

“How do I Understand Myself in this Text-tortured Land?”:

Identity, Belonging and Textuality in Antjie Krog’s

A Change of Tongue, Down to My Last Skin and Body Bereft.

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2006

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Arts
in the School of Literary Studies, Media and Creative Arts, Faculty of
Humanities, Development and Social Sciences in the University of
KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg.

Declaration:

Unless specifically stated to the contrary in the text, this thesis is my own original work and all quotations have been properly referenced.

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Abstract:

This thesis explores the question, “What literary strategies can be employed to allow as many people as possible to identify themselves positively with South Africa as a nation and a country?”. I focus in particular on the possibilities for identification open to white South African women, engaging with Antjie Krog’s English texts, *A Change of Tongue*, *Down to My Last Skin* and *Body Bereft*.

I seek to identify the textual strategies, such as a fluid structure, shifts between genre and a multiplicity of points of view, which Krog employs to examine this topic, and to highlight the ways in which the literary text is able to facilitate a fuller engagement with issues of difference and belonging in society than other discursive forms. I also consider several theoretical concepts, namely supplementarity, displacement and diaspora, that I believe offer useful ways of understanding the transformation of individual subjectivity within a transitional society.

I then explore the ways in which women identify with, and thereby create their own space within, the nation. I investigate the ways in which Krog represents women in *A Change of Tongue*, and discuss how Krog uses ‘the body’ as a theoretical site and a performative medium through which to explore the possibilities, and the limitations, for identification with the nation facing white South African women. I also propose that by writing ‘the body’, Krog foregrounds her own act of writing thereby highlighting the construction and representation of her ‘self’ through the text.

I proceed to consider Krog's use of poetry as a textual strategy that enables her to explore the nuances of these themes in ways which prose does not allow. I propose that lyric poetry, as a mode of expression which emphasises the allusive, the imaginative or the affective, has a capacity to render in language those experiences, emotions and sensations that are often considered intangible or elusive. Through a selection of poems from *Down to My Last Skin* and *Body Bereft*, I examine the way in which Krog constantly re-writes the themes of belonging and identity, as well as interrogate Krog's use of poetry as a strategy that permits both the writer and the reader access to new ways of understanding experiences, in particular the way apparently ephemeral experiences can be rooted in the body. I also briefly consider the significance of the act of translation in relation to the reading of Krog's poems.

I conclude by suggesting that in *A Change of Tongue*, *Down to My Last Skin* and *Body Bereft* Krog engages with the project of "[writing] the white female experience back into the body of South African literature" (Jacobson "No Woman" 18), and in so doing offers possible ways in which white South African women can claim a sense of belonging within society as well as ways in which they can challenge, resist, re-construct and create their identities both as women, and as South Africans.

Acknowledgements:

My deepest thanks to my supervisor, Professor Duncan Brown, for his astute insights and consistent support: his superb guidance has transformed this potentially daunting process into a highly enjoyable one.

A heartfelt thank you to my colleagues and friends in Pietermaritzburg: friendship, love and support unbidden are the sweetest gifts.

And last, but not least in love, thank you to my parents, Neil and Yvonne, and my sister, Amy. We all need a story; you gave me mine.

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Introduction

The question, “What does it mean to be South African?”, continues to be debated in the public arena and continues to be entangled with the issue of race. However, as Shaun de Waal claims, “white writers...seem to be simply sidestepping the issue of race, choosing not to address it...They know it’s there, they just don’t want to talk about it” (1). The question that I would raise is not “What does it mean to be South African?”, but “What strategies can be employed to allow as many people as possible to identify themselves positively with South Africa as a nation and a country?”. This thesis aims to explore this question in general, but to focus in particular on what possibilities for identification are open to white South African women, engaging with Antjie Krog’s English texts, *A Change of Tongue*, *Down to My Last Skin* and *Body Bereft* – texts which seem to be both suggestive and challenging in this regard. De Waal proposes that novels are no longer expected or required to deal with “broad social realities”; they can “eschew the big political gesture” (1). Rather novels can begin to do the thing “[they] do so well”, that is to turn inward and “handle more subtle, personal inner states” (1). He goes on to argue that “nowadays novels don’t really need to do what radio shows, the opinion pages of newspapers and online letters from the president can do so much better” (1). In making such a statement De Waal appears to be separating the personal and the political, relegating the personal to the sphere of art and literature and locating the political exclusively in the public arena. The danger in such an approach is that the nation’s literature is robbed of its power, and the key role of narrative in social transformation or nation-building is overlooked.

While I would agree that novels are able to “handle more subtle, personal inner states”, I would argue that those personal states are always situated within a political context and that what novels have the potential to “do so well” is to illuminate the intricate and often hidden connections between the personal and the political. Novels, and works of fiction generally, have the imaginative space in which to create new answers and new questions, and to conceptualise new possibilities for individuals and the societies in which they live.

The construction of identity and the processes of identification are deeply embedded in language, and literary studies provides a useful framework for exploring emerging identities within a given context. Literary studies also allows for an exploration of the narrative of a nation and “the ambivalent...perspective of nation as narration” (Bhabha 4). It is this idea of ‘nation as narration’ that Homi K. Bhabha argues “will establish the cultural boundaries of the nation so that they may be acknowledged as ‘containing’ thresholds of meaning that must be crossed, erased, and translated in the process of cultural production” (4). In Krog’s texts these ‘thresholds of meaning’ are highlighted, and possible strategies for crossing, erasure and translation are investigated in order that new modes of cultural identification may be produced.

It is interesting to note that while a number of contemporary post-apartheid South African novels offer productive possibilities for black and white male identities and black female identities¹, there is an alarming absence regarding the points of positive identification made available to white women. As a white South African woman I have a personal

¹ See K. Sello Duiker’s *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* (2001), Nadine Gordimer’s *The House Gun* (1999), Achmat Dangor’s *Bitter Fruit* (2001) and Shamim Sarif’s *The World Unseen* (2001).

interest in the way in which this group is represented within South African literature. I have found it very difficult to identify with characters represented in contemporary South African novels, and feel that this is problematic because it potentially limits the ways in which I am able to relate to a broadly 'South African' identity and thereby invest myself in this country. Beyond my personal response appears to lie a larger socio-literary problem. As Eva Hunter points out in her essay on South African novels in English by white women, white South African women are often characterised in very negative and limiting ways (46). This is significant as the manner in which women are characterised and represented through language contributes to a society's implicit understanding of what it means to be female, which in turn impacts on the ways in which women are allowed to be female. It is enlightening to explore how a writer such as Krog writes women in her English texts, in order to investigate the modes through which women identify with, and thereby create their own space within, the nation, as well as how this may open up new, more affirming, possibilities.

The question of how a gendered (racialised?) subject, or individual, identifies with a given nation is very complex, complicated by poststructuralist understandings of the fluidity of subjectivity and the difficulty of defining 'nation'. It seems that in order to function as a nation-state, among other things a collective of individuals must in some way have their sense of identity invested in that particular concept of nation. Following Bhabha's idea of 'the nation as narration', I propose to use the medium of literature

because of its capacity to both reflect and to shape social experiences, to explore how an individual negotiates a variety of points of identification within a changing nation.

Poststructuralist theory proposes that subjectivity, acquired in and through language, is “inherently unstable and...constantly in process” (Weedon 84). I find this formulation particularly useful in that it highlights both the fluidity and instability of subjectivity, and overtly identifies the connection between language and subjectivity, which are key elements in understanding the formation of identity and the processes of identification. However, as Kathryn Woodward points out, Lacan argues that although this inherent instability characterises subjectivity:

the subject still longs for the unitary self and ...thus [there is] an ongoing process of identification where we seek some unified sense of ourselves through symbolic systems...Having first adopted an identity from outside the self, we go on identifying with what we want to be, but what is separate from the self, so that the self is permanently divided within itself. (45)

It is thus this process of identification that proves to be most interesting to this project: the exploration of the self as divided and of the symbolic systems through which the self seeks to gain a semblance of stability. In *A Change of Tongue* Krog foregrounds the difficulty of maintaining a coherent sense of self that still allows for change and development. Through this text she is able to make visible the ways in which the self both expands and defines itself in the context of a given society. Therefore as Krog, the

narrator-protagonist of *A Change of Tongue*, travels through South Africa recording the progress, or lack thereof, that has taken place since 1994, she is not only recording the developing character of the country but she is also highlighting the changes that have taken place within her own sense of identity. In a similar manner, *Down to My Last Skin* and *Body Bereft* present a composite picture of the multiple points of identification open to Krog. Through these volumes of poetry Krog reveals the challenges of negotiating a variety of subjectivities that include poet, mother, wife, activist, daughter and woman. This negotiation emphasizes the fluidity of subjectivity and the processes through which identifications are made that grant a degree of stability to the subject.

In discussing their theories on nomadism, Deleuze and Guattari introduce the concept of itinerant subjectivities, or subjectivities that are able to move, transcend traditional boundaries and be displaced. This is a useful notion, especially as applied by Stephen Clingman to a discussion of Bram Fischer and his adoption of disguise while on the run from security police. Clingman argues that when subjects are displaced or “dislodged from previous moorings, other linkages and imaginings [are] possible, other constellations of interaction and attachment [become] visible” (9). This concept of displacement re-echoes in Krog’s writing, but instead of casting it in a negative and inhibitory light it appears that Krog, like Clingman, approaches subjectivity with the understanding that “the self can be displaced – even from itself – and so find other linkages and possibilities of being. It can also...find forms of horizontal connections with others – a chain of connections across the spectrum of human identity” (10). Such displacement can be both positive and productive because it means that “we can change

our sense of identification through connection with others...we can transform and extend our sense of place and belonging...[and] this will help produce new imaginings” (12). The positive and productive nature of displacement is powerfully revealed in Krog’s narration in *A Change of Tongue* of her journey with the Poetry Caravan to Timbuktu (286). That is not to say that the process of displacement is an easy one:

Everyone seems to be sick. Amina has a fever, Were Were is throwing up, Zein spent the night fighting stomach cramps. Nobody looks up as they stumble from their rooms. Everyone looks slightly dismayed, but nobody says a word. It is our continent. Ours. And we take what it dishes up for us. (320)

What are seen as the issues of the continent come to the fore as the accountant voices the question, “what is the matter with this continent?” (330). He goes on to say:

African kills African. African is making African go hungry. African robs African. And those calling the loudest for their rights are the corrupt and fat ones. [...]
Each and every one of us must take the blame for the corruption, the inhumanity and the moral bankruptcy that Africa is experiencing. (330 –331)

However, this is counter-balanced by the optimism that pervades the experience of the written word.

Through being physically displaced from the South African context, the narrator-protagonist is (finally) able to identify more positively with the nation (and the

continent). During the course of the trip she moves from feeling that “she had dressed inappropriately, that she was using the wrong language, that she was caught up in the wrong genre” to knowing “she wants to be nowhere else but here, wants to be from nowhere else but here, this continent fills her so with anguish and love – this black, battered but lovely heart” (293, 333). Thus it is through displacement that identifications are intensified and actualised.

The role of language is central to this discussion as “language differentiates and gives meaning to assertive and compliant behaviour, and teaches us what is socially accepted as normal. Yet language is not monolithic. Dominant meanings can be contested and alternative meanings affirmed” (Weedon 73). Thus the literature of a society provides a useful insight into how both the individuals and the society operate. Literature also has a transformative power because “in the reading process the reader is subject to the textual strategies of the writing in question and its attempts to position her as subject and extend to her its values and view of the world” (ibid.168). Thus depending on the textual strategies employed by writers and the particular views they wish to endorse, texts can both resist and challenge the dominant social systems and, in challenging them, open up new possibilities for their readers. Also, because “different discourses provide a range of modes of subjectivity, and the ways in which particular discourses constitute subjectivity have implications for the process of reproducing or contesting power relations”, it is important to examine how individuals engage in the processes of identification, and how they negotiate their identities, within a given society because that will influence to what degree they resist or comply with systems in that society (ibid. 4, 88). Thus, in order to

encourage white South Africans to invest in the construct of the South African nation, the processes that facilitate positive identifications must be understood. I would argue that in *A Change of Tongue*, *Down to My Last Skin* and *Body Bereft*, Krog shows a keen awareness of language as deeply embedded in the prevailing discourses, and she challenges those discourses by experimenting with language and form and foregrounding the ways in which characters identify with the South African nation. In so doing she creates new options with which her readers can engage.

Gender itself is not an uncontested concept, but for my purposes here I will be using the concept in a performative sense, in that gender is not a given, but rather a performative strategy employed in the construction and expression of identity (Butler 25). Thus, the way that gendered individuals are represented within texts is significant as that representation either allows for, or prohibits, the formation and expression of certain identity positions or modes of subjectivity and identification. In *Down to My Last Skin* and *Body Bereft*, Krog explores the ways in which women are represented and, in compiling these collections of mostly self-translated poems, she challenges the ways in which she has been represented. Through the inclusion of poems such as “Ma will be Late”, Krog points to the performative strategies involved in constructing an identity and maintaining points of identification when she writes that her performance as wife and mother “makes me neither poet nor human/ in the ambush of breath/ I die into woman” (45).

A well-known definition for ‘nation’ is Benedict Anderson’s formulation of “an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (6). This

definition foregrounds the constructed nature of the concept 'nation', and allows a space in which the concept can be continually re-imagined. Thus nations are always-already in a state of change as they constantly re-imagine themselves in order to maintain their coherence and cohesion in a rapidly changing global environment. This sentiment is echoed in Radhakrishnan's comment that "nationalism is not a monolithic phenomenon to be deemed entirely good or bad; nationalism is a contradictory discourse and its internal contradictions need to be unpacked in their historical specificity" (82). Thus the concept of nation is itself not fixed and stable but rather open to processes of change.

Le Pere and Lambrechts argue that "South Africa's nation building takes place on the foundations of ethnonationalism, racial identity and the cultural politics of ethnic solidarity", and that the aim is the "shaping of an immanent and transcendent South African identity, one in which all its citizens feel authenticated through a felt allegiance to a common nationhood and identity" (25, 24). A key point in this argument is that "citizens feel authenticated" and therefore "national identity would be a negotiated process of self-definition" (24). Thus the development of a South African identity must "move away from focusing on identity construction as differentiation to identity construction as meeting point" (24), and it is important to explore the strategies that make this possible.

Homi K. Bhabha notes that "to study the nation through its narrative address does not merely draw attention to its language and rhetoric; it also attempts to alter the conceptual object itself" (3). Similarly, Le Pere and Lambrechts quote Farrands as showing that just

as “changes in the state and state system should reshape and transform identity patterns” so too can “forms of identity...undermine or legitimate particular forms of power...they give shape to social and political relations” (16). Therefore, both identities and the narratives through which they are expressed can work to transform the concept of nation in any given society. As a result, it is vital that productive identities are recognized and imagined in order to further facilitate the development of a cohesive and inclusive nation that continues to allow space for a variety of individual identifications. I contend that Krog’s English texts, *A Change of Tongue*, *Down to My Last Skin* and *Body Bereft*, provide examples of the ways in which writers are able to facilitate the development of an inclusive and authenticating national identity. My proposal is that Krog achieves this through her willingness to engage with uncertainty, interrogate areas of taboo, attempt to express ideas and emotions which do not sit comfortably in language and, ultimately, imagine new and creative points of identification for South Africans, especially white South African women.



In examining the available literature, I became aware of the paucity of recent material that engaged with my area of interest. The 2001 edition of *Poetics Today*, edited by Leon de Kock and entitled “South Africa and the Global Imaginary”, remains strangely silent on the topic of white women and South African writing, as does *Senses of Culture: South African Culture Studies*, edited by Sarah Nuttall and Cheryl-Ann Michael, published in 2000. Of the two volumes from the Social Identities South Africa Series, edited by

Robert Krieger and Abebe Zegeye and published in 2001, namely *Social Identities in the New South Africa* and *Culture in the New South Africa*, only the latter contains articles that begin to engage with the issues of whiteness and women's writing (see Parker and Wicomb). Both of these articles focus on Afrikaans writing and both stop short of exploring texts' possibilities in creating positive spaces of identification for white South African women.

The question this project is engaged with is whether Krog's texts offer positive points of identification for white South African women and, if so, what strategies and techniques she employs to achieve this. The emphasis here is in seeking modes that will allow women readers to imagine new, creative ways of identifying with, and investing themselves in, the South African nation. In an article published in 2004, entitled "A Whiter Shade of Pale: White Femininity as Guilty Masquerade in 'New' (White) South African Women's Writing", Georgina Horrell explores "the negotiation of identity performed by white women in contemporary South African narratives" (774). However, Horrell emphasises that these stories are of "guilt and alienation...of women's place in a space inscribed by shame, fear, power and desire", and she goes on to suggest that "white women writers must of necessity, it would seem, seek a discourse of self-effacement" (776). I would argue that white women writers must actively seek to create new possibilities and imagine new ways of being that can be productively adopted by white South African women in order to become fully and positively invested in South African society. It is my contention that in *A Change of Tongue*, *Down to My Last Skin* and *Body Bereft*, Krog is able to seek out, and where necessary create, positive points of

identification for her readers, and in doing so she actively enables the processes of national identity formation.

In her essay “Five Afrikaner Texts and the Rehabilitation of Whiteness”, Zoë Wicomb examines Afrikaans texts for “textual strategies for refiguring [Afrikaner identity] in relation to whiteness” (159), particularly because in a post-apartheid context “whiteness, the condition...is no longer one to be cherished” (159). Wicomb argues that “as a construct, whiteness cannot be fully addressed”, and it is only “from within and bound up with the meaning of a specific ethnic group that a revision can emerge” (159). She shows that “what contemporary literature appears to engage with is a new meaningfulness of ethnic tags...ones which can be divested of received meanings and can be negotiated afresh” (180). She concludes by pointing to the binary relationship between Afrikaans and English, and highlighting the fact that English remains a “[cultural space that]...is necessarily one where whiteness will continue to reside in silence and anonymity” (180). The effect of this is to render a sector of the South African society voiceless and unable to participate in the formation of new personal and national identifications. In the light of this it is extremely significant that Krog has chosen to publish *A Change of Tongue* in English and that she has worked to translate her poetry for an English audience. I propose that in doing so Krog creates a space through which English-speaking white South Africans can find a voice and new ways of identifying – even if through the work of an ‘Afrikaans’ writer.

There is obviously a great amount written about Krog as an Afrikaans writer and poet, and more recently there has been a special interest in her writing on the Truth and

Reconciliation Commission in *Country of My Skull*. Of particular interest to this study, however, is an essay by Stephan Meyer, which explores Krog's role as translator, focusing on her poetry collection *Down to My Last Skin*. Meyer discusses what is lost and gained through translation, highlighting the fact that poems shift and transform through the process of translation and that some poems defy translation altogether. Meyer also explores the themes that Krog tackles through the selection of her poetry, and he examines the way in which Krog actively works to re-present herself through this collection of poetry. While Meyer does comment that Krog's inclusion of the cycle "Lady Anne Barnard at the Cape" is "particularly significant for English writing in South Africa" (14), he does not explore the implications of this choice for the literary representation of English-speaking white women. Krog's engagement with the historical character of Lady Anne is complex, as she attempts to find through this personality new possibilities for herself as a writer and yet is frustrated by this character's apparent lack of substance. However, it is through a process of displacement and rejection that Krog is able to transform the deficiencies of Lady Anne into creative and productive points of identification. Krog displaces her own feelings of ineffectualness as a white liberal onto the character of Lady Anne, and in so doing is able to reject her and that subject position. This in turn allows for a space in which a new subjectivity can be imagined that is able to incorporate both the ideas of whiteness and effective resistance to colonial and patriarchal power.

Elleke Boehmer claims that "when compared to Schreiner and Plaatje, more recent South African novels in English have been distinctly less comfortable with, and less creative,

less exploratory about, indeterminacy – by which I mean indeterminacy in form and language as well as subject matter” (44). I would argue that *A Change of Tongue* echoes *The Story of an African Farm* and *Mhudi* in the way that Krog’s text actively grapples with uncertainty and indeterminacy in order to imagine fresh points of identification for South Africans. Boehmer further suggests that “the last scenes of *Mhudi* and *African Farm* pose the question of the future through their willingness not to foreclose, through what might be called their anticipatory or optative openness. At their end they spread out” (53). Boehmer goes on to comment that “at this moment of transformation in the country...what we hope for is not so much fiction that imagines the future in detail, but narrative structures that embrace choice or, if you will, stories that juggle and mix generic options” (51). In *A Change of Tongue*, Krog appears to hark back to the indeterminacy of Schreiner and Plaatje as she opens her text in terms of genre, structure and language, and does precisely what Boehmer hopes for by “[inviting] greater complexity, more exploration, more cross connections, more doubt” (54).

In “Moms and Moral Midgets: South African Feminisms and Characterisation in Novels in English by White Women”, Eva Hunter examines a number of South African novels written post-1990. She focuses on how white women, particularly English-speaking white women, are characterised and represented. She notes that generally writers have “failed to depict not only alternative but even authentic ways of being”, and that this has “continued to inscribe a lack of agency” as part of white women’s identity (37, 46). Hunter concludes by identifying two novels, namely Alison Lowry’s *Natural Rhythm* and Nadine Gordimer’s *None to Accompany Me*, that begin to offer a “tentative hope for the future”

(51) by re-presenting the possibilities for white female identities. In a similar vein I intend to explore Krog's *A Change of Tongue*, *Down to My Last Skin* and *Body Bereft* for ways in which they open up possibilities for white women to pursue identifications that can be deeply implicated in a sense of national belonging.



This thesis is structured as follows. In Chapter One, I identify the textual strategies that Krog uses to explore how individuals claim a sense of national belonging within a changing society, and highlight the ways in which the literary text is able to facilitate a fuller engagement with those issues of difference and belonging. Before examining the textual strategies that Krog uses, such as fluidity of structure, genre shifts and multiple points of view, I discuss several theoretical concepts that I believe offer useful ways of understanding the negotiation of individual subjectivity within a changing society. I briefly explore the role of narrative in the formation of the nation, before examining the concepts of the supplementary, displacement and diaspora. In the spirit of Levi-Strauss's *bricoleur* I draw from each of these concepts that which is useful in illuminating the ways in which individuals are able to identify differently and the possibilities open to them in a transitional society. Krog uses a range of genres and a structure that resists classification to create an indeterminacy that productively transgresses boundaries, and in so doing imagines new possibilities for identification, belonging and even a new social formation. *A Change of Tongue* comprises six parts, which vary in length and move between the use of first- and third-person narration. "Part One: A Town" is particularly interesting in this

regard as it contains two narratives, one of the present written in the first person and one of the past written in the third person. This dual narrative highlights the way in which memory and the experience of the past are constantly renegotiated within the present in order to make sense of the variety of identifications made available to the subject. A similar technique is employed in “Part Five: A Journey” which is written in the third person but foregrounds the author-narrator’s struggle to find a space for her own sense of identity within that of the national formation. Although the text appears to be written as an autobiographical piece, this is undermined in the “Acknowledgements” where Krog points out that “stories around one can lie the truth” and “the ‘I’ is seldom me, my mother and father not necessarily my parents...and so forth” (369). This then apparently moves the text into the area of fiction, but the use of the autobiographical genre is deliberate and requires close attention. There appears to be an inherent, and necessary, contradiction within *A Change of Tongue* where Krog simultaneously strives for a romantic ideal and problematises its enactment by insistently foregrounding her own, and South Africa’s, particularities. This contradiction is overtly played out in the tension that exists between the conventionally associated, albeit contentious, binaries of the autobiography (truth) and the novel (fiction), and the use of the first person (present) and third person (past), as well as in the seemingly dislocated structure of the text.

Chapter Two examines the ways in which women identify with, and thereby create their own space within, the nation. Firstly, I argue that Krog uses the ‘body’ as a theoretical site and a performative medium through which to investigate the ways in which white South African women are able to negotiate, create and resist identification with the

nation. And secondly, I suggest that by writing the ‘body’, Krog interrogates her own act of writing, thereby foregrounding how the ‘self’ is constructed, and represented, through the text.

Krog continues to explore the themes of identity and national belonging in her mostly self-translated English poetry collections, *Down to My Last Skin* and *Body Bereft*. In Chapter Three I examine how Krog uses poetry as a textual strategy to explore the nuances of these themes in ways which prose does not allow. I argue that lyric poetry has a capacity to render in language those experiences, emotions and sensations that are often considered intangible or elusive because it is a form of expression that engages with the allusive, imaginative and affective. In this chapter, through a selection of poems which includes “Outside Nineveh”, “Ma will be Late”, “Lady Anne as Guide”, “Country of Grief and Grace”, “Paternoster”, “God, Death, Love”, “sonnet of the hot flushes” and “how do you say this?”, I examine the way in which Krog constantly re-writes the themes of belonging and identity. I shall also interrogate Krog’s use of poetry as a strategy that permits both the writer and the reader access to new ways of understanding experiences, and examine poetry as a medium through which apparently ephemeral experiences can be rooted in the body. Finally I briefly discuss the importance of the act of translation in relation to the reading of Krog’s poems.

I conclude by suggesting that in *A Change of Tongue*, *Down to My Last Skin* and *Body Bereft*, Krog engages with the project of “[writing] the white female experience back into the body of South African literature” (Jacobson “No woman” 18), and in so doing offers

possible ways in which white South African women can claim a sense of belonging within society and suggests ways in which they can negotiate their identities, both as women and as South Africans.

Chapter One:

“How do I Understand Myself in this Text-tortured Land?”

Textuality, Change and Belonging

Reconceive the self and you reconceive the shape of your society; alter the image of society and the self has a different kind of space in which to move.

- Stephen Clingman (4)

A central theme in *A Change of Tongue* is how individuals claim a sense of national belonging within a changing society. This chapter seeks to identify the textual strategies that Krog employs to examine this topic and to foreground the ways in which the literary text is able to facilitate a fuller engagement with issues of difference and belonging in society than other forms of writing. Before exploring the specific textual strategies that Krog uses, such as a fluid structure, shifts between genre and a variety of points of view, I consider several theoretical concepts that seem to offer useful ways of understanding the transformation of individual subjectivity within a transitional society. I begin with a brief discussion on the role of narrative in the formation of the nation, and then examine the concepts of the supplementary, displacement and diaspora. In the spirit of Levi-Strauss' *bricoleur* I extract from each of these concepts that which illuminates the ways in which individuals are able to transform and the possibilities open to them in an ever-changing society.

As already noted in the Introduction the concept of the nation is contested, but the idea of the nation as a physically and psychologically constructed space which is always-already in a state of change is most useful to this project, as this acknowledges that nations constantly re-imagine themselves in order to maintain their coherence and cohesion in a rapidly changing global milieu (Radhakrishnan 82). Brennan suggests that ‘the nation’ is “both historically determined and general. As a term, it refers both to the modern nation-state, and to something more ancient and nebulous – the ‘*natio*’ – a local community, domicile, family, condition of belonging” (45). It seems to me that it is the concept of the ‘*natio*’ that is one of Krog’s primary concerns in *A Change of Tongue*. While Krog does explore the issues of the modern South African nation-state, she is more intimately concerned with the local, with the “condition of belonging”, and how the construct of the nation-state impacts on the lived experience of the individual.

Within the South African context it is important to explore the nation as a multivalent space that is often complicated by the historical and political legacies of various nationalisms. However, Duncan Brown points out that “a simple retreat from nationalism into multiplicity, division and difference can be immensely disabling in contexts, such as our own, in which the rebuilding of society requires commitment and a sense of shared responsibility” (758). Thus we may have to seek forms of unifying nationalism that incorporate, tolerate and actively encourage multiplicity and facilitate a form of difference that is able to remain invested in the nation. It is this problem of “how to allow for the multiplicity of identities while still maintaining some sense of national belonging” (Brown 763) that Krog tackles in *A Change of Tongue*.

Brown goes on to argue for “reconciling the demands of difference and national belonging, not through the fictions of imagined unity, but through a shared problematic” (767). He describes this as “a real engagement with the politics and economics of difference”, and says “I have defined this as a problematic rather than a narrative, in order to avoid the risk of any sense of closure. On this model, national identification is a process, always in motion” (766). However, I would argue that narrative does not necessarily signal closure, but can in fact extend the possibilities for engagement with the problematic of difference and belonging. It is possible to create a sense of national belonging that incorporates difference through the “fictions of imagined unity” *and* to cast the nation’s narrative as the “shared problematic”. What is required in this case is to shift the focus from the “fictions of a unified past” (Brown 759) to the development of the narration of an inclusive, though not necessarily unitary, future. In creating a nation space that allows for multiple points of identification while still building a sense of national belonging and unity, we need to look to the future and begin to understand the ways in which ‘usable’ futures are imaginatively created. Exploring *A Change of Tongue* seems to be a useful starting point, as Krog is actively engaging with these issues of belonging, identity and transformation of both individuals and the nation.

It is through this written text that Krog attempts to “construct narrations of the imaginary of the nation-people” (Bhabha 303). The act of writing and the act of narrating appear to be central to the process of nation-building. However, it is not through writing the nation’s past or even its present that this process is best facilitated, but rather through

writing the future and inscribing the possibilities of the future within the literary traditions of the emerging nation.

Definitions and categories such as ‘the Third World’ and ‘the nation’ remain much contested in literary studies. An example of this is the heated debate between Aijaz Ahmad and Fredric Jameson regarding ‘the nation’, literary output and ‘the Third World’. Jameson proposes that:

all third-world texts are necessarily...*national allegories*...particularly when their forms develop out of predominantly western machineries of representation, such as the novel...[because] *the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society*. (69)

However, Ahmad suggests that “literary texts are produced in highly differentiated, usually overdetermined contexts of competing ideological and cultural clusters” (121) and it is therefore not possible to have “a singular form of narrativity for Third World Literature”, (106) nor is it possible that “the narrativity of [national experience] takes the form exclusively of a ‘national allegory’” (109). Nevertheless, Timothy Brennan points to the role of fiction within ‘the Third World’ in contributing to the formation of ‘nations’. He states that “the ‘nation’ is precisely what Foucault has called a ‘discursive formation’ – not simply an allegory or imaginative vision, but a gestative political structure which the Third World artist is consciously building or suffering the lack of”

(Brennan 46-47). The emergence of the nation is linked with the literary output of its people, for whilst “political tasks of modern nationalism directed the course of literature...just as fundamentally, literature participated in the formation of nations” (Brennan 48). It should be noted that imaginative texts play an important role here, as this aspect of literature has the greatest scope for envisioning spaces which have not yet come to be. The novel often takes precedence as the given form for imaginative texts in such contexts, and Brennan notes that “it was especially the novel as a composite but clearly bordered work of art that was crucial in defining the nation as an ‘imagined community’” (48). He goes on to say of ‘Third World’ novels:

Many of the novels often attempt to assemble the fragments of a national life and give them a final shape. They become documents designed to prove national consciousness, with multiple, myriad components that display an active communal life. (61)

This is true of many novels, but it does not take into account those that work specifically to explode the myth of ‘nationalism’ and reveal the fragmented nature of urban and rural life. In *Writing and Africa*, Msiska and Hyland argue that writers of post-colonial African literature such as Achebe, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o and Soyinka engaged in a ‘literature of disillusionment’ in which they undermined the appearance of cohesiveness that is associated with ‘nationalism’ and mourned the “loss of the opportunities represented by independence and the possibility of nation-building” (35).

While Brennan speaks specifically of the novel, his comments apply equally to Krog's text. Throughout *A Change of Tongue* Krog weaves together “fragments of a national life” and attempts to give them, not a final shape, but a variety of configurations that continually open out into new possibilities. It is as though she is playing with a puzzle that has no pre-determined outcome, but can be assembled repeatedly to form a variety of images. Krog is seeking the image that is the most cohesive and that is simultaneously the most diverse; the image that is most welcoming of difference and that offers a space in which difference can belong. In engaging in this project, Krog provides an example of what is possible and thereby encourages others to play with this puzzle as well.

In exploring how to allow for a multiplicity of identities, while simultaneously developing a shared sense of belonging within a changing society, I argue that the idea of the ‘supplementary’ may offer useful insights. Derrida proposes the idea of the supplementary as that which both replaces and sits alongside or is adjacent to. Bhabha expands upon this idea by discussing the advantages of a supplementary strategy: “It changes the position of enunciation and the relations of address within it; not only what is said but from where it is said” (312). Krog is interested in how one lives as a South African within a nation that is still in the process of becoming. The ‘new’ South African nation has replaced the ‘old’ but, as a concept, still exists alongside it. The supplementary is useful in that it offers a more fluid space that moves beyond binaries and not simply between them. With *A Change of Tongue* Krog is not only working with the idea of transition, she is engaging with the idea of transformation and thus with the notion of the supplementary. J.M. Coetzee’s famous argument on the idea of the novel existing either

in relations of supplementarity or rivalry to history may be germane here. I argue that what Coetzee presents under the banner of rivalry – the novel which “operates in terms of its own procedures and issues in its own conclusions” – is ironically very similar to that which I present with the concept of the supplementary (3). In both cases we are looking at how “the offensiveness of stories lies not in their transgressing particular rules but in their *faculty of making and changing their own rules*” (3, my italics). The theoretical concept of the supplementary is useful in exploring how Krog works outside and yet alongside the genre of the novel, and how this textual strategy enables her to tackle the issues of transition and transformation in a South African context.

If we intend to engage with the possibilities of imagining a ‘unified future’, the notion of the supplementary seems to provide a means of engagement, because it simultaneously provides access to the future while allowing a productive proximity to the past. Bhabha aptly notes, “the questioning of the supplement is not a repetitive rhetoric of the ‘end’ of society but a meditation on the disposition of the space and time from which the narrative of the nation must *begin*” (306). *A Change of Tongue* is a meditation on how a new and imaginative narrative of the nation can begin, and Krog is bringing to light those features that are needed in order to narrate the individual’s place within the nation.

Displacement is a second theoretical concept that appears to offer illuminating ways of examining the themes of individual subjectivity and national belonging. Stephen Clingman writes very eloquently on the notion of displacement, by which he means “a certain dislodging, and dislodging meant that the pieces could move around, as in a

kaleidoscope of self, belonging and nation, before falling into a different arrangement” (6). He uses Bram Fischer’s assumption of a physical disguise while on the run from the South African police as an example of how this concept operates for both the individual and the nation. Clingman makes overt the link between displacement and the supplementary when he says of Fischer:

for through this form of displacement he was himself being shifted – as if he too were involved in a process of adjacency: attached to his previous self, and therefore connected with it, but now standing in a different ‘place’, with a different view both of himself and the world. That too was a form of shift in identity. (6)

It is this sense of being “attached to [the] previous self...but now standing in a different ‘place’” that Krog captures in *A Change of Tongue*. She is exploring the ways in which the nation can move, can make the transition, from one that is divided to one that is unified yet diverse. Krog works to highlight the ways in which the South African nation can be transformed into a state that, while remembering the past, actively creates the future. The concept of displacement is valuable in this context because “dislodged from previous moorings, other linkages and imaginings [are] possible, other constellations of interaction and attachment [become] visible” (Clingman 9). Clingman goes on to point out that “this sort of combinatory principle will always be prepared to accept and even celebrate non-homogeneous versions of the collective – just as long as that non-homogeneity does not mean the absence of linkage or connection” (11). As such, within a

South African context, displacement can facilitate not only the imagining of new possibilities, but through displacement a wider variety of positions can be valued. In *A Change of Tongue* Krog provides examples of how individuals can gain a sense of value and belonging within a nation, and how this encourages greater engagement with the development of that nation.

While Krog does foreground the pain and discomfort involved in being displaced, she also works to reveal how the individual benefits from the process. In *A Change of Tongue* the narrative of the Timbuktu Poetry Caravan highlights these issues of displacement. At one point the protagonist is lost in the streets of Kita, Mali, and “[s]he walks and walks...It feels as if she will carry on walking like this because poverty and misery have no horizons. She has gone way beyond tears. She speaks no one’s language. She will never again see anyone she can talk to” (297). The protagonist is completely displaced and feels acutely the isolation and discomfort that this displacement brings. However, eventually as she learns to make new connections she becomes “aware of how far she has come – no longer feeling threatened or exposed...but simply part of it all” (328). And at this point, the protagonist is able to claim a sense of belonging as “she knows that she wants to be nowhere else but here, wants to be from nowhere else but here” (333). The hope and the optimism are written larger, not because she ignores the negatives, but because she incorporates them and acknowledges them as part of the process.

Displacement becomes a rite of passage; the transition from one point to another results in the transformation of the self. Clingman captures this shift when he states:

we can change our sense of identification through connection with others...we can transform and extend our sense of place and belonging...this will help produce new imaginings both of our societies and a more truly transnational world founded on the linkages of human identity. (12)

It is through the written text that Krog engages in this project of imagining a future for South Africa, and she does this by finding ways in which to live in that future, “to transform everything into an opening instead of a closed wall”, and to portray that in her writing (146). Krog conveys through her text the possibilities of being displaced, of being like Bram Fischer who:

in his mind, in his inclinations and aspirations...was at home in a country that he imagined, and like others, was working towards making ‘real’. Again, the word for this is displacement. Bram Fischer was prepared to be at home in a country that both did and did not exist. (Clingman 8)

Through *A Change of Tongue* Krog reveals a country “that is internally created, a country perhaps of the imagination or of memory” but always a country that is possible (Coetzee 685).

Susan Spearey says of the theme of displacement within *Country of My Skull*:

[the text] works towards transcendence of histories of displacement and dispossession, and participates in the project of imagining new psychological states and topographies in which selfhood, both individual and collective, can be understood in more enabling and inclusive – or at least less threatened and threatening – ways. (67)

It is this engagement with the “project of imagining new psychological states and topographies” that Krog continues in *A Change of Tongue*, while simultaneously imagining an inclusive future that actively encourages diversity and creates a sense of belonging. However, as Carli Coetzee points out, Krog’s text “exhibits a high degree of self-doubt and an acute awareness that a new identity for white South Africans may only be possible provisionally, at certain moments” (692). In a heated debate with a former black colleague who states in frustration that he cannot break away from whites, the author-narrator responds, “Maybe you prefer to forget that I also can’t break loose from you. My whole definition of who I am, what ‘white’ is, where I live, where I come from, what my future looks like, is bound up with you” (119). Later the author-narrator discusses this idea with two black friends and says:

As long as you accept that we can share a variety of identities...Because as we sit here, the three of us, we do have a few things in common, a home town, several political rallies, a party or two, a march, we have this personal identity that we share. (274)

The possibility of this new identity is evident, but often the hardship of the process involved in attaining that possibility is overwhelmingly apparent. Clingman encapsulates the mindset that is required to undertake this task of imagining the future, and creating spaces in which new identities can be formed, when he says, “we need to live with the principle of displacement, retain in some existential way a sense of still being nomads on the journey towards our destination” (12).

In attempting to understand how white South Africans negotiate their identity and sense of belonging within the ‘new’ South Africa, I believe that aspects of the concept of diaspora can also be useful. However, before I attempt to apply this concept I must raise several questions. Can one have a diaspora of the mind? What happens to a people whose country no longer exists? What happens when you cannot long for your homeland because a) it has disappeared and b) it is politically incorrect to do so? And in what ways, if any, do transformation and transition link to displacement and diaspora?

Diaspora is another concept that resists simple definition. Jana Evans Braziel focuses on the physical aspect: “diaspora suggests a dislocation from the nation-state or geographical location of origin and a relocation in one or more nation-states, territories or countries” (1). Vera Alexander highlights the psychological features of diaspora in commenting that:

diaspora is a concept which much engages with the imagination...with maintaining utopian hopes of a return but also identifying with a dispersed virtual

community most of whose members one does not know personally but who rely on similar traditions and beliefs. (208)

In *Diaspora and Multiculturalism: Common Traditions and New Developments*, Monika Fludernik summarises Robin Cohen's discussion on diaspora. Cohen makes a distinction between diasporas which are characterised by forced exile or dispersion from the homeland and those that are experienced more positively as an expansion from the homeland, often in search of work or to improve trade opportunities. He identifies several characteristics of both forms of diaspora, including a sense of collective memory and the myth of the homeland, a wish to return home, a sense of ethnic group consciousness, a troubled relationship with the host society and, finally, a sense of the possibility of a distinctive, creative and enriching life in the host country (cited in Fludernik xiii – xvi).

Bearing the above-mentioned definitions in mind, I will attempt to elaborate on the notion of a diaspora of the mind. If we accept that a diaspora involves a generally involuntary movement from the country of origin or homeland, then this term could be applied to white South Africans who have been 'exiled' from apartheid South Africa and have had to move into a new space, that of the 'new' South Africa. While this has not involved a physical movement, it has required an enormous conceptual transition, which can be seen as a diaspora of the mind. However, Cohen's proposal that diasporas can be experienced positively can also be applied in this argument. Many white South Africans have embraced this movement from the country of the past to the 'new' country of the present, and have attempted, as best they know how, to assimilate into their new country

and contribute to it. Again, this has involved a change of mind and attitude as opposed to a simple physical movement. While the more negative characteristics of diaspora, such as a wish to return home and a troubled relationship with the host country, can still be seen amongst many parts of the white South African community, Cohen's final point of a sense of the possibility of a distinctive, creative and enriching life in the host country also seems to be apparent. And it is these points of hope and optimism that Krog highlights within *A Change of Tongue*.

While the notion of diaspora is loaded with negative connotations, it is possible to apply this term productively to situations such as our own. Diaspora provides a way of talking about individuals and their relationship with the political space in which they live.

Diaspora can be used to illuminate certain issues around identity and nation formation.

By naming white South Africans as a diasporic community, I am attempting to explore the ways in which that community exists within this nation, and then I hope to highlight the ways in which individuals can be encouraged to invest themselves within this nation.

Just as Clingman writes of the productive potential of displacement, I would argue that the concept of diaspora offers additional benefits because it acknowledges the act of leaving the homeland and attempting to create a new life in an 'unknown' country.

Braziel notes that "diasporic subjects are marked by hybridity and heterogeneity...and these subjects are defined by a traversal of the boundaries demarcating nation and diaspora" (5). In *A Change of Tongue* Krog explores this process of white South Africans finding a space within the 'new' South Africa, and she presents the ability to be displaced

and to move as paramount to becoming part of the nation, paradoxically as a precondition for belonging, if not rootedness. In Bamako, Mali, the protagonist receives:

a long, tasselled shawl in rust and white and copper. The Minister folds it twice around her shoulders so that it cups charmingly at her throat, while the tassels lap-lap at her feet. She looks at herself in the mirror for a long time: the shawl has transformed her from a pale, insecure T-shirt-and-jeans white person into a tall, worthy, graceful woman of unknown origin. (303)

It is through her displacement and her readiness to transform that the protagonist is able to claim a sense of belonging that is not dependent on her origins but on her ability to embrace and engage with change.

Brazier argues that:

diasporic subjects experience double (and even plural) identifications that are constitutive of hybrid forms of identity; hybrid national (and transnational) identities are positioned with other identity categories and severed from an essentialized, nativist identity that is afflicted with constructions of the nation or homeland. (5)

This is a critical point within the South African context as it suggests that white South Africans can “change, by integrating several social identities; you are no longer only

white, but also South African and African” (Krog “Change of Tongue” 129). It is also important to foreground the ongoing interaction by which diasporic identities are formed. Through conversation with the past, interaction with the present and engagement with the future, diasporic communities become integrated within their host countries. At a poetry reading in Timbuktu, the protagonist reads her Afrikaans poetry:

And as her first words tumble across the darkening square, something in her body gives. Here the language resounds that gave her soul its 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 the years of its origin, has become vulnerable and fragile on the tongues of its speakers...As she’s reading she looks up and sees a young boy standing across from her among the others, his head loosened from its turban like a flower from its calyx. He ought to understand nothing of her Afrikaans, but his mouth is half open, a delicate frown between his brows as if he can comprehend this soft filtering into some new sound. (329)

Integration with the host country does not mean that individuals, and communities, are absorbed and thereby lose their uniqueness, but rather that they become valued, contributing members of the nation.

Vera Alexander states:

While the concept of diaspora is interesting from an anthropological or sociological point of view, one also needs to ask what the function of this concept is in the discussion of a fictional text in which the different layers of imaginative constructions overlay one another. (201)

I have already argued that narrative has a central role in the formation of a nation, and that in order to build a cohesive nation that is secure enough to encourage diversity we must begin to narrate the future and thereby imagine new possibilities for being. The author-narrator recalls a discussion with fellow writers at a conference in Rwanda, in which one of the participants comments, “We have written a history as Africans, maybe we should now write one as humans. And then let it be a history which helps people to exist, helps them to live” (149). The concept of diaspora is useful as a tool to help us understand how identities are formed and how they are changed within the context of a nation in transition. Monika Fludernik comments that “as critics, we have to recognise that while writers are entitled to write on what they will, we should read between the lines of their content and intent, and see where the text fits in with the larger context of diasporic realities” (liv). Thus the concept of diaspora can offer new ways of exploring texts that emerge from a specific context; and by noting what is said, and what is not said, we can begin to gain a deeper insight into the society which is being narrated.

While Krog does not explicitly discuss the concept of diaspora in *A Change of Tongue*, she does explore the themes of transition, displacement and transformation, all of which are deeply implicated in the idea of diaspora. However, in order to understand not only

the text *A Change of Tongue*, but also its significance in narrating the nation, I would argue that it is important to analyse the strategies that Krog uses to make meaning. Krog examines the themes of transition, displacement and transformation through the narratives that she presents, but also crucially through the textual strategies she uses to present her stories. I argue that Krog's textual choices allude to possible ways of dealing with these themes. For the purpose of this project I will focus on Krog's ambivalent use of genre, her shifts in point of view, and the 'open' way in which she has structured her text. These are key strategies that Krog has used to foreground the physical and psychological movement of individuals within the emerging nation, and to question how the individual might create a sense of belonging within that nation.

Random House, the publisher of *A Change of Tongue*, very consciously avoids categorising the text within a specific genre. The inside jacket cover describes the text as "the author's first full-length *work* in English since...*A Country of My Skull*" and as a "brave *book* [which] provides a unique and compelling *discourse* on living creatively in Africa today" (my italics). The text, it appears, is very deliberately placed outside the conventional confines of genre. And this is important because it allows the text to move and 'work' in ways that reflect the themes of transition and displacement. The text reads much like an autobiographical work but, as Coullie suggests, Krog's undermining of the text's 'truth-value' in the "Acknowledgements" moves the text towards the realm of fiction ("Translating Narrative" 12) – "the stories around one can lie the truth. Therefore

many names and places have been changed” (Krog “Change of Tongue” 369). In exploring how Krog uses this ambivalence of genre to foreground the issues of displacement, transition and transformation, I will first examine the concept of autobiography within the South African context, and then discuss this concept in relation to *A Change of Tongue*.

Historically autobiographical writing demands that the reader accept the text as a factual record of the development of the self and, as such, the author is expected to comply by providing a truthful account of him- or herself: “for a text to present itself as an autobiography a specific set of assumptions on the part of the readers must be involved, as well as particular responsibilities for the author” (Coullie “Not Quite Fiction” 3). This establishes an “autobiographical pact” – which traditionally “[sets] autobiography, memoir and testimony apart from fiction” – between the author and the reader (Coullie “Translating Narrative” 10). The autobiographical act is seen as autonomous, and the text accepted as a direct engagement between the author and reader. However, Judith Coullie points out that:

poststructuralists...argue that the author can no longer be conceived of as the autonomous creator of her or his own identity or text, but as someone who is interpellated into available subject positions. Language and culture determine the range of subject positions available to the author in her or his life experience, as well as in the composition of textual identity. (“Not Quite Fiction” 3)

As such, autobiography allows us to analyse the type of society from which the author writes and, by noting what is not said as much as what is said, to gain a better understanding of how that society enables its individuals to interact, both within their communities and with the broader nation.

South Africa has a tradition of autobiographical writing that became more pronounced in the 1980s and 1990s. Sarah Nuttall and Cheryl-Ann Michael say of this genre:

South African autobiographies written before the first democratic elections in this country are, as we might expect, preoccupied with the future – with the emergence of the non-racial and post apartheid nation. ‘The future’ is explicitly tied to ‘nation’, and in its manifestation as such it offers a potential space of healing and freedom. (300)

While this comment emerges from the specific context of South Africa in the 1990s, the point raised remains valid today. But more importantly, as Nuttall and Michael point out, “notions of the individual and collective emerge in new forms in a context in which the political struggle for democracy has ended but the new nation must be built” (308). Thus Nuttall and Michael suggest that autobiography is one of the genres that promotes the building of the nation, because it highlights the individual’s development within the space of the nation, and in so doing is able to reflect the nation’s potential for growth (229).

Nuttall and Michael discuss the development of the television talk show as an extension of the genre of autobiography, in that individuals are encouraged to tell their stories. They comment that “in 1990s South Africa, talk shows appeared to be about psychic healing but were largely preoccupied with the creation of the nation” (308); “what these shows seemed to be premised on is an idea that, at the present moment, the focus must be on nation-building in order to ensure a future for the self” (309). While Nuttall and Michael appear critical of the possibility for talk shows to engage meaningfully with the task of social transformation and individual identity formation, this idea of nation-building that works to “ensure a future for the self” is interesting for my project. It would seem to imply that in certain instances the individual cannot be removed from the nation, and the nation will not exist without the individual. Thus, through the process of telling the self, understanding where and how the self has come to be, it is possible that the development of the nation can also be tracked and understood.

Autobiography has become a tool that not only allows for the excavation of the self, but facilitates the laying down of foundations for the future nation. Nuttall and Michael point out that:

whereas the future nation in texts of the 1980s was seen as representing a space of freedom, in Ramphele and Coetzee’s texts, nation becomes a potential space of entrapment – a limiting or narrowing of the reach of selfhood, and story. (313)

It is interesting to note that Nuttall and Michael then turn their attention to Krog by saying that while:

for Ramphele and Coetzee the limits of community and nation are marked and tested, for Krog it is the possibility of belonging...that the new nation brings. For Krog, the fear is to be left with privilege without belonging – and belonging is something that has to be earned, asked for, and finally asserted. (315)

Thus, Krog appears to be able to imagine a future nation that has the potential constantly to open outwards while always including the individual and fostering a sense of belonging within the broader nation.

Nuttall and Michael close their argument on autobiographical writing in South Africa by saying:

A consideration of autobiographical acts in the post-apartheid period must include a sense of the pluralities that have come with the opening of the public sphere in South Africa. There will now not only be multiple ways of telling stories of the self in public but the possibility that people will resort to quite other forms than those they have used in the past. (317)

Such a comment foregrounds the necessity of finding new ways of writing, and thereby creating new ways of imagining the future. In *A Change of Tongue* Krog works towards presenting her themes in a form that most cogently represents and conveys those themes.

For her, it would seem, the form of the text is as important in conveying her concerns as her chosen content. Coullie argues that:

introspective, highly personal autobiographical writing in contemporary South Africa is so uncommon... This is indicative of the fact that a great many South African autobiographical works have a political agenda; a straightforward account of a life... can provide an interpretive framework for the reader much more effectively than a complex narrative which requires active reader involvement. (“Not Quite Fiction” 15)

It would seem that Krog does not subscribe to this view. Instead of a “straightforward account of a life”, she creates a complex narrative that shifts between genres and styles. However, *A Change of Tongue* can still be said to have a political agenda. It is a text that tackles political issues of race, gender, belonging and nation, but does so in such a way that the individual and her negotiation of these issues are always foregrounded.

Autobiography appears to be a dominant mode of narration in *A Change of Tongue* and the question is still asked as to whether the text can be classified as an autobiographical work. In her paper “Translating Narrative in the New South Africa: Transition and Transformation in *A Change of Tongue*”, Judith Coullie states:

for individuals to fit in with the ideals of the constitution entails first the engagement of the imagination (one has to imagine the self that one should be)

and then the fictive...development of the self. Autobiography in the new South Africa is thus as much a record of self as creation of new self. (16)

Coullie considers how *A Change of Tongue* should be classified: should the text be viewed as an autobiographical work or as fiction? She concludes that the work is autobiographical but points to the “translation of the genre of autobiography from the conventional narrative of being of authorial subject to the narrative of becoming for both addressor and addressee” (16). While I agree that Krog enacts a “translation of genre”, I would argue that one of Krog’s primary strategies in *A Change of Tongue* is to challenge the confines of genre. As such she actively works to situate her text within the interstitial spaces between the genres of autobiography and fiction and, in so doing, she attempts to resist classification, creating a space for her text that is as yet unnamed. This textual strategy not only allows Krog to resist the limitations of genre and to simultaneously transform it, but also provides a fertile ground for the imagining of “the self that one should be”.

My thesis engages with the question of how literature can facilitate individuals becoming more invested in society through a greater identification with that society. If, as Coullie argues, “for individuals to fit in with the ideals of the constitution entails first the engagement of the imagination...and then the fictive...development of the self”, it would appear that fiction is the logical vehicle for that project (16). The novel should be able to provide a space for the creative imagining and “fictive development of the self”. Part of that “fictive development of the self” occurs through the imagining of characters and

situations that possibly do not yet exist, but are still able to provide points of identification that we, as readers, are able to engage with. However, as I have already suggested, current South African fiction appears hesitant with regard to re-imagining the future and so is not creating positive points of identification for South Africans, especially (white) South African women. Perhaps the deficiency lies not so much with South African authors as with South African fiction as a genre. If this is the case, or if fiction somehow fails the complexity of our society, it would then make sense to turn to another genre to attempt the “fictive development of the self”.

Sarah Nuttall and Cheryl-Ann Michael state that in the South African context “all different kinds of autobiographical acts...have pervaded the culture of the 1990s and have spread into the new century”, and that “personal disclosure has become part of a revisionary impulse, part of the pluralizing project of democracy itself” (298). Thus autobiography appears to provide a link between the formation of the individual identity and the formation of the national identity. As the individual speaks, she speaks from within her nation and she draws attention to the ways in which that nation is imagined. Perhaps it is because the individual and the nation are intertwined within the South African autobiographical act that autobiography becomes a more effective genre through which to attempt the “fictive development of the self”.

Although *A Change of Tongue* reads as an autobiographical work, Judith Coullie rightly points out that Krog subverts the reader’s expectation of this genre through her “Acknowledgements” at the end of the text (10). Krog states:

This book would not have been possible without the storytellers of the Free State – they are really telling the change. Among them are my brothers and mother who have taught me how the stories around one can lie the truth. Therefore many names and places have been changed – the ‘I’ is seldom me, my mother and father not necessarily my parents, my family not really blood relatives, and so forth. (369)

Coullie argues that, while “telling the truth” is an integral component of an autobiographical work, in order to engage with the larger truths of South African society and life as an individual therein, Krog reforms those smaller truths that, if presented accurately, would prevent the text from being published (15). Thus, says Coullie, this text “is more true – not less true – than the text that was not written” (15). However, this is not simply a strategy for avoiding the legal repercussions of potential libel suits; rather Krog is consciously seeking out a different manner through which to present her story. In *A Change of Tongue* Krog is not merely hesitating between two genres – fiction and autobiography – she is deliberately moving across them. Thus, by undermining the “autobiographical pact” (Philippe Lejeune in Coullie “Not Quite Fiction” 10) Krog is not only protecting the integrity of individuals whose lives form part of her narrative, but she is also challenging the accepted modes of both fictive and autobiographical narrative.

In *Fictions in Autobiography* Eakin speaks of the autobiographical act as that in which “the materials of the past are shaped by memory and imagination to serve the needs of

present consciousness” (5). Thus where fiction cannot contain the complexities that Krog wishes to explore, she strategically embraces the autobiographical act. However, it is an act that relies on imagination and Krog employs the form in order to “serve the needs of [her] present consciousness”. In that way Krog maintains her ambivalent position between the genres of autobiography and fiction and uses this ambivalence as a textual strategy to open up new spaces in which new forms of identification can be imagined.



In order to write in the un-named space between autobiography and fiction, and thereby foreground the themes of displacement, transition and transformation, Krog draws on techniques from a variety of styles and genres. Journalism features stylistically in *A Change of Tongue* and provides Krog with additional strategies to maintain a sense of ambivalence in her text.

In stating that Krog uses elements of journalism in her writing, I do not mean to imply that her text simply reads like an overlong feature article, but rather that she appropriates those attributes of journalistic writing that best serve her purpose in creating a text that explores how the individual might belong within the nation. This activity of appropriation bears some resemblance to what journalists seemed to do within the ‘New Journalism’.

The ‘New Journalism’ emerged in the United States in the 1960s as a response to literature in general, and the novel in particular, moving away from exploring and writing about society and the individual’s experience of society. In many ways Krog’s text, *A Change of Tongue*, is similar, in that it appears at a time when South African fiction is

“[eschewing] the big political gesture” and choosing not to deal with “broad social realities” (De Waal 1), and is thereby failing to offer the individual new possibilities for engagement with a changing social and political milieu. As such, Krog uses whatever methods are at her disposal to say what cannot be said in either a novel or an autobiographical work.

Wolfe highlights four key devices that are used in ‘New Journalism’ and I propose that it is these same devices that Krog employs to great effect. These are devices that are drawn from the realist novel but, as Wolfe points out, when applied to non-fictional events they “[enjoy] an advantage so obvious, so built-in, one almost forgets what a power it has: the simple fact that the reader knows all this actually happened” (49). In the case of Krog’s text, while she throws doubt onto the veracity of events, the reader still believes in the truth-value of her experience and therein lies her text’s power, partly because her undermining of this in the “Acknowledgments” is only (and deliberately) done retrospectively.

The four devices listed by Wolfe are scene-by-scene construction, recording dialogue in full, use of shifts in point of view, and the “the recording of everyday gestures, habits, manners, customs, styles of furniture, clothing, decoration, styles of travelling, eating...and other symbolic details that might exist within a scene” (46-47). Each of these devices is used by Krog in *A Change of Tongue* to give the text a richer texture and more depth. Wolfe comments that “there is a tremendous future for a sort of novel that will be called the journalistic novel or perhaps documentary novel, novels of intense social

realism based upon the same painstaking reporting that goes into the New Journalism” (50). However, he goes on to acknowledge that “there are certain areas of life that journalism still cannot move into easily, particularly for reasons of invasion of privacy, and it is in this margin that the novel will be able to grow in the future” (50). While *A Change of Tongue* is not a novel, Krog does succeed in creating a text that operates on the margin of genre and textual style, and in so doing is able to tackle the issues of nation and belonging, displacement and diaspora, transition and transformation, both in terms of content and through the actual style of the text.

In his foreword to Todorov’s *Poetics of Prose*, Jonathan Culler states that “when poetics studies individual works, it seeks not to interpret them but to discover the structures and conventions of literary discourse which enable them to have the meanings they do” (8). In a similar vein, I am looking to uncover the strategies and devices used by Krog to create meaning in *A Change of Tongue*. I have already discussed Krog’s ambivalent use of genre to highlight the issues of transition and displacement; I now wish to focus specifically on her vacillation between points of view as a meaning-making device.

A Change of Tongue is divided into six narrative parts. In “Part One: A Town” and “Part Three: A Change” Krog uses both the first and third person. “Part Two: A Hard Drive” and “Part Six: An End” are written solely in the first person, while “Part Four: A Translation” and “Part Five: A Journey” are written through the third person. This act of

shifting from one voice to another creates a shift in meaning. It also ensures that no single voice, no single perspective, is prioritised.

In a seminar given at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg, in October 2005, Krog discussed the use of the first person 'I' in her writing. She raised a number of points that are valuable in considering *A Change of Tongue*. Firstly, Krog claims, the author-narrator has control over the 'I'; it indicates the personal speaking voice, and therefore the author-narrator is able to change the 'I' and even forge a new 'I'. By displaying the way in which the 'I' can be subjected to change, the author-narrator provides an example to the reader of how one's subjectivity can be transformed. The use of the 'I' is also important for Krog because the 'I' calls forth 'you' as the reader and thereby forces 'you' to respond to what the 'I' has said. The use of the first person facilitates a dialogue with the reader and allows a deeper level of involvement between the author-narrator and the reader. This is an important strategy in *A Change of Tongue* because it allows the reader to imagine the possibilities for change within her own situation. Krog went on to comment that by using the first person 'I' the author-narrator is able to include and subject the 'I' to critical analysis. Thus the act of writing avoids tones of condescension and judgement because the 'I' is constantly under scrutiny, and the motives and actions of the 'I' are carefully explored. Having said that, Krog also highlights the fact that the 'I' has the capacity to lie, and the reader accepts that this is an aspect of the first-person voice.

It is through juxtaposing the use of the first person and the third person that Krog highlights the strategic importance of each voice. The third-person voice is more

reflective and indicates a contemplation of the issues at hand. Using the third person also allows Krog more critical distance from which to examine the themes that she raises, as well as indicating to the reader that a shift or change in perspective has occurred. Krog uses the third person to different effect in the various parts of *A Change of Tongue*. In “Part One: A Town”, the movement between the first and third person indicates a shift between past and present. As the present-day author-narrator Krog relates her experiences in the first person, but in the chapters that explore the author-narrator’s childhood, Krog uses the third person. Not only does this highlight the distinction between the present and the past, but it also foregrounds the temporal distance between the present protagonist and the past protagonist.

The use of the third person is slightly different in “Part Five: A Journey”. Here the entire section is written in the third person and this emphasises the sense of the distance travelled and the displacement that the author-narrator experiences. However, the third-person voice does not, traditionally, allow access to the character’s interior world, therefore by focalising through the protagonist Krog allows the reader a privileged insight into her emotions and experiences. Thus, by using a strategic combination of the third-person voice and internal focalisation, Krog is able to foreground the issues of transition and displacement and encourage the reader to grapple with those issues in her own situation.

The epigraph at the beginning of *A Change of Tongue* states that:

Some rules, according to Noam Chomsky, are transformational: that is they change one structure into another...Transformational Grammar has stipulated two levels of syntactic structure: deep structure...and surface structure...Transformation links deep structure with surface structure.

While I am not using the notion of structure in the way discussed by Chomsky, it could be said that Krog's text operates with two different levels of structure. A quick glance at the contents page would indicate that the text appears to follow a coherent and logical format: six longer narrative parts separated by seven short prose poems. *A Change of Tongue* therefore appears to have a simple structure, but this is true only at a superficial level and looking at the contents page does not in fact prepare the reader for the actual structure of the text.

There is no consistent pattern within *A Change of Tongue*, in that the length of each part varies, as does the way in which the parts are structured and divided. Initially in "Part One: A Town" the narrative seems to alternate between the present and the past, with the present indicated by chapter headings in capital letters and the past by chapter headings in lower case. However, any form of pattern or coherence between the present and the past is soon undermined and chapter divisions become more and more haphazard. This section, while beginning in the present, ends in the past with the acceptance of the author-narrator's first volume of poetry for publication.

"Part Two: A Hard Drive" does not even consist of chapters but has the various sections divided by computer garble. This is the shortest section of narrative and while the story

contained in this part is that of the retrieval of the author-narrator's work from the hard drive of a faulty computer, it raises issues that are then echoed throughout the text. In "Part Three: A Change" the text returns to the chapter divisions used in the first part, except that this section is written wholly in the present barring one short chapter that reverts to the third person and the lower case chapter heading of the past. Each part of the text appears to follow a unique set of rules designed for the individual part. "Part Five: A Journey" follows the format of journal entries, where each day is recorded and labelled. However the intimacy of the diary format is subverted by the fact that this section is written in the third person.

There is therefore a deeper structure operating in *A Change of Tongue* and it is through the inconsistencies and irregularities of this structure that Krog is able to highlight the themes of transition, displacement and transformation. The text as a whole never lacks a sense of coherence, and the reader, while encouraged to experience the feelings associated with displacement and transition, is never left feeling isolated, alone, or 'lost'. Thus Krog is able to foreground the possibility for moving and transforming while simultaneously gaining a sense of belonging.

Ultimately, what Krog's text offers is a blueprint for the possibilities of change. Krog engages with the ideas of a changing nation and she explores how to facilitate the reconception of the self, as the self and nation are inextricably linked. However, Krog does not assume that we know how to change. It seems that individuals do not willingly alter themselves, but when a society has changed and the "space in which [the self can]

move” has transformed, it is vital that the individual adapts in order to productively contribute to that space and to establish a sense of belonging within that new nation (Clingman 1).

Chapter Two:

“I am not I, without my Body”

Re-Presenting the Body; Re-Writing the Self

“Write your self...your body must be heard”

- Hélène Cixous (338)

One of the aims of this thesis is to explore the ways in which women identify with, and thereby create their own space within, the nation. *A Change of Tongue* is useful in this regard as the portrayal of women in society is a key feature in this text. In this chapter I investigate the ways in which Krog represents women, and discuss two important strategies which she uses that offer productive possibilities for identification. Firstly, Krog uses ‘the body’ as a theoretical site and a performative medium through which to explore the possibilities, and the limitations, for identification with the nation facing white South African women. And secondly, by writing ‘the body’, Krog foregrounds her own act of writing thereby highlighting the construction, and representation, of her ‘self’ through the text.

In recent times the body has become a point of theoretical focus, with questions regarding the performance of gender and the link between the body as locality and site of subjectivity coming to the fore. The way in which the body is written becomes increasingly important as this reflects “how the body itself is constructed through public

discourse and practices that occur at a variety of spatial scales” (McDowell 35). The representation of the body in literary texts also reveals how “all societies and all social situations make their own particular demands upon the deployment of the body such that bodily performance is consistent with the requirements of time and space” (Morgan and Scott 14). In *A Change of Tongue* Krog engages with the “particular demands” made by South African society upon “the deployment of the body”. She does this by focusing on the body both as form and function, and through her narration of social experiences of nutrition and excretion, food and sewerage.

In *Gender, Identity and Place: Understanding Feminist Geographies*, Linda McDowell states that “the body is the place, the location or site, if you like, of the individual, with more or less impermeable boundaries between one body and the next” (34). This idea of the body as ‘place’ or ‘location’ is helpful in that it allows us to understand the body as constructed through power relations and defined by boundaries, which are “both social and spatial” (McDowell 4). And just as “[g]eographies now argue that places are contested, fluid and uncertain”, so too are “our bodies...more fluid and flexible than we often realize” (McDowell 4, 34). It is this fluidity of the body that Krog highlights as she writes different types of bodies in her text: the dominant body, the deviant body, the female body, the white/black body, the ill body.

Krog’s engagement with the body, as a site in which both textual meaning and personal identity are contested, is not limited to one section of the text but permeates the variances of genre and style. The body becomes a recurring trope that highlights the fact that the

process of identification is a visceral, not merely abstract, experience. One incident in *A Change of Tongue* that foregrounds the physicality of identity is the narrative of the dog attack. Rina's dog, Nefie, attacks the gardener, Sambuti, and Rina throws herself between the two. Peet then comments, "there they were, so covered in blood that I could hardly make out who was who. And both had wounds" (27). It is the idea that the two individuals cannot be distinguished from one another, that the boundaries between their bodies have blurred, that is most interesting to this discussion. Although, as McDowell states, there are "more or less impermeable boundaries between one body and the next", Krog explores those moments where the boundaries between bodies blur and they become "...more fluid and flexible than we often realize". This is an uncomfortable notion, not only because it undermines the rigidity of traditional ideas of individual identity, but also because in the South African context it highlights the frailty of the body and its susceptibility to infection, in this case by HIV and AIDS.

In *Undoing the Social: Towards a Deconstructive Sociology*, Game comments:

My concern has been to argue that the body provides the basis for a different conception of knowledge: we know with our bodies. In this regard, the authentics of experience might be reclaimed; if there is any truth, it is the truth of the body.
(192)

It is the "authentics of experience" that Krog seeks out as she writes the body. The third-person narration of the author-narrator's childhood begins *chapter three*, describing the

experience of hay fever: “around ten o’clock she starts to sneeze and itch and swell” (40). The corporeality of the body is what determines the author-narrator’s experience of life, in the family and on the farm. After sleeping through the day in a haze of antihistamine, she wakes in the evening and “walks eagerly, like a werewolf, into the cool dusk. So she gets to know the farmyard, the veld under an awning of stars” (40). When she looks back on the family home, her response is that it is “[t]oo full. Too many. Too many voices, too many sounds, too many bodies...” (40). The demands of her own body, with all its sneezing and itching and swelling, overwhelm her and she seeks to experience herself and her world in the cool dark of night. In looking at the home as “too full” with “too many bodies”, the author-narrator highlights the intrusion of other bodies on the self, and suggests that in order to preserve a sense of self she has to remove her body from the throng of others and experience her body with its own truth in semi-isolation.

This ability to withdraw and experience the truth of the body is juxtaposed with the body’s ability to isolate the self. In *chapter four* the author-narrator writes, “her earliest memory is of smelling pee. Of wetting her pants on her way to the bathroom and hiding in the toilets until the school bell rings” (41). The body is revealed as something which can be unacceptable and which can be uncontrollable. In this instance, instead of retreating from the “too many bodies” of the home, the author-narrator desperately clings to her father when “a nurse is pulling her away...and...she is moving away from her father’s body” (41). The body simultaneously signifies the cause of the author-narrator’s distress and that which can ease it, the protection of the father’s body. Thus the body becomes multivalent in the way in which it is used within Krog’s text. As a trope or

theme, the body is never presented as one-dimensional, but is constantly complicated by the issues of materiality and subjectivity.

McDowell comments that “Foucault theorised the body as a surface to be inscribed by social practices, suggesting that bodies are acted upon in discursively constructed institutional settings” (50). And Morgan and Scott state that “social orders have always been concerned with bodies and their control and surveillance and that, in certain ways at least, these concerns have increased in modern societies” (14). It would seem that society then, to a degree, constructs the body, or at least determines and promotes the dominant ideal body, usually at the expense of the deviant body. Through bodily features, especially those points of difference, bodies are defined as either dominant or deviant. This is important because:

in the production of inferiority...dominated groups are defined as nothing but their bodies, and seen as imprisoned in an undesirable body, whereas the dominant groups occupy an unmarked, neutral, universal and disembodied position which is white and masculine [and healthy] by default. (McDowell 48)

Thus the female body is socially constructed as deviant, as inferior through its difference from the male body. In writing against this, Krog appears at times to negate the validity of the female body. The author-narrator describes herself as a child:

[pricking] a circle with an arrow sticking out of it into the skin of her thigh. She rubs ink over it. She is a man. With this she lays down all weakness and softness, vulnerability and emotion. Impenetrable. (63)

In this instance, the only way for the protagonist to claim any strength or agency is to disavow her body's 'femaleness'. She fortifies her body by claiming the masculine, by making herself 'impenetrable'. The act of altering the physical body in order to gain a sense of self and agency is repeated when the protagonist "walks into the barber's shop to have her hair cut. 'We only cut men's hair', the barber says. 'I want my hair cut like a man', she says" (108). However, in this case, she has made a shift from "I am a man" to wanting her hair cut "*like* a man". What Krog highlights through this is that it is not the negation of the female body that she writes or seeks, but the acceptance and valuing of the female body within society. She resists the different standards that are applied to individuals based on their bodily differences. It is generally agreed within poststructuralist theory that "language and culture determine the range of subject positions in that they pre-exist the individual participant's interaction within them" (Coullie "Not Quite Fiction" 7). However Krog continually resists the idea that "although being a woman does not mean that conformity to stereotypes is inevitable, it does mean that behaviour will be subjected to different interpretative strategies from that of men" (Coullie "Not Quite Fiction" 7).

In their book, *Genders*, Glover and Kaplan comment on the portrayal of femininity in Victorian novels and argue that "the state was, as it still is, invested in particular

articulations of femininity which supported it” (23). The accepted ideal, in terms of subjectivity and the body that women are encouraged to subscribe to, is very often state-sanctioned. This is because in order to maintain the status quo, the state works to endorse specific forms of masculinity and femininity. The state, perhaps not with malicious intent, provides models of the ideal citizen or member of the nation. These models provide both men and women with examples of how to perform their identity, and how to perform their bodies, as fully integrated members of the nation. Their models can either be prescriptive and limiting in the options they make available to citizens, or they can be inclusive and broad enough to allow for a variety of ways of performance. Clearly it is seen to be in the state’s best interest to provide its citizens with models that are supportive of the state. However, it is possible to imagine models that are invested in the state, while still able to be critical of the state. It is this kind of model, which is involved yet critically aware, that Krog is seeking out in her texts. She is sifting through the narratives of change in order to uncover this model, which may very well already exist, but may also need still to be imagined. In moving between the present day and her own history, Krog seems to be trawling her own narratives in an attempt to locate the outline of this model. Later, in telling the story of the Timbuktu Poetry Caravan, Krog begins to limn this new model and gives it a vague, and deliberately indiscrete, form. This vagueness is important, as it is this that allows for the inclusivity that is so important in a working model of identification.

In order to begin this process of imagining and creating a new model for women in the South African context to engage with, Krog writes the taboos of the female body, the

foremost of which is menstruation. Certain cultures and societies enact various rituals that move young girls from childhood to womanhood. While some initiation rites are deeply problematic, there are also those that serve to educate as well as instill a sense of belonging and continuity in the young women. Krog highlights the absence of this kind of community, which can work not only to secure the traditions of the past but also actively engage with imagining new possibilities for the future, when she says:

[her mother] says, “Soon the time will come when you start menstruating. I have bought you a packet of sanitary towels and a belt...”

“The other girls in the hostel wear tampons and plastic underpants.”

“One doesn’t push all kinds of foreign objects in between one’s legs...”

The packet of Dr. White’s sanitary towels and the belt lie on top of a book: *It Is Time That You Knew*. (76)

The protagonist must make the psychological transition from childhood to womanhood, which is expected to accompany the physical changes of puberty, in relative isolation. Menstruation is framed as a difficulty, as an abhorrent condition and as a point of conflict between the protagonist and her mother. This view of menstruation is contrasted with the author-narrator’s description of having her period while on the Poetry Caravan: “After waiting in a queue for the toilet, she finds she has started to menstruate. No headache, no PMS, she simply bleeds peacefully and powerfully” (290). The female body is in the process of being reclaimed; Krog is re-scripting the female experience. Menstruation is written as an acceptable condition in that “she simply bleeds peacefully and powerfully”.

Krog uses the notion of the body as performance to highlight the ways in which women are restricted within their bodies, and to suggest how women might begin to live beyond those restrictions. The protagonist's mother is described as a woman who actively challenges the social expectations placed on her in terms of her gender. The author-narrator comments:

Her mother presses her own hair to her head and cuts it off with the kitchen scissors. Her mother doesn't shave her legs or armpits or upper lip. Her mother has thick calluses under her feet from walking barefoot. Her mother looks like no other woman she knows. (76)

The mother has chosen to defy the demands of society for an appropriate performance of the feminine body. However, she still subscribes to certain social norms as revealed in the protagonist's comment: "She hates her mother. When she had to do the hem of her school tunic, she made it nice and short. 'Unpick that hem,' her mother said. 'Or do you want to look like a slut?'" (103). Even when she challenges society through the deployment of her own body, the mother still enforces the socially correct deployment and performance of her daughter's body.

If the dominant body is by definition male, white and healthy, the deviant body is female, black and ill. However, the issue of race is complicated in the current South African context. In *A Change of Tongue* Krog draws attention to these complexities by

highlighting the deviancy of both black and white bodies. In a heated debate between the author-narrator and a former colleague, Sheridan Jooste, the latter states:

You don't take whites out of power so easily. Their white skins protect them everywhere in the world. If you touch a white person it has international repercussions...Whites have the universal sanctity of the white skin. (118)

Sheridan goes on to quote Njabulo Ndebele saying, “ [South African whiteness] will have to declare that it is home now...South African whiteness will have to declare that its dignity is inseparable from the dignity of black bodies” (118). In this exchange Krog is highlighting the perception of the white body as dominant and as protected. This is further reinforced during a debate at a gender workshop when someone comments, “‘White women have always been the biggest taboo’...‘A white woman has always been first prize. That is why the rape of a white woman in front of her husband is seen even today as the ultimate revenge’” (196). The white body signifies power and oppression; the body of the white woman is doubly complicated because it is seen as the property of the white male body and therefore, by claiming it, a political statement can be made.

However, Krog also explores the limitation of the white body within a South African context. The author-narrator comments to a black friend:

Race is the only thing about yourself you cannot change. I can change my perspective, my words, my thinking, my body language, but not my skin. So if

you have a problem with me because I'm white, I'm trapped...I am trying to find a way into your definitions of 'African' and 'South African', I am trying to access those categories that you closed off so quickly with skin...I still have to be accepted by those who proclaim themselves the guardians of African-ness. (274)

The friend responds by asking, "And if you were just unacceptable rather than unaccepted..." (274). In this instance it is the white body that is deviant, that is unacceptable and that does not belong. This point is emphasized through the author-narrator's description of her experience of the Poetry Caravan:

She feels overcome by the exhaustion of not belonging...Whereas the Belgian writer is accepted as an African, because he is black. Her whole body pains from it. Is loneliness a kind of desperate non-belonging?...Another white person cannot rescue you from this, she knows, this deep precipice of not belonging. (300)

This sense of not belonging is experienced as a bodily pain. It is an isolation that is rooted in the colour of her skin and reveals the unacceptability of the white body.

Eva Hunter comments that "'whiteness', too, has had its silences, and the stories of women living during the apartheid era, women both heroic and 'ordinary', have remained largely unwritten" (51). When the stories of white women living under apartheid are told, they tend to either revolve around a white liberal heroine who has completely rejected her white heritage and becomes, therefore, an alienated nomad – never able to settle in any

meaningful way into any community – or else the apathetic, privileged white woman who is held up for all to revile². Even in a post-apartheid space, white women must either be heroes or must be completely immobilised by the weight of ‘white guilt’. The ‘white woman’ is seldom portrayed as a fully legitimated member of the South African nation. The burden of her British and European ancestry clings to her and becomes more visible than her life and history that are entirely located in southern Africa. The white woman who comes of age in a democratic South Africa is even more challenged to find stories of young South African women who are imbricated in the fabric of South African life.

In discussing how in the 1980s bodies became “the objects of intense cultural, philosophical, and feminist fascination”, Elizabeth Grosz states, “The preferred body was one under control, pliable, amenable to the subject’s will...” (1). She goes on to comment, “Such a conception never questioned the body’s status as an object...never even considered the possibility that the body could be understood as subject, agent or activity” (2). It is when the body is ill, when it defies our control, that the agency of the body becomes most clear. The individual often experiences illness as “an alienation from the body and as a permanent renegotiation of [her or his] sense of herself or himself as a woman or a man” (McDowell 60). This sense of the body having its own agency and not submitting to the control of the individual is conveyed in *A Change of Tongue* when the author-narrator describes her stroke:

² See Elleke Boehmer’s *Screens Against the Sky* (1990), *An Immaculate Figure* (1993), Jo-Anne Richards’s *The Innocence of Roast Chicken* (1996), *Touching the Lighthouse* (1997), Nadine Gordimer’s *The House Gun* (1997), Sarah Penny’s *The Beneficiaries* (2002) and Pamela Jooste’s *People Like Ourselves* (2003).

My left hand suddenly shoots upwards – like the claw of a bird. I force it down...my whole hand collapses...I try again, but my third, fourth and fifth fingers are hanging like dead lumps...I get up and walk slap bang into the doorpost. I seem to be drunk. In bed I try to read, but my left eye will not focus properly...The next morning when I wake up, I realise that something is terribly wrong. The blood is thundering in my veins. My left hand cannot help me to make coffee...My tongue recognises no taste. (92)

The material body and the individual's subjectivity appear to disconnect as the author-narrator attempts to accomplish tasks that she is used to performing but that her body no longer agrees to comply with. The physical experience of the stroke forces the author-narrator to reassess and redefine her subjectivity, her sense of identity and belonging within her body. This transformation is highlighted when the doctor comments, “I prefer a heart attack or cancer to a stroke...You can recover from the others or die, but a stroke changes you into what you never were” (120). The author-narrator begins to respond to her body as though it were a separate entity that is connected to her and yet is removed. She writes, “But it is my hand, my neglected clumsy left hand, that I want to spread out and look at...I start stroking each estranged finger, of me and not of me” (121). She goes on to speak to her hand as though it had a subjectivity of its own:

You have taken me to the closest sound of touch...I know you have always ached to touch like the right hand. All your life, you too wanted to behold beloved

jawbone, fondle collarbones of stars, coddle scrotum or soft, newborn head. But
your lot was to lie next to, to balance, to cradle in the lap. (121)

The deviant status of the sick body challenges the individual's subjectivity and forces her to renegotiate her way of being in the world. By highlighting this process of renegotiation between the self and the body, Krog is able to map new possibilities for the renegotiation of identity within society.

The sick body also becomes a metaphor for a broken or sick society. The author-narrator describes a visit to an Eastern Cape hospital:

[the doctor] opens a door and leads us into the waste, into the lonely place where death has come to stay...person after person, skinned into thinness, black skulls with staring sockets...Black splinted bone there. No need for tongue. Only breath turning the ill blood over and over...They all wait like ferns to die. (354)

She goes on to ask, "how could we become whole, when parts of what we are die every day into silently stacked-away brooms of bones?" (354). The ravages of the sick body, and the lack of care shown to those individuals who are dying, reveal the brokenness of the society that can no longer care for or heal itself. Krog foregrounds the difficulty of becoming an integrated and unified society when the individuals who comprise that society are not empowered to live and negotiate their identities with dignity. She seems to

suggest that both the individual and the nation must take full responsibility for the development and enhancement of each other.

In “Part One: A Town” the author-narrator visits her hometown of Kroonstad to research an article on “Food and Reconciliation” (19). Later she comments to her husband:

For some reason I’ve been seized by this morbid scatological interest here in Kroonstad...Preoccupation with excrement. How we deal with what the body has purged, the rubbish cast aside after transformation, the outward signs of the internal change. (121)

The themes of food and sewerage recur with surprising frequency throughout Krog’s text. It seems to me that this is a textual strategy to highlight the viscosity of the bodily experience, and to explore how a society deals with the debris of change. The author-narrator describes the food prepared for Ouma Hannie’s birthday lunch:

One [cousin] is busy carving a chicken...Each slice with its curve of brown skin, its piece of juicy filling, is cherished into place. The other cousin is making the gravy...a cup of sherry and thick cream is slowly caressed in, followed by some crumbling Roquefort cheese. The baked potatoes ooze on to clean paper towels.

Whole heads of garlic packed in like fragrant roses between the legs of mutton,
hams shafted among stacks of pink baked quinces. (20)

Food becomes a complete sensory experience, and the preparation of the food becomes a ritual; it is not merely a means of nourishing the body, but a way of creating and maintaining a sense of identity and community. However, “an overwhelming sense of being hounded, deprived and on the edge of chaos rises amidst the aromatic vapours of food” (21). Krog highlights the fact that the processes of change and transformation cannot be avoided by turning inward, but must be negotiated constantly. The author-narrator provides an example of the ability to signal those processes through food when she makes boerewors for Rebecca, a black friend. During an earlier conversation Rebecca had commented that the author-narrator was “part of [her] collective” (259) and that she “needs to live in a world now where intolerance and revenge are being discarded as part of the debris of transformation” (259-260). By making the boerewors according to her Afrikaner traditions and then giving it to her friend, the author-narrator is both enlarging her collective and becoming part of someone else’s.

The author-narrator’s awareness of food becomes more acute as she describes the experience of the Poetry Caravan. She comments how “over open fires the meat is being grilled. When a piece is ready...[t]he meat is chopped up with a panga and you grab the pieces you fancy” (294). She goes on to say, “The revulsion lies so thickly in her throat that she knows she could die from it, absolutely die, if she eats anything” (294). Later she says, “She has switched over to survival mode. She eats nothing...” (310). It is at this

point, when the author-narrator has become most fixated with food and her inability to eat it, that she begins to depict the body and its taboo functions. She describes how:

Someone takes a heartfelt dump in the toilet next door, you can hear him neighing slightly between volleys...The stench belches into their room...Later they hear another person going in...he throws up. Then he takes a dump...The smells become unbearable. (309)

She goes on to muse:

How is it possible that people can produce such sophisticated architecture, such beautiful lines, let such colours bloom beneath their hands, yet are unable to deal effectively with their own excreta...Is the clearing away of shit important to her because she is white?...Is an abhorrence of shit a suppressed shame at normal bodily functions? Is she abnormally absorbed in shit? (310)

Shit and a society's methods for disposal thereof become a metaphor for the 'debris of transformation'. Krog is in fact asking how it is possible that a relatively developed society, such as South Africa, can experience such difficulty in dealing with that which is left over from the process of change and transformation. The difficulty of facing one's metaphorical shit is played out literally when the author-narrator finds she can no longer avoid going to the toilet:

She goes, breathing desperately through her mouth, to the bathroom. She scrums into the stench. She squats. And by the light of the torch she shits a shiny and solitarily massive turd in the shower. When she wipes her arse with her right hand, she knows she has broken through something forever. (320)

By finally overcoming her own revulsion for the waste of the body and by breaking through the social taboos that define all shit, all waste, all that is left over, as untouchable, the author-narrator releases herself and her body to accept and enjoy the nourishment that food, and thereby community, provides. The Poetry Caravan has lunch with a local imam in Timbuktu. She comments how “the hunger that has built up over the past two weeks now grows to convulsive proportions” (327). She eats with her hands:

she becomes aware that her comrades of the bowl are sitting in varying degrees of dismay...She wants to call out: People, after weeks of torture my taste buds are bursting with pleasure...I am crazy with hunger for this fragrant, sense-enchanting food. (327)

Finally, “she sits back sweating with pleasure” (327). When she prepares for the evening’s performance and looks through her diary, she realises that the “later pages contain some of the most beautiful poems she has ever written” (327).

The body and the functions of the body are central themes in *A Change of Tongue*, and Krog uses these themes to foreground those issues of identity, change and transformation that have become taboo within our society. McDowell quotes Warner as stating:

the body is still the map on which we mark our meanings; it is chief among metaphors used to see and present ourselves, and in the contemporary profusion of imagery...the female body occurs more frequently than any other...women attest the identity and value of someone or something else. (199)

McDowell goes on to say, “And as we have seen here, the ‘something else’ is often a longed-for and struggled-over sense of national identity” (200). Thus by writing the body, Krog is attempting to engage with the issue of national identity in such a way that the individual is able to gain a sense of belonging within the nation through the lived experience of the body.

Just as the body provides a metaphor for understanding change and transformation so too does the act of writing, and the processes involved provide a means of understanding the construction and negotiation of identity within a South African context. In *A Change of Tongue* Krog foregrounds the way in which the author-narrator creates and then navigates the fields of her identity through the act of writing; the way in which she negotiates her Afrikaner identity through translation; and the way in which she finds her African identity through her poetry and the performance thereof on the Poetry Caravan. By exploring the processes of writing Krog is able to frame identity as that which is actively created rather than passively imposed or received. The act of writing is seen as a means

of exerting agency and as a way of understanding one's lived experiences. The protagonist writes in her diary of her grandmother's funeral:

When she reads the entry again a few weeks later, a terrible burning pain shoots into her chest...And then she cries...The words have not lost their power. The words have kept their content like bottled fruit, and every time she reads them she will experience her grandmother's funeral again. She will never lose it. (60)

Through the act of writing the protagonist is able to experience the emotions that she was unable to feel at the time, and through writing she is able to capture that experience and relive it at will.

Early on in "Part One: A Town", the protagonist writes, "How does she write the blue? How does she write the boy? Her life has begun" (34). Thus her identity, her life, becomes synonymous with the act of writing. In order to formulate her identity, the protagonist seeks out the written word that will enable her to contain and construct her sense of self. She goes on to ask, "How does she write the stars suddenly in her mouth? The warmth. How does she write light?" (34). The act of writing enables the protagonist to identify and express subconscious thoughts, feelings and desires, which in turn allows her to become an active agent in her life. She comments, "Like her mother she also writes. Not stories but a diary. Her daily truths, because she lives twice" (40). By setting her daily experiences down on paper, the protagonist is able to relive each day as she captures "her daily truths" and examines her thoughts, actions, and emotions, as well as

her physical responses and sensations, and in that way explore the nuances of her experience. Through her diary she is able to “[conjure] her ordinary life into gripping reports about aggressive boys, backward teachers and furious outbursts between her mother and her” (40). Thus the protagonist is building an awareness of the power of the written word to construct, change and challenge one’s experience of daily life.

This realisation that language and the process of writing can re-create and re-form experiences is further reinforced when the protagonist first reads her mother’s short story based on a family trip to Cape Town. The protagonist challenges her mother saying, “Things didn’t happen the way you wrote in the *Sarie*”, to which the mother responds:

I wasn’t giving a factual account of what happened...I wanted to say some other things in an amusing way...That the ways and means of a poor Afrikaans family are also heroic, that you don’t have to be embarrassed among the English. (82)

The mother suggests that language and the act of writing are a means of uncovering different truths that are not readily accessible in daily life. She also reveals how her identity is bound up in her writing:

It is the only bit of my life that I keep for myself. What do you know about the courage it takes to write something down? What do you know about the personal battlefield strewn with corpses which I leave behind every time I finish a piece? (83)

She goes on to show how the act of writing is a means of making peace with herself, how it allows her to negotiate the different aspects of her identity. She comments, “I am two people. The one uses her own surname and writes her own stories and earns her own money. The other one has a husband and children” (83). The act of writing allows her to bridge the space between her sense of self and the demands placed on her by her family and society.

It is through language and writing that the author-narrator is able to construct her own identity and understand the position of others. After reading a letter written by her grandmother the author-narrator comments:

“I never knew that grandma was such a compelling writer!” I say surprised, but know my mother’s answer in advance: Writing, like music, runs in families. It is nothing special, it is genetic. Some families can cook, others can write. All the same: I am thrilled to be drifting among so many female texts. (112)

While writing provides the author-narrator with the means to re-shape and re-define her own experiences and identity, writing is also a legacy that offers her a sense of belonging and a feeling of history. Thus through writing it is possible to create and construct one’s own identity and one’s future, and yet not discard the past but rather re-write it into the present and future in productive ways.



In attempting to create new possibilities for identification within the South African context, Krog engages with the concept of translation as a means for understanding the ways in which individuals can change. In *A Change of Tongue* Krog focuses specifically on how she might translate from Afrikaans to English and thereby translate herself from 'Afrikaner' to 'South African'. Quoting Christiane Nord, Krog says that "translation is an intentional interaction intending to change an existing state of affairs" (267). The emphasis here is on an 'intentional interaction'; translation cannot happen either haphazardly or in isolation, but must involve a dialogue between two voices.

Krog deals with the issues of transformation and translation both explicitly, as political and literary phenomena, and implicitly, as social and personal experiences. The author-narrator in researching the translation of poems learns, "This is the only way to learn about yourself in the world, by translating what others are saying" (184). And a Swedish expert in translation comments, "Translation is essential if we are to learn to live together on this planet. We have to begin to translate one another" (271). Translation becomes more than the act of rendering a text into another language. It is a way of engaging with difference and a means of gaining a sense of belonging in a new or changing context. Therefore, when the author-narrator struggles with the translation of the word 'African' into Afrikaans in Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom*, she is "[moved] to see how the word 'Afrikaan' for the first time finds its balance in a paragraph and rigs its sails to the winds of change" (278). The author-narrator realises that translating this text into Afrikaans

“[forces] Afrikaners to go back to the roots of the word they took so exclusively for themselves, to share it with others, to transform the language of apartheid into a language of coming together” (279). The author-narrator broadens her own sense of identity, and thereby her sense of belonging in a South African context, when her ‘Afrikaner’ identity can be translated by the new use of the word ‘Afrikaan’.

After a visit to Kroonstad, the author-narrator returns to Cape Town and begins to “work systematically through any information on transformation” (125). She encounters the difference between change and transformation; transformation involves an internal, fundamental change. This idea becomes symbolised by the example of the sole or flatfish whose “one flank really functions as the underside of the fish” (128). Thus the fish literally transforms its physical shape and function: “the eye of the underside migrates to the other flank...the mouth becomes oblique, the skull changes, the upper side turns dark” (128-9). However, the author-narrator is told by a psychiatrist, “...a person...*should not* transform, or change his essence. That would make him no longer himself, make him lose his sense of self and disintegrate, fall apart. Accommodate a variety of identities, yes. Transform, no” (129). Within the South African context, individuals must be able to expand their sense of self, absorbing and accommodating an ever-increasing number of identities. It would appear that this would then allow individuals to become more empathetic to others, regardless of the perceived differences between them.

In searching for definitions of the word transformation, the author-narrator decides, “In its deepest structure, then, the word ‘transformation’ means: to form the other side, to

start creating where you are going” (126). It is the idea that one can ‘start creating where you are going’ that is particularly significant to my project. In *A Change of Tongue* Krog is attempting to map out the possibilities for individuals for future engagement with the South African nation. She is attempting to envisage new ways of identifying and gaining a sense of belonging within this context. And she is foregrounding the important link between change, transformation and language. Language and the act of writing play key roles in the construction of identity and, therefore, the power of language must be taken into account when attempting to facilitate the broadening of the individual’s sense of self. The image of the flatfish becomes symbolic of this, especially when it is noted that the Afrikaans name for the flatfish is the ‘tongvis’ or ‘tongue fish’ (Coullie “Translating Narrative” 2). Thus ‘a change of tongue’ refers not only to the process of translation but also to the processes of (physical as well as psychic) change and transformation.

In “Part Five: A Journey”, the protagonist reads her poetry during a performance but “in the tumult of colour and sound and light she feels clumsy, uncomfortably gnarled...People are reacting in voice and dance and song to one another...she will have to learn this change of tongue” (293-294). Just as the author-narrator is able to negotiate her Afrikaner identity through the act of translation, so the protagonist discovers, negotiates and creates her African identity through poetry and performance. Initially she feels excluded and unable to embrace a sense of community via her poetry because “[w]hatever she has to say will be inaudible, because her language does not exist here. Only her body and her colour...There is no one to translate her” (291). The protagonist is forced to question her identity and what represents her ‘South Africanness’. She asks, “If

she must bring her ‘own culture’, then what exactly in her history of fabricated and reconciled identities is her own?” (293). This raises the issue of how the individual negotiates her place within the collective or nation, and what symbols she can claim as representative of herself in the nation.

It is through engaging with her poetry as performance that the protagonist begins to find a way of identifying with her new context. The connection between the poet, the voice and the body is made overt as the protagonist realises “[a] poet is not just her voice. There is the *body* that moulds the texture of the voice. There is the *space* around the body in which the voice resounds, which scorches the body into bringing forth the voice” (311). After writing a new piece “[s]he carefully works out sound possibilities...and how to use various parts and levels of her voice, rhythms and intonations” (303). Later:

While she is reading her new poem, she sees, from the corner of her eye, a small motorcycle stuttering past the back of the crowd. The woman’s cloak billows happily, the tassels of her bound headdress slightly askew. Without thinking she works it into the poem...The motorbike and the goats and Afrikaans...She is back in her seat, for the first time feeling less...lost. (306)

Through her poetry and through the performance of her poetry the protagonist begins to gain a sense of belonging. Because her poetry is able to open up and make space for that which she sees and experiences, she is able to feel more rooted in that environment. When she goes back and looks through poems that she brought with her she “feels miles

away from them. As if someone else wrote them. As if nothing that she is remains in them” (327). She has begun a process of change, of metamorphosis, through which she becomes increasingly integrated with her current space, and she becomes “aware of how far she has come – no longer feeling threatened or exposed by the activities, not indulging in them like a tourist, but simply part of it all” (328).

The link between language and the body, and the possibilities for expanding one’s sense of identity through poetry, are foregrounded when the protagonist reads a poem in Afrikaans:

As her first words tumble across the darkening square, something in her body gives. Here the language resounds that gave her soul its 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 the years of its origin, has become vulnerable and fragile on the tongues of its speakers...When she finishes reading, an ovation erupts over the square...She does not know why. And it does not matter. One of many mouths, many tongues. Accepted as, part of, sharing in. (329)

Language allows the protagonist to find a physical release; her body responds to her words and is loosened. And through poetry, she experiences belonging and community. She is no longer isolated and excluded; she has gained a sense of identity that is deeply engaged with those around her. “Part Five: A Journey” ends with an emphatic

declaration: “With the scar of our tongues, we write the land beneath our feet. We write a landscape of breath. Our word smells human, our tongue tastes African. To write is to belong” (334). Through poetry and through performance, the protagonist has been able to discern herself and gain a sense of belonging as an African. She says “she feels light-footed and loose-limbed, sorted out and rooted. She has no soul other than the one breathing in the enormous shade of this continent” (334). By engaging with the body and with the visceral experiences of constructing and maintaining one’s identity, and by foregrounding the act of, and processes involved in, writing (and performing), Krog is able to offer new possibilities for identification within the South African context. *A Change of Tongue* provides individuals with maps of potential, and reveals how social truths can be understood through the body, and how the act of writing can facilitate an integration that relies on and values difference.

Chapter Three:

“The Poet writes Poetry with her Tongue”

Saying what Cannot be Said

*“I sing the body electric /.../ I believe the likes of you shall stand or fall with my poems /
and that they are my poems /.../ O I say these are not the parts and poems of the body
only / but of the soul / O I say now these are the soul!”*

- Walt Whitman (250, 257, 258)

A central question in this thesis is how Krog’s texts present imaginative possibilities for South African women to identify with, and thereby claim a sense of belonging in, an emerging South African nation. In her mostly self-translated English poetry collections, *Down to My Last Skin* and *Body Bereft*, Krog continues to explore the themes of identity and national belonging which she engages with in her prose text, *A Change of Tongue*. In this chapter I focus on Krog’s use of poetry as a textual strategy that enables her to explore the nuances of these themes in ways which prose does not allow. I propose that lyric poetry, as a mode of expression which emphasises the allusive, the imaginative or the affective, has a capacity to render in language those experiences, emotions and sensations that are often considered intangible or elusive. Furthermore, I argue that poetry permits both the writer and the reader access to new ways of understanding experiences, and that through poetry apparently ephemeral experiences can be rooted in the body. I

also briefly consider the significance of the act of translation in relation to the reading of Krog's poems.

I present, in the Introduction, the poststructuralist argument that subjectivity is acquired in, and through, language and that experience is mediated through language. I also propose that it is therefore useful to examine the literature that emerges within a given society in order to begin to understand how that society, and the individuals involved, conceives of itself, and thereby to imagine new possibilities for identification. However, individuals negotiate their subjectivity, not only through language, but also through lived experience. Consequently, our understanding of the individual's subjectivity must involve an exploration of how she navigates the fields of her identity in and through language, as well as an examination of her lived experience within her specific body with its own particular attributes. This can, however, be challenging as such a project often involves engagement with concepts and experiences, in particular emotions, that are at times intangible, elusive and abstruse. By using the textual strategy of poetry, Krog is able to reveal the ways in which women can challenge and resist conventional notions of femininity and how they can create and give form to new possibilities for identification by engaging with language and the lived experiences of the body.

Krog describes the moment in which the protagonist in *A Change of Tongue* discovers the capacity of poetry to speak differently, and thereby create a distinct and haunting impression. Her mother reads her a poem about Japie Greyling:

She is completely enchanted. “Why does the poet say ‘shoot then dead’ and not ‘shoot me dead’?” Her mother looks at her as if she is seeing her for the first time. “If he said ‘shoot me dead’ it would be an ordinary sentence. You remembered it precisely because of the ‘then’.” (61)

Poetry, with its particular use of lineation, and often rhyme, metre and punctuation, allows the same words to speak differently from when they are in prose form. John Lennard quotes Christopher Ricks: “whereas prose *has* to go to the end of the line, in poetry it’s an option” (75). It is this, along with other options, which enables poetry to engage with those ideas, impressions, moods and sensations that defy ready expression in prose. In *Country of My Skull*, Krog writes of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission:

Ah, the Commission! The deepest heart of my heart. Heart that can only come from this soil – brave – with its teeth firmly in the jugular of the only truth that matters. And that heart is black. I belong to that blinding black African heart. My throat bloats up in tears – my pen falls to the floor, I blubber behind my hand, my glasses fog up – for one brief, shimmering moment this country, this country is also truly mine.

The heart is on its feet. (259)

In the prose form this passage is tied to the narrative of the TRC, and specifically to the testimony of Winnie Madikizela-Mandela. The meaning which these words can convey is therefore limited by the context in which they appear. Krog then includes the same

words, with significant changes, as a poem in the cycle “Country of Grief and Grace” in
Down to My Last Skin:

deepest heart of my heart
heart that can only come from this soil
brave
with its teeth firmly in the jugular of the only truth that matters
and that heart is black
I belong to that blinding black African heart
my throat bloats with tears
my pen falls to the floor
I blubber behind my hand
for one brief shimmering moment this country
this country is also truly mine

and my heart is on its feet. (97)

In poetic form, these words engage the reader at a number of levels, and encourage an understanding of a broader context than simply that of the TRC. The poem gives voice to a deep yearning that does not sit comfortably in language and is therefore difficult to identify and understand. The poem uses no punctuation or capital letters and begins without the definitive article ‘the’ that is used in the prose. It is through the metaphor of the body, and of the heart in particular, that this yearning is expressed in the opening

lines: “deepest heart of my heart / heart that can only come from this soil”. And it is through the image of the heart that a connection is forged as the speaker indicates that it is the “deepest heart of *my* heart” that “is black”. The use of the first-person speaker allows the reader to inhabit the poem and to own the yearning and emotions described. This is particularly important when the speaker states “I belong to that blinding black African heart”, as it provides the reader with the chance to both imagine and experience that possibility of belonging. The use of the first person in the prose does not afford the reader the same opportunity. This sense of belonging which is able to counteract the yearning expressed in the beginning of the poem is fully realised as the speaker says “for one brief shimmering moment this country / this country is also truly mine”. Although the prose contains the repetition of “this country, this country is also truly mine” the effect is more pronounced in the poem because the words “this country” both end a line and begin a new line. This not only emphasises the sense of belonging conveyed in “this country is also truly mine” but also gestures towards the ending of the old South Africa, and the beginning of the new, where it is the new country that “is also truly mine”. And finally, where the prose states “The heart is on its feet”, the poem is able to ring a tone of celebration as the speaker says “and my heart is on its feet”, once again accentuating the personal claim and involvement of the individual. Even though Krog has used essentially the same words, the textual strategy of poetry allows her to engage with concepts and impressions that do not admit of simple expression and are difficult to explore through prose language.

In *Talking Poetry* Peter Strauss argues that “[p]oetry never thinks or feels with the mind alone” and that it “is a good thing that we should have a form of written language which

forbids disembodied thought” (45). Strauss goes on to quote D.H. Lawrence in saying that the body experiences “real feelings” and emotions, and that “all the emotions belong to the body, and are only recognised by the mind”. As such “[p]oetry seeks the concrete, the bodily, because it seeks a reality...which is outside the sphere of the will, which can’t be bribed and which can’t pretend” (46). Poetry is a form of language that seeks to engage the body and secure lived experience within the body. One of the ways poetry achieves this is through engagement with the senses and through evoking those moods and impressions that are most difficult to confine to language. In “first sign of life” from *Down to My Last Skin* Krog describes an expectant mother’s moment of awareness when her unborn child first moves, and she parallels this with the poet’s awareness of the beginning of a poem:

with my hand across my abdomen
I wanted to hold you in words
how you look
how you sound
how I am going to utter you
but you drifted wordlessly in placenta. (35)

The poem is thereby doubly secured within the body as Krog foregrounds the bodily experience of the expectant mother as she desires to connect with her unborn child physically, and the poet’s experience of “a yet unwritten, but most awe-inspiring poem” which is still contained within the body and “[drifts] wordlessly in placenta” (35).

Not only does poetry allow for experiences to be rooted in and expressed through the body, but as a literary form poetry also provides a useful strategy for writing about the body and about the individual's response to her own, and to other, bodies. It is the *body* that Krog tackles in *Body Bereft*. In this collection she rails against, cherishes, caresses, denigrates and makes peace with the body, especially the ageing female body. This already complicated task is made more difficult by the fact that:

God, Death, Love, Loneliness, Man
are Important Themes in Literature
menstruation, childbirth, menopause, puberty
marriage are not. (20).

This supports the argument put forward by McDowell that “[t]hrough the mechanisms of cultural imperialism, women are constructed as inappropriate bodies in the rational spaces of the mind” (48). However, Krog does not focus exclusively on the female body, but explores those emotions that are tied to the ageing body. In “God, Death, Love” the speaker comments:

meanwhile terror lies exactly in how
one lives with the disintegrating body
in how one accepts that the body no longer
wants to intensify with exhilarating detonation. (20)

It is this terror, and the impotent rage that accompanies it, that Krog brings to the surface in many of her *Body Bereft* poems. The speaker in “when tight is loose” comments that “it must have happened gradually, but / she feels overcome – suddenly her body / is simply loose” and she mourns the fact that “her thumbs are crumbling away” and “her skin is loose from // her flesh like a shuddered boiled-milk / skin” (23). But then she erupts angrily, “how dare her toe- / nails grow so riotous”, and “since / when has her blood impulse changed / from ‘fuck off’ to ‘careful now’” (24). The body is no longer co-operating with the speaker’s desires and demands, and this in turn challenges her sense of self and her subjectivity. While it is possible to tackle these themes within other discourses, poetry enables the reader to simultaneously examine and experience the emotions that are being explored in a particular poem. As a textual strategy, poetry allows Krog to deal with those aspects of life that are not “Important Themes in Literature” and in so doing to suggest new ways in which, and through which, her readers are able to imaginatively engage with those moods and impressions that “belong to the body” (Strauss 46).

Although poetry is often recorded and distributed in the printed form, this belies the fact that poetry is ‘useful’ precisely because of its rootedness in orality, voice and the body. Peter Strauss points out that even when reading poetry silently we are aware of “the sensations of movement, effort, activity that we feel in our chest and throat and mouth when speaking which poetry makes us repeat in our imagination” (66). Stephan Meyer argues that Krog herself claims “that truth arises when semantics yields to phonics. Truth

is not only a matter of meaning but, more accurately, a matter of meaning moulded by sound. The force of language...lies in its combination of incantation and propositional truth” (6). Poetry therefore draws its strength as a strategy for imagining new possibilities for identification from both its fluidity as an oral medium and its fixity on the printed page.

Within her narration of the Timbuktu Poetry Caravan in *A Change of Tongue*, Krog highlights the importance of poetry’s oral nature. Describing a fellow poet’s performance, Krog comments, “She sings, she swings her body. It is not only the word, but the journey of the word. The trace of the word. The colour of the trace. It is also the journey towards the word and travelling with open eyes” (291). And then later, “a very tall, very skinny woman...stands, bringing forth sounds: the ancient, angry cries of the Malian Empire...It is a sound human in fibre, but other-worldly in tone” (293). As I have argued in Chapter Two, it is through the performance of poetry, by overtly linking the language and the body, that Krog is able to claim a sense of belonging and identity within the African continent. But what is important here is the notion of poetry as word in sound. What the medium of poetry offers is the word able to journey, to travel through sound, even sound alone speaking as a poem. The result is that even when read as print on a page, poetry cannot be static; it must always invoke the movement and the journey of sound. Krog quotes one of the poets: “Poetry is always busy with light. Poetry glows from the inside. Poetry is the ritual of draping sound over light. So that you can live opened” (334). It is this possibility of “[living] opened” that Krog seeks to present. Krog’s use of poetry allows for a shift in our understanding of the processes of

identification to occur, so that it is “not of being / but of becoming / many becomings / past lost and drifting spaces / many many becomings” (329).

Poetry proves to be a useful textual strategy for approaching those ideas, moods and emotions that resist containment in language: it does so because of its orality, its close connection to the body and its ability to convey different meanings from other literary forms and to offer a different mode of expression from prose. As such, through poetry both the writer and the reader are able to imagine new possibilities for being and for becoming that may yet be unthought of. I now focus specifically on how Krog tackles the themes of belonging, becoming and resistance in her English poetry collections, *Down to My Last Skin* and *Body Bereft*.

The question of belonging and the struggle of the individual to claim it are concepts that recur frequently in Krog’s poetry. In section one of *Down to My Last Skin*, FIRST POEMS, Krog includes “outside nineveh”, written in 1970. Even as an eighteen year-old, Krog is acutely aware of the difficulty presented by her white skin in her bid to belong in South Africa, and in Africa. The speaker describes a “small tree with separate white thorns / with a small europe / in its africa” (14). Krog grapples with the isolation of the white population within the continent, and indicates that it is both whiteness and the legacy of Europe that feed this isolation. However, Krog is not simply bemoaning her inability to belong, rather she laments the loss of wholeness that comes from a lack of engagement

with others. The second stanza of “outside nineveh” reveals how “those” who take, i.e. the white population, do not give back or acknowledge their interdependence with Africa: “those who reap your seeds never give you water / and they cheer the worm in your trunk” (14). Finally, Krog claims her place in, and her responsibility for, Africa:

I will make a song for you, my little tree

I will pray for you

because wherever I sleep at night

I stay your thorn

I stay white. (14)

Krog has had to negotiate the implications of her skin colour and assert her claim of belonging. Her identity and her South Africanness take on an intrinsic quality, in that it becomes irrelevant where in the world she sleeps, for she will always retain that element of her identity. It is also not an unproblematic identity as the speaker says “I stay your thorn”, implying that she does not belong completely, and echoing the notion of being ‘a thorn in one’s side’, that is something that is embedded, but does not sit comfortably. And this is because she ‘stays white’. However, while Krog acknowledges that it is her white skin that causes her such difficulty in belonging, she also claims that white skin as her own and does not attempt to either cast it aside or alter it, but asserts her claim of belonging in spite of it. In this way “outside nineveh” suggests the potential for white South Africans to negotiate an identity, albeit a sometimes-problematic one, within the emerging South African nation.

In the cycle “Country of Grief and Grace”, from *Down to My Last Skin*, Krog traces the difficult process of negotiation that occurs as South Africans move from the old South Africa into the new. The cycle begins with a poem that raises the question:

how long does it take

for a voice

to reach another

in this country held bleeding between us. (95)

The isolation of individuals and the vast distance between people, a legacy of the forced separation of apartheid, is expressed by the demarcation of these lines. Communication does not take place easily, but is halted and protracted. At this point in the cycle, it is important to note that the country is described as being “held bleeding between us”, implying that the land itself somehow separates and divides individuals. The image that is created is that of a tug-of-war, where each side desperately attempts to claim the land as their own. However, Krog offers an alternative to this image in the second poem of this cycle. The speaker cries:

hear oh hear

the voices all the voices of the land

all baptised in syllables of blood and belonging

this country belongs to the voices of those who live in it. (96)

It is significant that this country belongs “to the voices” of those who live in it, and not merely “to those who live in it”. This emphasises the power of the voice as a potential means of communication and as a hope for bridging the distance between individuals. Also, the voice is rooted in, and formed through, the body, and cannot be without the body. And yet the voice is able to transcend the skin, the barrier between bodies, as the sound travels from one body to another. Krog does not imply that this negotiation of belonging and identity is either simple or painless. It is through a baptism of “blood and belonging” that the voices of this country are able to claim membership in the South African society.

Later on in the cycle, “Country of Grief and Grace”, a shift occurs as the speaker says, “because of you / this country no longer lies / between us but within” (98). And it is through language, and through sound – “soft intimate clicks and gutturals” – that this shift and healing begin. Again, this is not an easy process that can be accomplished through a once-off gesture, but rather a negotiation that must be repeated again and again. Krog highlights this:

I am changed for ever I want to say

forgive me

forgive me

forgive me. (98)

The repetition of the line “forgive me” reinforces this idea of the repeated process. But Krog does not imply that this must occur indefinitely, but rather that those who have the power to forgive can forge new connections and allow the shift from the country lying “between us [to] within [us]”. The speaker ends the poem asking, “you whom I have wronged, please / take me // with you” (98). The break between the last two lines emphasises the metaphorical distance that must be travelled by all South Africans in order to become comfortable with one another.

Krog does not attempt to sustain a purely idealised image of what might be possible for South Africans involved in this process of negotiating their identity and sense of belonging anew, but raises questions of how the individual can live in this complex and changing nation. In the penultimate poem in this cycle, the speaker asks:

what does one do with the old
how do you become yourself among others
how do you become whole
how do you get released into understanding
how do you make good. (100)

These are key questions to which Krog does not endeavour to give neat, superficial answers, but rather she creates a space in which individuals can engage with them. She provides a decisive moment, “a line which says: from this point onwards / it is going to sound differently” (100). It is this moment and the fact that Krog, again, focuses on the idea of sound, which is significant: sound seems to hold a profound potential for becoming for Krog, and this openness and ability to transform and become are especially important in the South African context as they allow for individuals to change and to renegotiate their identities. The speaker goes on to comment, “we know the deepest sound of each other’s kidneys in the night / we are slowly each other /.../ and it starts here” (100). It is the “sound” of the kidneys, those organs that cleanse and renew the blood, in the night, when all is dark, which provides the point of connection and the space in which individuals can begin to know each other. Krog ends the cycle, “Country of Grief and Grace”, with a caveat: “if [the new] repeats the old // things may then continue as before / but in a different shade” (100). While the potential exists for all South Africans to engage with this process of identity negotiation in order to find ways to belong within the emerging South African nation, Krog intimates that it cannot be a superficial engagement, but must look to transform the old and thereby create something both different and new. The textual strategy of poetry allows Krog to chart the course of transformation in a South African context in a way that can address both the fears and insecurities and the hopes and aspirations of individuals who are deeply rooted in this land.

This engagement with the notion of identity and belonging continues in *Body Bereft*, but in this second English volume, Krog tackles those aspects of the topic that are more ambivalent and more fraught with tension. In “fossil alphabet” the speaker reveals the awkwardness of black-white interaction:

the found fossil does not describe
how my blue eyes look past your eyes
how your black eyes look away from my eyes
how my white forearm does not simply
rest next to your black forearm. (62)

These moments of failed interaction are not described as deliberate, but rather as the result of a (difficult to define in language) ‘not-knowing’ – a not-knowing how to be different. Krog turns once again to the image of the land, this time not as that which is fought over, but as that which holds a memory of connection and belonging. The speaker comments on how the fossil is able to describe “how the coast blindingly kept on shouting / after the continent that was once part of her /.../ how the rusted rock along the coast longed for the drifted bloodbrother” (62). The image of the fossil communicates the idea of that which remains when all else has faded away, and Krog uses this to draw attention to the possibility that within black-white interactions there may exist, beneath the surface of “stoney one-ness / and so much furious aversion”, the memory “...that once everything was linked / that we broached our hearts for one another” (62). However,

this remains merely a possibility and the poem ends in an ambivalent mood, highlighting the difficulty of negotiating our claims of belonging when so much of what we experience does not sit easily within language.

Many of Krog's English poems are written in free verse, which increases the impact of the poem that is written in rhyme. In *Body Bereft*, "farewell" makes use of a haphazard system of pairs of rhyming words, "blue/you" (lines 6 & 8), "know/so" (lines 10 & 11), "free/identity" (lines 16 & 18), "fright/white" (lines 22 & 23) and "this/truth-ness" (lines 23 & 24), which gives the poem an odd concertina effect with two of the pairs squashing together in the last four lines of the poem. This poem is written as twelve two-line stanzas, but this format seems strangely contrived. The effect of this is to create a tension between the almost free verse poetry and the rigidity of the format in which it is presented. Here again, Krog is dealing with the issues of belonging, in an African context, within the "strange white wrapping" of a white skin (65). The speaker states, "...I've always been from here / I belong nowhere else" and then goes on to comment:

whether you see it like this

I don't know

whether you acknowledge my right to say so

I will want to know

from you. (65)

A tension exists between the speaker's desire for belonging and her uncertainty as to whether her claim will be recognised as legitimate, and this is revealed when the speaker asks, "dare skin say so much / in this search for identity" (65). As in "fossil alphabet", this poem ends on an uneasy note. The final two stanzas read:

but when we look into the water

I get a fright from the omnipresent

white who sits like this:

stipulating truth-ness. (65)

There is, firstly, the disjuncture between the "we" that looks into the water, and the "I" that gets a fright and, secondly, the reminder of the inescapability of the white skin. Krog is attempting to find a way into language for the uneasy tension between the individual white South African's desire to belong and the overwhelming reality of the sanctity that her white skin offers her, thereby reinforcing her otherness and the difficulty of negotiating an identity that is fully connected with this continent.

Krog not only tackles the politics of belonging in her poetry, she also wrestles with the difficulty of ‘becoming’ – of becoming a woman, a poet, a mother, a wife – and through poetry she attempts to map the ways in which it is possible to ‘become’, and the ways in which it is possible to resist ‘becoming’. In both *Down to My Last Skin* and *Body Bereft*, Krog writes the negotiation of identity and foregrounds the tension of performing many roles. Motherhood, marriage, poetry and writing are not glamorised, but are held up for scrutiny. By examining these roles and the expectations attached to them, Krog is able to write possibilities for renegotiating them and thereby create new ways of identifying within a South African context. Again, it is poetry’s capacity to express those ideas, moods and emotions that resist discursive exploration that allows Krog to engage with these themes and to foreground those issues that tend to remain hidden.

Krog divides *Down to My Last Skin* into seven parts, and groups her poems according to general themes and concerns. Parts two, three and four deal specifically with the idea of becoming and negotiating a variety of roles and identities, all of which are equally demanding. “LOVE IS ALL I KNOW” explores the intricacies of marriage and the demands and expectations of being a wife; “DEAR CHILD OF THE LEAN FLANK” engages with the theme of motherhood and the way in which one must negotiate one’s individual identity within the restraints of socially constructed ideals of being a mother; and “TO BREATHE” highlights the necessity and the difficulty of writing.

In “How and With What?”, Krog highlights how the apparently mundane demands of motherhood become overwhelming. The first stanza reveals the isolation of the speaker

as she attempts to negotiate dishes, nappies and crying children while her “man closes the door against [it] all / and turns up the Mozart piano concerto” (36). The speaker begins to lose her sense of self, and even her body begins to metaphorically give way and transform as her “nose leaks like a fridge”, her “eyes quake like eggs in boiling water” and her “ears are post boxes pouting with calendars and junk mail” (37). It is not only the speaker’s sense of identity that is challenged, but also her belief in her ability to fulfil this role of ‘mother’:

my children assault me with their rowdiness
selfishness
cheekiness
destructiveness
their fears complexes insecurities threats needs
beat my “image as mother” into soft steak on the wooden floor. (37)

The poem ends with the speaker asking, “how and with what does one survive this?” (37). Krog does not provide an answer, but in depicting domestic meltdown she is able to normalise this experience of chaos, isolation and disintegrating identity, and thereby begin to evaluate the demands and expectations of motherhood in order to renegotiate them.

The difficulty of juggling several roles is highlighted in “Two Years this Month”, where Krog depicts the struggle of the poet to write while simultaneously dealing with the needs of her home and family. The speaker comments that it is “two years this month / since my last volume of poetry / two years without a single line – dark” (52). As a poet, the speaker needs to write – she must find a way to set her life and experience in language – but she cannot. She asks, “how does one start a poem?” and says:

I split my ears inward
tap against the inner sides to intercept tremors
desperately I flog every wound
but inside it stays prudently thickened. (52)

And yet, the speaker states, “this is the way I want my life this / binding of an unwritten house” (52). A tension therefore exists between what the speaker needs in order to write, in order to be a poet, and what she wants for herself as a mother and for her family. Krog captures this tension in the second half of the poem when, in the moment that a poem begins to take form and “the pulse of the fabric is emerging”, “*a child calls from afar / a door slams / footsteps down the passage*” (53). It is significant that Krog renders this interruption of the poetic moment in poetic form, as this conveys the tension of being that the speaker is attempting to understand and negotiate. The speaker loses her poem even as she “[grabs] the opening” and “urgently [cradles] the closing muscle” (53). The moment that the speaker, as poet, has been seeking so desperately, vanishes. However,

Krog is able to hint at a possible balance between the needs of the individual woman, the need to write a poem, and the demands made by her family and society. The poem ends in two lines of italics, again in poetic form: “*carefully the child enters the room / mom are you busy? / his eyes ragged and grey*” (53). Thus the interruption, the child, the demands of family life become the poem, and for that moment the speaker is able to become both poet and mother.

Krog is often able to give form to those experiences and emotions that are awkward and socially unspeakable. The difficulties faced by women walking a tightrope of priorities in their attempts to simultaneously fulfil all the demands of careers and motherhood are dealt with compassionately in Krog’s poetry. She does not minimise the complexity of this negotiation, nor does she offer sweeping and generalised remedies. Krog uses poetry to examine and interrogate the issues of guilt, responsibility, social expectations and personal needs and desires. This then provides South African women (and those elsewhere) with the opportunity to re-evaluate and renegotiate their roles and their identities within the South African context. In “Ma will be Late” Krog conveys through her choice of verbs and adjectives the negative emotions experienced by a mother who has been away from her family. The speaker returns home with “*hurriedly* bought presents” and finds that her “family’s *distressed* dreams / *slink* down the corridor the windows *stained* // with their *abandoned* language” (45, my italics). These words suggest the guilt experienced by the speaker, who believes that by not being available to her family, constantly and without interruption, she has abandoned them and has failed in her role as mother. However, while Krog attempts to normalise the experience of these

emotions, so that they can be challenged and renegotiated, she is careful not to legitimise the demands placed on the woman by social expectations. Krog suggests that not only can women re-evaluate their own roles, but that they can actively challenge the demands placed on them by society, and thereby create new ways in which they can become citizens, women, poets, mothers, partners and/or wives. The final stanza of “Ma will be Late” gestures towards this possibility as the speaker comments that all these experiences “[make] me neither poet nor human / in the ambush of breath / I die into woman” (45). In that moment, the speaker is able to shed her roles, and the demands attached to them, and become completely ‘woman’. Krog does not suggest that this is a continual, straightforward existence, but rather that it is a transient moment in which the speaker continually rediscovers the possibility of what and who she can be. It is these moments of possibility that Krog attempts to reveal for her readers, so that they in turn might be surprised and reassured by what is possible.

Poetry not only allows Krog to write new ways of becoming, but it also suggests ways in which ‘becomings’ can be resisted. In both *Down to My Last Skin* and *Body Bereft* Krog includes poems that resist and defy the demands and expectations placed on women and on individuals. This resistance is at times violent and angry, and at others subtle yet intense. In *Body Bereft* Krog deals explicitly with the experience of ageing. At times she laments this process, at times she celebrates it and at times she angrily defies it. In “sonnet of the hot flushes”, the speaker describes the physical manifestations of the menopause. Initially, this “newly floated fire” that causes your “bones to bake besides themselves” and your “cheeks to simmer in dismay” is grudgingly accepted as part of the

process of ageing. However, the second stanza of the sonnet denotes a change: “But one day you shift in your chair – and / feel this enormous crucible destroying your / last juiciness. God knows, this is enough” (17). It is the moment in which the speaker feels that her identity is challenged that she begins to resist the ageing process. The speaker is attempting to retain a sense of her sexual identity, and that is threatened when this “enormous crucible” begins to destroy her “last juiciness”. The speaker then describes how, in this moment of resistance, “you rise – a figurehead of / fire – you grab death like a runt and plough its nose / right through your fleeced and drybaked cunt” (17). Krog does not write of a physical defiance of the ageing process; there is no mention of Botox or liposuction. However, she does reveal how it is possible to metaphorically challenge death, not because the speaker is primarily afraid of dying, but because this process is seen as altering and undermining the individual’s sense of self. While death is accepted as part of a natural process, Krog attempts to convey the complexity of negotiating one’s identity in the face of an inevitable, and often undesirable, becoming.

As well as suggesting the struggle to renegotiate one’s identity within an ageing body, Krog also reveals how difficult it is to render this experience in language. In “how do you say this”, from *Body Bereft*, the speaker confesses, “I truly don’t know how to say this/.../ I really don’t know how to write your ageing body/.../ I simply do not know how ageing should sound in language” (28). Here Krog draws attention to the fact that there are those spaces in our experience for which we do not have a comfortable language. Ageing, as a process, an experience and a forced renegotiation of identity, does not have an adequate social language. Through poetry, Krog attempts to find a way to contain this

experience within the written and spoken word. In doing so she is able to seek out ways in which one can resist and challenge the undermining of identity that ageing appears to bring, and ways in which one can claim the process of ageing and renegotiate one's identity so as to open up possibilities rather than closing down options. However, as the speaker notes at the end of the poem:

at times it seems easier to rage
against the dying of the light
than to eke out
the vocabulary of old age. (29)

Just as poetry offers Krog a way of engaging with, and resisting, the implications of the ageing process for identification, it also provides Krog with a means of interrogating her identity as a white South African woman. In an article on *Down to My Last Skin* Stephan Meyer comments that Krog's inclusion of the cycle "Lady Anne Barnard at the Cape" is "particularly significant for English writing in South Africa", but he does not explore the implications of this choice of subject for the literary representation of English-speaking white women (14). Krog's engagement with the historical character of Lady Anne is complex, as she attempts to find through this personality new possibilities for herself as a writer, and yet is frustrated by this character's apparent lack of substance. In "Lady Anne as Guide" the speaker reveals that she looked at the character of Lady Anne as offering an example of how "to live an honourable life in an era of horror" (73). However, the speaker is disappointed and comes to realise that Lady Anne "never had real pluck" and

comments that “as a metaphor, my Lady / you’re not worth a fuck” (73). Krog therefore resists the point of identification offered by the character of Lady Anne, but instead of remaining angry and disparaging of this historical figure, Krog comes to view her with compassion. In “You are being Remembered for your Parties Lady Anne”, a shift is revealed. In the opening stanza the speaker states, “this poem is our final showdown” but then as she describes the ageing body of Lady Anne, the speaker realises:

how close I am to you my inhibitions set me free

nothing missing in this brief assault

except that you have become beautiful

to me and movingly brave. (76)

Thus the speaker sees her humanity and her own weaknesses reflected in the character of Lady Anne. The poem ends with the speaker acknowledging, “...I mourn beloved friend // your complete radiant uselessness” (77). Krog is able to transform the deficiencies of Lady Anne into creative and productive points of identification by displacing her own feelings of ineffectualness as a white liberal onto the character of Lady Anne, and in so doing is able to reject her and that subject position. However, while Krog resists a white identity that is complacent and ineffectual, through her engagement with the historical figure of Lady Anne, Krog is also able to retain a sense of compassion for herself and for the limits of identification that Lady Anne comes to represent. This in turn allows for a sympathetic space in which new subjectivities can be imagined that are able to

incorporate both the idea of whiteness, and effective and imaginative resistance to colonial and patriarchal power.

Poetry has the potential to break the rules of symbolic, syntactic, masculine language (Kristeva 57), and therefore is a powerful medium through which to challenge a phallogentric patriarchal system. In “Stripping”, from *Down to My Last Skin*, Krog writes of the “bloody thick cock” that “does more than conquer” (31). While this poem can be read literally, it is useful to examine it as a metaphor for the apparent power of the patriarchal system as symbolised through the phallus. The speaker comments that “everything every godfucking thing revolves around the maintenance of cock”, highlighting how societies in general, and South Africa in particular, are still organised by a predominantly patriarchal order. However, Krog writes in resistance to this as the speaker says, “I am waiting for the day / oh I look forward to the day the cock crumbles” (32). The tone is expectant and optimistic as the speaker goes on to state, “and come it will” (32). Krog does not suggest any form of violent revolution to overthrow the patriarchal order, but rather a growing awareness amongst women that they can, and should, claim their own power. The speaker comments that “the women in [her] family kapater their men with / yes with stares” (32). The men, or rather the patriarchal system, are castrated not with knives and sharp blades, but with the gaze. Krog implies that women can challenge the patriarchal system by choosing to actively ‘see’ the world around them, and thereby engage with it. Because she has the power to ‘stare’, the speaker is able to “slither away like fertile snakes in the grass / taking shit from nobody” (32). Krog also implies that women draw their power from a community of other women,

and that the appreciation of one's own body is an immense source of power. The speaker ends the poem triumphantly commenting, "my aunts and my nieces and sister they laugh and tell me / how one's body starts chatting then how it dances into tune / at last coming home to its own juices" (32). By the end of the poem the cock, that "does more than conquer", has been overthrown and the speaker has claimed a space for herself and her body that allows her access to power that previously resided only in the domain of the phallus. Thus Krog is able to use poetry as a medium that makes it possible for women to claim their own power, and in so doing offers a creative possibility for identification to South African women.

Krog closes *Down to My Last Skin* with a final poem of defiance, "Paternoster". It is significant that the collection is ended with this poem as it encapsulates a variety of themes and concerns, including those of belonging, becoming and resistance. The dual meaning of "paternoster" is important as it signifies both the small South African West Coast village of Paternoster and the Latin *paternoster*, the "Lord's Prayer" or "Our Father". This dual signification allows Krog to engage with ideas on belonging within a South African context and with notions of the patriarchal order. In the same way as in "stripping", the speaker enacts her power through the gaze as she says, "fearless / I stare down every bloody damn wave / in the gut as it breaks" (117). The tone throughout the poem is one of defiance. The speaker stakes her claim for belonging within South Africa by identifying with the physical land as she boldly states, "like hell! I am rock I am stone I am dune", implying that as she stands on "a massive rock in the sea at Paternoster", she

belongs because she is (117). The final four lines of the poem are defiantly triumphant as the speaker exclaims:

I am
I am
god hears me
a free fucking woman. (117)

Krog is here able to signal the culmination of many ‘becomings’ into a moment of legitimated ‘being’. Krog subverts the power of Christian patriarchy by simultaneously allowing her speaker to own the phrase “I am”, traditionally assigned to the God of the Old Testament, and rendering “god” in lower case. This subversion accentuates the speaker’s claim of power as a “free fucking woman”, while allowing her to both belong and ‘become’. Thus through the medium of poetry Krog offers alternative ways in which South African women can negotiate identities that enable them to belong within the South African nation, and to become “free fucking women”.

In a *Translation Note* at the beginning of *Down to My Last Skin*, Krog comments that reading her poems translated by others “was quite a disturbing experience: I felt alienated from the translations” (3). She goes on to state, “I longed to interact as a poet with South Africans who do not read Afrikaans” (3). Stephan Meyer picks up on these points when he observes of Krog’s decision to translate her Afrikaans poems into English:

Two issues are at stake here: The first to correct the skewed representation of oneself...The second is to overcome the alienation of having words ascribed to one, words with which one cannot quite associate oneself but which one cannot disclaim as one's own either. (8)

Because I am one of those "South Africans who do not read Afrikaans", this project has only engaged with Krog's poetry in the English translation and I have chosen only to examine those poems that Krog herself has translated. This is important because as Meyer again notes:

By committing to paper her own interpretations of her writing, Krog makes significant suggestions about how her work can be read. Her self-interpretation can be discerned in the choices she makes in the translation of actual words; her selection of poems to be translated; her thematic focalisation; and the composition of the collection as a whole. This makes *Down to My Last Skin* valuable to those who can only read her in English – and at the same time invaluable to Afrikaans. (16)

This chapter has investigated how Krog uses poetry to explore not only the ways in which South African women can more positively identify with the South African nation, but also how women can negotiate what it means to be a 'woman'. It is therefore significant that Krog has used the process of translation of her Afrikaans poetry into

English to challenge the way her work has been read and the way in which she, as an individual woman, has been interpreted.

Meyer remarks that “[b]eing her own translator gave Krog the liberty to chop and change, something a translator of someone else’s work cannot do” (10). Krog is therefore able to constantly rework her poems as she translates them from Afrikaans to English and in so doing renegotiate the meanings and forms that she presents to her readers. However, Meyer also observes that:

...[Krog] is extremely sensitive to the possibility of the once-forged union of meaning and sound falling apart in translation. Given the specific cadences of, say English, translation necessarily requires establishing a new union between meaning and sound...this means that ‘new’ poems arise in the process of translation which are quite different from the originals. (7)

and:

The resistance of language to the translator’s agency is also evident in the absence of poems which Krog abandoned for translation. The impossibility of translating one colloquialism into another meant that whole poems had to be left out, primarily for this reason. (10)

Krog comments that not only are certain poems impossible to translate because of central stylistic devices that cannot move from one language to another, but poems also lose “the echo of other Afrikaans poets and the ways in which I have used their well-known works” and “the response of my poems to the male voices” of Afrikaans canonical poetry (“Last Skin” 4). Krog notes that the “biggest loss in translated poetry is the sound of the original language, a key element that completely disappears when a work is translated into an unrelated language” (3). However, translation also allows the poet to “create a ‘version’ of the original that is in many respects a new poem” (3), and Krog remarks:

Literature is constantly retranslated for new eras. In the case of some of the earlier poems I tried to recreate the newness of then, but also took the liberty of exploring the same theme from a later perspective. (4)

Krog deals extensively with the act and process of translation in *A Change of Tongue*, even titling one of the sections “A Translation”. One of the epigraphs at the beginning of this section is from Salman Rushdie, who comments, “It is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation; I cling obstinately to the notion that something can also be gained” (267). Krog, it would seem, also adheres to this notion that translation allows for something to be gained. She quotes Nelson Mandela as saying “One’s language should never be a dead end...That is why I believe in translation: for us to be able to live together” (268).

However, responses to Krog’s attempts to “interact with South Africans who do not read Afrikaans” have not all been favourable. Stephen Gray, in reviewing *Body Bereft* for the

Mail & Guardian, writes, “Now we are to believe Krog just *sommer* writes in both the old official languages, producing two separate publications”, and goes on to ask, “But still, how good is Krog’s second language, English? Is her daring in publishing 112 pages of it justified?”. In response to these comments Nic Dawes, also writing for the *Mail & Guardian*, says that, while Gray would argue “[Krog] has somehow betrayed a vital tradition in Afrikaans literature for an etiolated and unsatisfactory English, a language for which she in any event has a tin ear”, “Krog has, in fact, been working towards a theory of translation, and her efforts are adumbrated at some length in *A Change of Tongue*, which sketches South Africa’s transition and her work as a transitional writer, as a work of translation” (13). Dawes has highlighted a key point that Gray seems determined to overlook, namely that Krog is not attempting to become an English poet, but rather she is attempting to interact with South Africans, as a South African, in the most widely used common tongue. It is an active “theory of translation” through which Krog is able to suggest alternative ways in which South Africans can meet, can interact and can negotiate their identities within a constantly changing global milieu. Thus, through the medium of poetry and through the process of translation, Krog is able to offer South Africans, and South African women in particular, ways of imagining new points of identification and being within the South African context.

Conclusion

“Lost White Tribe in Search of an Inoffensive Identity”, “Just Put me Down as ‘Anglo-African’”, “Are You Truly an African?”, “How to be a White African”, “How to be a South African”³: these headlines, taken from leading South African newspapers over the past year, foreground the ongoing debate around national identity and highlight the inherent insecurity in white South African identity formation.

This project has worked towards identifying those strategies in Krog’s English texts, *A Change of Tongue*, *Down to My Last Skin* and *Body Bereft*, that suggest new ways in which white South Africans can begin to engage with the issues of belonging, social integration and identity formation. However, as Colean Jacobson points out:

It is hard to pin down what South African cultural and national identity is, the terms being so slippery and so loaded. And in some ways it is too soon to try. It is from the coming generations and their hybrid future that new national identities will bloom. (“Power of Africa make-do” 39)

Jacobson goes on to quote Sarah Nuttall, who in discussing the Hansa beer advertisements – “I hate being black/I hate being white” – comments: “What young people do want to do, the ads suggest, is to evacuate the older meanings of race and be able to insert new meanings into what it is to be black or white” (“Power of African make-do” 39). While this is an important observation as it highlights the constructed

³ See L’Ange, Laurence, Sefularo, Godi, Tyler.

nature of identity, Jacobson does not go on to elaborate how those new meanings can be formulated. Similarly Jeremy Cronin observes that:

It is President Thabo Mbeki who articulated a moving celebration of a new South African identity, identity as process and not origin, identity as heterogeneity and not some univocal root, identity as mixedness. (13)

However, here again Cronin focuses on the idea of “identity as process” without suggesting ways in which South Africans, and white South Africans in particular, can engage with that process. This project has suggested that literature provides one possible way of enabling individuals to engage with broader issues such as the formation of a national identity and gaining a sense of belonging within a society. In commenting on the recent surge in publishing by white women writers, Celean Jacobson states:

While many of these books may be clichéd, over-written and benefit from publishers’ commercial desires, they are important in that they add to a sense of white perspective. It is as if the authors are attempting to write the white female experience back into the body of South African literature. (“No Woman” 18)

And in “attempting to write the white female experience back into the body of South African literature”, authors have the opportunity to imagine new ways in which white South African women can negotiate their identities. I argue that in *A Change of Tongue*, *Down to My Last Skin* and *Body Bereft* Krog engages with that opportunity and in so

doing suggests possible ways in which white South African women can claim a sense of belonging within society, and how they can challenge, resist, re-construct and create their identities both as women, and as South Africans.

A Change of Tongue begins:

It is as if the rain picks you up carefully. As if the rain has got your scent...as if the rain clears your throat...It encompasses everything...Somewhere light sifts through...The rain clutches you tightly. It holds you. It hurts you. As if the rain has snipped the wire that draws your insides together. (9)

And it ends:

The rain picks up carefully. The rain has our scent. It clears our throats. Light sifts through. It encompasses everything. (367)

These two quotations, taken from the prose poems “rain” and “wing” that respectively open and close *A Change of Tongue*, reveal a progression in thought and perspective as Krog attempts to illustrate how it is possible for the individual South African to be “shifted...: attached to [her] previous self, and therefore connected with it, but now standing in a different ‘place’, with a different view both of [herself] and the world”

(Clingman 6). This ability to be displaced, shifted, cut loose, is central to Krog's project of imagining new ways in which South Africans, particularly white South Africans, can gain a sense of belonging within the broader South African society. More importantly, it is the new perspective that comes with this shift that Krog outlines and examines.

It is significant that there are key differences in tone and point of view in the lines that open and close the text as these foreground the possibilities for transformation and change that are open to South Africans. The text begins in the first prose poem with the use of the second-person singular; this highlights the space between the "I" and the "you" and reveals an attitude of separation in which there is always an 'other'. The tone is unsure and the repeated use of the phrase "as if" emphasises this uncertainty, as does the phrasing "*somewhere* light sifts through" suggesting a sense of isolation, dislocation and longing. The experience of the rain in the first prose poem is negative as it "clutches you tightly. It holds you. It hurts you", and the poem concludes, "the rain has snipped the wire that draws your insides together". However, this painful experience does serve the purpose of "dislodging [the self in order] that the pieces could move around, as in a kaleidoscope of self, belonging and nation, before falling into a different arrangement" (Clingman 6).

In *A Change of Tongue* Krog charts this movement through various journeys – the author-narrator's travels around South Africa, the Timbuktu Poetry Caravan, the journey of one language into another through translation, the passage from childhood to adulthood, the crossing of thought into word – and in so doing offers suggestions for

“different arrangements” of self, belonging and nation. Krog also uses various textual strategies – in particular a fluidity of structure, genre shifts, and a multiplicity of points of view – to reveal the possibilities for engagement with issues of difference and belonging in society. Finally, Krog attempts to outline alternative ways of negotiating identity as she foregrounds how the self is inseparable from the body, and how the self can be re-constructed through the processes of writing. The final prose poem echoes Krog’s concern with the body as a medium of interaction, and highlights the possibilities for connecting with the ‘other’ through the body:

I take your blood, so light it could have been dust, and skim from it ages of exhaustion, virus and hunger. I take my own blood and I mix it with yours, as I have always yearned to do – to be of your body, to be surged by your heart, and loved by your skin. I bend over your face. You open your eyes and I see myself for the first time. As you widen your eyes, you see yourself there, compellingly complete. (367)

The body provides a space in which, and through which, the individual can negotiate her own identity and find a sense a belonging within a broader community or society. In this final poem blood, which in the context of the South African HIV/AIDS pandemic is so fraught with danger and is desperately avoided, becomes the point of connection and the mingling of blood allows the individual to “see [herself] for the first time” and to be “compellingly complete”.

The end of the text does not claim to offer a definitive answer to the problem of identity formation and national belonging; rather Krog is optimistic that a change in perspective can allow for new ways of being and belonging. To suggest this change in perspective, Krog ends *A Change of Tongue* with the same words that open the text, but in a significantly different formulation. The key change is that of point of view; the final prose poem ends in the first-person plural as “the rain has *our* scent. It clears *our* throats” (my italics). There is no longer the sense of a separation between the self and the ‘other’, but rather a joint experience that is inclusive and shared. A tone of quiet optimism is implied in the last two sentences: “Light sifts through. It encompasses everything”. Light, symbolic of hope, possibility, new beginnings, is no longer “somewhere” else, but is here; and the light, not the rain, now “encompasses everything”. Thus the text outlines a trajectory of change and in so doing provides a tentative map for the possibilities open to individuals for identifying as South Africans and gaining a sense of belonging within a changing South African society.

However, these possibilities for identification are not always easy to contain and define in language, especially narrative discourses, and it is therefore productive to explore Krog’s poetry in order to gain a clearer understanding of how individuals, particularly women, can identify within the South African context. The poem beginning “this body bereft”, from the cycle “Country of Grief and Grace” in *Down to My Last Skin*, draws together a number of tropes that are central to Krog’s poetry and her engagement with issues of belonging in a South African society (99). This poem is also significant as it provides the

title for Krog's second English poetry collection and thereby creates an overt link between the two collections.

Lyric poetry proves a useful textual strategy for dealing with those experiences and ideas that are allusive and difficult to express clearly in language because it is a medium that is rooted in orality, allows access to the visceral experiences of the body, emphasises the allusive and intuitive, and presents ideas in defamiliarising ways. In "this body bereft" Krog highlights these attributes of lyric poetry through her use of the tropes of the body and the voice. It is the *body* that is bereft and that has suffered loss and is isolated from the warmth of community, and then it is the *throat*, the passage through which the voice must travel, that is tortured. The two key points through which social interaction between individuals can take place have been damaged. Krog also returns to the image of the heart, as both the central organ in the body and the seat of compassion and love, as a metaphor for what it costs to belong within "this country of death" (99). The tone of this poem is characteristically ambivalent, and despite the initial pessimism, conveyed through the use of the words "bereft", "tortured", "death", "grief" and "anguished", Krog is able to offer a tentative hope for renewed interaction and connection by the end. Significantly, it is through sound "lovelier, lighter and braver than song" that this connection occurs in the "warm fragile unfolding of the word humane" (99). The word and the act of "unfolding" the word allow for the beginning of relationship. It is also important that in this instance Krog has focused specifically on the moment of connection between women, as the speaker, after acknowledging the effort made by the other as "you do not lie down / you open up a pathway with slow sad steps / you cut me loose", asks,

“may I hold you my sister / in this warm fragile unfolding of the word humane” (99).

Thus this space in which the women of South African can meet is made possible both by the opening up of “a pathway with slow sad steps” and by the reaching out and asking for acceptance and belonging.

While Krog is sensitive to the difficulties faced by white South Africans in overcoming the legacy of apartheid and gaining a sense of belonging in a constantly changing South African society, she also suggests that that belonging must at times be asserted and that white South Africans can integrate themselves into a broader community by actively laying claim to their own South Africanness and Africanness. In “letter-poem lullaby for Ntombizana Atoo” in *Body Bereft*, the speaker insists:

that what we are as Africans is something so soft so humanly skinned
so profoundly constitutionally big and light and kind as soul
so caring as to surpass all understanding

we are what we are because we are of each other. (59)

What is significant in this assertion is the claim that is made to broader ideals and concepts and how this imbricates the speaker into the community from which these ideals and concepts stem. The fragility of both the individual and the moment of belonging is highlighted as the speaker says “what we are as Africans is something so soft so humanly skinned”, echoing the moment of the “warm fragile unfolding of the word humane”

("Last Skin" 99). Similarly, the idea of the body is used to emphasize the space of common ground found within "something so soft so humanly skinned" ("Body Bereft" 59). It is noteworthy that Krog uses the word *constitutionally* in this context, as it brings with it a multitude of connotations, such as the ideals of a democratic South Africa, the hope for change and the insecurity of change. However, Krog suggests that "what we are as Africans is something.../ so profoundly constitutionally big and light and kind as soul /...as to surpass all understanding", and so individual identity becomes inextricably linked with the emerging nation. Finally, the poem ends with a rephrasing of the quintessentially African philosophy "we are who we are because of each other" as Krog states "we are *what* we are because *we are of* each other" (my italics). Thus the ambiguities and contradictions of a divided and brutal history are acknowledged, and yet Krog is able to simultaneously underscore the possibilities for, and necessity of, humanising interconnections that depend upon, and value, difference in a transitional society.

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“How do I Understand Myself in this Text-tortured Land?”:

Identity, Belonging and Textuality in Antjie Krog’s

A Change of Tongue, Down to My Last Skin and Body Bereft.

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Pietermaritzburg
2006