desperation to belong to a land she greatly loves.

I want to lie down. I want to embrace. I want to sing the shiny silk stems upwards. I want to ride the rust-brown seeds, the rustling frost-white growth around my ankles. Grass, red grass bareback against the flanks. This is my landscape. The marrow of my bones. The plains. The sweeping veld. The honey-blonde sandstone stone. This I love. This is what I'm made of.

Despite Krog's assertions in this extract of belonging, of having been parented and constituted by land, we cannot miss the emphasis on

desire, the disjunction between wanting and having. Later, writing about her experience of the Free State landscape, she remarks how her “eyes lick the horizon clean” (Krog, 2002:272). At the end of *Country of my skull*, Krog describes her return to the mainland after an excursion to Robben Island with the commissioners. Looking at the tip of the continent, she says,

There is a rawness in my chest. It is mine. I belong to that continent. My gaze, my eyes are one with thousands of others that have looked back over centuries towards Africa. Ours. Mine. Yes, I would die for this. (Krog, 2002:277.)

But only two lines later, she confesses her reliance on the commissioners: “When I am away from these people, I falter, I lose faith”. Her rootedness in place and claims of ownership are fragile. Her body’s desire for belonging is registered in *Country of my skull* in the focus on Krog’s eyes – eyes that see and want. In *A change of tongue*, Krog apprehends the need of a new way of relating to place, one that does not seek to translate desire into ownership despite our deeply-etched inclination to possess.

Nowhere is this struggle for an openhanded belonging better expressed than in Krog’s account of what she feels when she arrives for a two-week stay at the farm that used to belong to her family but which they were forced to sell for financial reasons. Sitting on a stone bench outside the rondavel in which she is lodging, she reflects:

My throat feels thick and ostracized, my chest hurts with the indescribable intimacy of belonging and loss. This is my place. Place that in a way never really wanted me. Place that bore my love so fruitlessly. For its veld. For its sky. For its spruits. For its grasses and trees. For its horizon which carries every other horizon I have dreamt of. A love that longs for land.

They can sell it, take it, divide it, pawn it, waste it. That will be all right. If only, until I die, I can come and sit here. So quiet. So here. So completely dissolved into where I belong. I will never lay claim to it. Ever. If I can just come and sit here, in the autumn, with my heart so light-headed. (p. 36.)

She begins by claiming ownership of what she sees, but her body, registering both rejection by and desire for place, tells her that this land cannot belong to her. So she comes to a new accommodation: she will not claim place, instead she will ask only to sit with place, to allow her body communion with place in a dissolution of self that

expresses our inalienable unity with our environment. It is significant that this rejection of ownership results in a heart that is light-headed, so unlike the imprisoning skull in which place had been trapped for her. It is also important that this realisation happens in a place that had been her family's farm, that piece of land so basic to a traditional Afrikaans (and Afrikaans literary) apprehension of identity.

In *White writing*, Coetzee describes the emphasis in the Afrikaans plaasroman on natural right, which accrues to the founding fathers because they pay for the farm with their bodies: "they hack it out of primeval bush, they defend it against barbarians, they leave their bones behind in its soil" (Coetzee, 1988:85). Subsequent, descendant owners deserve their inheritance of natural right by practicing, again through the labour of their bodies, good stewardship of the farm. Because of this relation to land, Coetzee argues, tragedy enters the plaasroman when the good steward who loves his land is forced off his ancestral farm (Coetzee, 1988:86). Krog's family is forced off their farm, despite their good stewardship and love of it, by financial and security considerations. Writing of this, Krog, who was nourished by and writes poetry within an Afrikaans literary tradition, deliberately subverts the plaasroman by refusing tragedy: one does not have to own place to belong to it, to experience unity with it. This recognition is what she seeks to translate into her experience of place more generally. One of the ends Krog seeks to accomplish in her literary change of tongue is the subversion of the plaasroman with its emphasis on ownership as a function of the Afrikaans body's relationship to farm. Although farm is the first locus of her engagement as a young girl, with place and with literature, as the lower case chapters show us, the garden in which she experiences place and language so intimately for the first time is only incidentally part of the farm. It might have been any garden; the girl did not need to own it or inherit it. If Krog's conclusion in the extract above is that what we need is not ownership of land but sufficiency in merely sitting with place, the poetic voice in the other strands I have identified advance the even more transformative idea that we need to engage with, and find a way of sitting with, landscape that alienates us because it has never been our own.

### **3.2 Poetic journeys**

In the second poetic strand of *A change of tongue*, Krog takes two trips, one to write and one to perform poetry. The first of these trips is to the Richtersveld, and follows a period of intensive journalistic work on the TRC. More than anything, she wishes to discover

whether she can still write poetry, and in Afrikaans, after so many months of prose writing in English. She wonders, echoing the words of a Bushman narrative about the relationship between body, place and story, “[w]ill anything ever come drifting towards her from afar if she sends her ears out into nothingness?” (p. 249). She hopes to “breathe in the mountainous air” in the Richtersveld and find a rejuvenation that leads to poetry, but what she discovers upon arriving there is a barren, rocky and alien landscape in which she feels out of place and for which she lacks language and feeling. Not only does this place not belong to her, but she does not desire it to belong to her. What she sees is ugly to her: “No majestic formations or dramatic colouring – just a harsh mess of stone. Untidy stone” (p. 251). This is not a landscape that inspires romantic language or the elegiac tone. Indeed it inspires no language at all: “She realizes that she has only one word for stone, and that is stone” (p. 251). She discovers that she needs to learn a new vocabulary in order to write that which is to her “unforgeable, insoluble, inaccessible” (p. 253). However, she must learn this vocabulary not simply by accumulating new words but also by discovering how to establish communication between her body and foreign territory. Before language can find her, she must simply sit with place; she must experience her alienation and accept it: “Her one-man tent is pitched on the bank of the River. The whole night it flows past her, silent and broad as blood” (p. 252). The extremes of temperature seem to reject her body: “Dry, clear, fierce heat in the day, but cold at night. She simply sits next to the jeep. Mostly with her head on her knees” (p. 251). This waiting is rewarded when “as the days fall away in blurs of heat and stone, she feels the scales of tension and exhaustion and ageing and politics slowly melting in her veins” (p. 251). Now that her body has begun to dissolve its limiting capacities to experience place, she can begin to consult those to whom the landscape is familiar and dear, and allow their ways of speaking to teach her how to be in their place. She spends a day with a goatherd for whom each goat makes a distinctive bleat. She interviews “the people of the stone desert” and her ears “gulp” their speech: “Such language. Such inflection. Such secure grip. Healing her mother tongue” (p. 252). She also seeks help from a local geologist for whom the language of stone is intimate and indispensable: “He helps her trace dolorite squirting like toothpaste through the crust of the earth. He points out lighter granite peeling in regular layers. He breathes fault-line and matrices of mud” (p. 253). It is as reward for these efforts at finding vocabulary and ways of relating to place, that place eventually offers itself to her body’s internal ears and allows her to bring poetry to the surface:

She's been here a week. The mountain on the other side of the River looks as if it's leaking into the midday hour. It slakes in blue, strains away from its tainted bronze. The vygies on the banks hiss in cyanide pink. ... She lies down on the sandbank and drowns between shade and grazing and heat.

Then she hears it. Faintly. She sits upright. It steps softly into her blood: "*Ek is hier ... ek's by jou ... ek het gekom in laventel blou.*" Again please, she pleads. "I am here. I'm with you. I have come in lavender blue."

She has no pencil, no paper, but she lies back. She breathes through her ear, overcome with loose-limbed happiness. (p. 253-254.)

The land gives her this language, not of stone, but of something soft, and it delivers poetry to her blood from which words take shape and rise within her. The poetic is thus a moment of transformation that is embodied; it is both a means of communication and also a gift between landscape and body. That it speaks in her blood suggests a new concept of blood relation to land, one that has nothing to do with inheritance of ownership. She breathes synaesthetically through her ear because the language she hears is as oxygen to her, life-sustaining.

The second trip Krog takes is in a poetry caravan of African poets destined for Timbuktu. The journey is often harrowing, and the Southern African poets have to learn about a region of Africa that feels unfamiliar, even "un-African" to them. Before she sets off, Krog is immunised against all manner of disease; she is armed with mosquito repellent, as well as drugs for diarrhea, malaria and bacteria. She is told horror stories about burrowing African moth larvae, and is even entreated by her physician to take with her a litre of her own blood. The African landscape beyond South Africa is represented to her as a place of extreme body peril and otherness, of invasion and possession. She does indeed suffer all the usual ailments of traveling in places where sanitation is dubious and food unfamiliar. As well as these ills, Krog feels inadequate as an African poet because she is unfamiliar with performance traditions of poetry. She also doubts her legitimacy in representing South Africa to black poets from the rest of the continent. She feels herself to be, in this alien landscape among African poets, utterly alone: "Her whole body pains from it. Is loneliness a kind of desperate non-belonging?" (p. 300). But in the very performance contexts in which she feels so other and insufficient, she is called forth by her fellow poets and challenged to exceed her limitations. Again, she must incorporate

new registers and ways of communicating into her repertoire. She begins to write poems that can be performed, giving careful attention to sound and “how to use various parts and levels of her voice” (p. 303). She notices what surrounds her and, “without thinking, she writes it into the poem” (p. 306). Knowing that no one understands Afrikaans, she nevertheless performs in Timbuktu in her native tongue, and it proves to be a moment of profound healing:

... as her first words tumble across the darkening square, something in her body gives. Here the language resounds that gave her soul existence: scarred and contaminated by so much shame and humiliation at having lost its compassion, at ruling without mercy. But in its effort to find a new rhythm in a new land, the language, as in its years of origin, has become vulnerable and fragile on the tongues of its speakers. (p. 329.)

This reward, which she feels in her body’s letting go of the inadequacies and shame she had felt in relation to her language, is given her because she has made so much effort to adapt to a place and its customs when they had felt forbiddingly foreign to her. The response of her audience, a standing ovation and elated ululation, is not a response to the meaning of her poem but rather to the sight and sound of her body finding its ease in place and poetry – the result, that is, of her efforts to become part of place and caravan through staying with what she had experienced as alienating. The air in that moment feels to her “fair with tolerance. The frame of the earth is green. A forest breathes in her chest” (p. 329).

In both visits, which together, on my reading, comprise the text’s second poetic strand, Krog must struggle with her language and her body in place that alienates her. The first visit takes her into a region of South Africa she had not known; the second visit takes her beyond national landscapes. In both cases she finds that she is rewarded with ease of body and with poetry which she can bring to the surface of herself because of her efforts at staying with, and learning, place that will not permit her “ownership” of it. The lower-case chapters and the accounts of two visits to foreign landscapes comprise poetic strands that articulate Krog’s experience of the relationship between landscape, body and poetry. The subject of these strands is, to a large extent, the product we call poetry. The way in which poetry emerges out of the body’s communication with place articulates Krog’s version of a poetics of transformation. In the third poetic strand Krog writes a series of poetic meditations on landscape and its inhabitants that take up spaces of interlude between substantive parts of the text. These interludes speak entirely

in the poetic voice. They do not take as their subject the product of poetry. Rather, they enact a transformative poetics by creating a second-person interlocutor through which the reader is drawn into the text.

### **3.3 Interludes**

In the first of the interludes, "Rain", you encounter the rain, you grip its forearms, "your back against its belly" (Krog, 2007:9). The scene is at first one of formless "vapour and deluge", but then an electric storm illuminates stone reefs. The emergent landscape is uninhabited by humans, except for you who sees the nebulous take form. All creatures and aspects of the environment have parity: both you and the rain have bodies and relate to each other as embodied entities. In the second interlude, "giraffe", the image of an untrammelled edenic landscape is embellished, and you come to see a second person, who is carving stone, through the eyes of the giraffe. The way in which apprehension takes place in these interludes suggests the permeability of boundaries that is the mode of the poetic: one does not possess a singular agency nor does one possess the world one sees. Rather, the "you" of these interludes is deeply connected to place and sees through the agency of that connection.

And you and the giraffe and the man and the stone breathe through one another. Through the ears of the giraffe you hear that the universe is inscribed in the body of the man, that the giraffe snorts from the stone, that you yourself gleam in geometric patterns across its hide. You sense that the man feels himself at one with the sky and the birds and the veld and the animals. That he reads the entire creation in his body. [...] For the man and you and the giraffe and the stone there is no end, because everything carries the word of the other in its body. You are only heard because your word is embodied by them. (Krog, 2003:137.)

The interludes ask us to imagine ourselves into this world in which each component lives through the others. In a sense, we are incarnated only in and through others, and man is inseparable from environment.

In subsequent interludes, however, human history imposes its patterns of segregation and independence on the landscape, and the second-person interlocutor deteriorates dramatically into a state of illness and alienation. In the final interlude, however, there is an "I" – an eagle, the far-sighted eye – who, seeing you from afar, experiences the pull of your pain and vulnerability:



In a rush I swoop down, I gather you in my arms, I hold you. I rock you. Past spilling and violence and the debris of dreams, I cradle your head in my hand and put your dry lips to my breast. My chest overflows. [...] How halved I've been without this. (Krog, 2003:367.)

"I" care for your body so that it can be restored to life: "Your burdened, beautiful back I caress, vertebra by vertebra, from my deepest memory. I take your blood, so light it could have been dust, and skim from it ages of exhaustion, virus and hunger". And finally, when you open your eyes "I see myself for the first time. As you open your eyes, you see yourself there, compellingly completed" (Krog, 2003: 367). This is an articulation of the idea that our humanity depends on our relationship to one another, that we cannot be human in isolation. But Krog extends the philosophy to a relation between the environment and all sentient beings. The seventh interlude is also evidently a response to a preceding chapter in the journalistic mode in which Krog visits a hospital in the eastern Cape to find AIDS sufferers, who have been discarded by the healthy, dying undignified, lonely deaths. One of the sufferers "hardly has skin or flesh left. Black bone splinted there. No need for tongue. Only breath turning ill blood over and over" (Krog, 2003:354). Devastated by what she has seen, Krog asks,

What has happened to us? Where are all the dreams we once had for ourselves? [...] How could we ever become that, how could we become whole, when parts of what we are die every day into silently stacked-away brooms of bones? (Krog, 2003:354.)

She asks, in other words, how we can imagine ourselves without those whom we let die in a state of forgottenness, wordlessness, physical suffering and indignity.

Krog argues elsewhere that in these "pre-passages", "the poetic voice became a tool to find the 'you'" so that "the impossibility, the impoverishment, of being simply and only 'I'" could be acknowledged (Krog, 2007:40-41). In the interludes, the poetic voice calls us back into our bodies and our environment to reimagine the relationship between place, self and other. It is this act of imagining, of translating ourselves into other experiences – that of the willow, that of the child on the train tracks, that of the "you" rescued by the eagle "I" – that is enabled by the literary zone. In the interludes, there is a doubling of this literary capacity because not only are we invited to translate ourselves into the experiences they proffer, but the interludes themselves arise out of Krog's translation and transforma-

tion of a Fulani oral narrative she had heard while on the poetry caravan. In the Fulani tale, twins are born and grow up, one a human-brother, the other a snake-brother. One day, on his return from the desert, the human-brother becomes ill, battles to breathe and coughs up seven lumps: "The snake-brother recognized a mist of sky, a word of giraffe, a burning moon, a weeping tree, a clump of water, a railroad track and a feathered wing" (p. 321). When the human-brother admits he does not understand the meaning of these things, the snake-brother says, "I will teach you to become them, to see what they mean ... and live with grace on the earth" (p. 321). Krog has made of the seven lumps seven corresponding interludes: "rain", "giraffe", "moon", "willow", "river", "child" and "wing". Each object asks us to become it and in becoming it, to relearn how to live with grace on the earth. The processes of imaginative transformation involved in these acts of "becoming" suggest the connection Krog posits in *A change of tongue* between living with grace on the earth and the transformative mode of the poetic.

#### 4. Conclusion

To "live with grace on the earth" suggests a way of being that transcends the categorical. In its religious deployment, grace is a state of virtue or excellence that enables one to experience one's unity with the divine even though one lives in a world characterised by division and alienation. In a state of grace, the alien other becomes the beloved because grace thus conceived is the agent and condition of dissolution. There is clearly this meaning in Krog's enactment of the poetic: it is through poetry, poetic prose and the poetic imagination that a variety of others in *A change of tongue* – landscapes, flora, people, foreign performance genres – enter into the interior of the poet where they communicate with her, producing sound that is brought to the surface in words. The state of grace is one of surrender and also of creativity born of surrender. If we think of grace and surrender as linked concepts (as I am arguing they are in Krog's understanding of the poetic in *A change of tongue*), then we can begin to apprehend the other meaning of "learning to 'live with grace on the earth'" with which Krog's writing, more generally, grapples. For grace might also mean clemency, reprieve and forgiveness. These graces – for which Krog hopes on behalf of herself, Afrikaners, South Africans, perpetrators and so on – lift the sentence upon one, remove one from the divisions one has wrought between oneself and one's others. In her cycle "Country of grief and grace" in *Down to my last skin*, it is apparent that "grace" is the state of having been forgiven and of having been permitted to go with the forgiver

into a future that, in the absence of forgiveness, would have been a divided one. It is through the poetic that Krog asks for this forgiveness at the same time that she imagines the country of grace in which forgiveness has been granted. For Krog, then, the poetic transforms in the direction of reconciliation, that state of grace – implying surrender, forgiveness and imagination – that occurs between the body, its environment and language.

### List of references

- BEUKES, M. 2003a. Problematisering van die skryfproses na aanleiding van Antjie Krog se “skryfode” uit *Kleur kom nooit alleen nie*. *Stilet*, 15(1):1-15.
- BEUKES, M. 2003b. The birth of the “new woman”: Antjie Krog and gynogenesis as a discourse of power. (In Wasserman, H. & Jacons, S., eds. *Shifting selves: post-apartheid essays on mass media, culture and identity*. Cape Town: Kwela. p. 167-180.)
- CIXOUS, H. 1999. Post-word: letter to Martin McQuillan. Trans. by E. Prenowitz. (In Mcquillan, M., MacDonald, G. & Purves, R., eds. *Post-theory: new directions in criticism*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. p. 209-213.)
- CIXOUS, H. 2005. *Stigmata: escaping texts*. New York: Routledge.
- CIXOUS, H. & CALEE-GRUBER, M. 1997. *Rootprints: memory and life writing*. New York: Routledge.
- COETZEE, J.M. 1988. *White writing: on the culture of letters in South Africa*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- DUREN, B. 1981. Cixous’ exorbitant texts. *Sub-Stance*, 32:39-51.
- KROG, A. 1989. *Lady Anne*. Johannesburg: Taurus.
- KROG, A. 2000a. *Kleur kom nooit alleen nie*. Cape Town: Kwela.
- KROG, A. 2000b. *Down to my last skin*. Johannesburg: Random House.
- KROG, A. 2000c. *Down to my last skin: a conversation with Antjie Krog*. Interview with Yvette Christianse and Karen Press. *Connect: art politics, theory, practice*: 11-20, Fall.
- KROG, A. 2002. *Country of my skull*. Johannesburg: Random House.
- KROG, A. 2003. *A change of tongue*. Johannesburg: Random House.
- KROG, A. 2007. Fact bordering fiction and the honesty of “I”. *River teeth*, 8(2):34-43.
- MARSHALL, C. 2007. A change of tongue: Antjie Krog’s poetry in English. *Scrutiny2*, 12(1):77-92.
- MEYER, S. 2002. The only truth stands skinned in sound: Antjie Krog as translator. *Scrutiny2*, 7(2):3-18.
- TALJARD, M. 2006. Die skryf vind plaas in selfgeveg: versoeningstrategieë in *Kleur kom nooit alleen nie* deur Antjie Krog. *Literator*, 27(1):141-162.
- VAN SCHALKWYK, P. 2006. Country of my skull/skull of my country: Krog and Zagajewski, South Africa and Poland. *Literator*, 27(3):109-134.
- VILJOEN, L. 2003. Die digter as reisiger: twee gedigsiklusse van Leipoldt en Krog. *Stilet*, 15(1):80-100.

**Key concepts:**

body and environment

Krog, Antjie: *A change of tongue*

poetic voice

transformation

**Kernbegrippe:**

digterstem

Krog, Antjie: *A change of tongue*

liggaam en omgewing

transformasie