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What if the truth is a woman? Reflections on Antjie Krog's TRC Report "Country of My Skull"

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We are all partly to blame
Graffiti quoted by
Gus Ferguson

In the introductory essay to his documentary play, *Das Verh"r von Habana* (1972; "The Trial of Havana"; first published in 1970), the German poet and intellectual Hans Magnus Enzensberger gives an incisive analysis of the situation depicted in the play. This situation bears some remarkable similarities to (and also some differences from) the Truth and Reconciliation hearings that form the backdrop to Antjie Krog's reportage, *Country of My Skull*: In April 1961 some 1500 Cuban exiles, sponsored by the US government, invaded Cuba from the American mainland, in an attempt at capturing their former country and ridding it of Communist rule. They were heavily defeated at the Bay of Pigs, some were killed and a large number were captured. Within days many of those captured were interrogated by a tribunal of 'ordinary' Cubans about their motives for the invasion. Enzensberger's play consists of a selection of ten of these hearings in their original, albeit abbreviated, form. The similarities to the TRC hearings consist mainly in their total openness to the public via the media (the four days of hearings were televised live), the fact that they had no legal status and could therefore not pronounce sentence, and the interrogators were neither judges nor politicians.

For Enzensberger, these hearings have paradigmatic value because they expose the structure of a class society and the character of a ruling class. What is normally disguised by the rhetoric of political discourse or the effects of ideological manipulation, is brought to the open thanks to the particular situation which, he says, is a revolutionary one:

For a ruling class does not permit itself to be questioned unconditionally before it has been defeated. Before that it does not reveal itself, does not account for itself, does not give up the structure of its actions, except by way of mistake (...) Once the question of power has been raised, the whole truth about a society comes to light. Only as a defeated counter-revolution can the ruling class be made to speak fully. (1972: 22; my translation)

Yet even in the moment of its defeat, the bourgeoisie denies "its manifest class solidarity". (1972: 27; my translation) Through their denials, ignorance, platitudes in their testimony at the tribunal the Bay of Pigs prisoners reveal the unconscious of a collective which, in order to perpetuate its rule, has to hide the true nature of its function in society not only from the exploited but even from itself. (1972: 31) According to Enzensberger, it is precisely this, the exposure of the inner mechanism of a ruling class, which the trial of Havana achieves.

The TRC hearings differ from the Cuban tribunal in that they do not interrogate 'the counter-revolution', nor traitors or enemies of the state who were captured after a military defeat. Instead, the Commission arose out of the need to "transcend the divisions and strife of the past" in the pursuit of understanding, reparation and 'ubuntu', as the Constitution has it (quoted in Krog 1998: vi) and, as Dullah Omar puts it, to find a "sound moral basis" for the country. (1998: 5) It resulted not out of one misbegotten military action, but out of years of collective, and individual, suffering under an oppressive regime. It is founded on an ethical-humanist discourse with powerful religious overtones, its ethos is essentially liberal and individualist.

Since it deals with a past regime that was effectively a racial oligarchy its inherent binarism of perpetrator and victim is easily, and frequently, conflated with the racial divide of white and black. It is also an open question whether the previous system has been defeated to the point where the 'ruling class' could be made to 'speak fully' and reveal the truth of its inner mechanisms and, for that matter, whether the new rulers differ as radically from the previous ones as Castro's government did from the American-sponsored Cuban exiles. Moreover, the large number of hearings in different places and over a lengthy period of time almost inevitably focus, as the televised programmes have shown, on personal suffering and pain, and on individual responsibility and guilt.

Yet a structural analysis of the TRC hearings can surely be made: it would remove the debate out of the realm of moral discourse and explain violations of human rights, the denials and mutual accusations among the perpetrators, the involvement of senior politicians, the cynical actions of so many seemingly decent people, the need for an effective chain of command, and much more, in terms of the protection and perpetuation of power and class interests, in whichever way they may be defined. In her book, Antjie Krog does not attempt an institutional analysis of the abuses of the past but chooses to follow the path decided upon by the founding fathers of the Constitution. It is an intensely personal and emotion driven approach which compels the reader to take sides through the sheer force of its personal appeal and its upfront commitment. She also continues along the road upon which she first set out years ago with the publication of her first volume of poetry as a teenager in 1970 and on which she has been travelling ever since. It is within this continuum that *Country of My Skull* could perhaps best be understood and evaluated.^[1]

The writings of Antjie Krog are determined by two central concerns of her being, both unresolved issues seeking resolution. The one is being a woman in a patriarchal society, the other being a person of European origin in Africa. A central metaphor linking these two themes is the land as place of origin, habitation and identification. Her most recent volume of poetry (Krog 1995a) contains perhaps her most radical statements in this regard but they are by no means a departure from her oeuvre to date. Two poems in particular have attracted much attention. In the opening poem of the volume, titled simply "1995", she explicitly and emphatically states her non-allegiance to anyone or anything. One reason for this attitude seems to lie in the power structures that are used by men "with interchangeable faces of politics and violence" who feel nothing but are running the whole country into the ground:

almal lyk dieselfde
almal is mans almal
is nekke almal
peule van mag

die generale en brigadiere en ministere
en hoofmangenerale sit en piele vleg
en bebbliksem 'n hele land met die omruilbare gesigte
van politiek en geweld
almal is slu
almal voel fokol (1995a: 6)□

It is the search for a space beyond and outside of these power structures that ultimately determines the force of *Skull*. In another, untitled, poem she proclaims her freedom as a woman become rock in the face of a masculinised land and sea at the West Coast town of Paternoster and by calling to witness the God whose name here can mean either Lord or gentlemen:

ek is
ek is
die here hoor my
'n vry fokken vrou (1995a: 66)

One of her very first poems, published in her school's annual in 1970 describes a vision of freedom in a land where skin colour counts for nothing and where no "goat faces in Parliament" can keep matters permanently rigid,

Waar swart en wit hand aan hand
vrede en liefde kan bring
in my mooi land. ("my mooi land", quoted in Conradie 1996:3)

In his monograph on Krog's writings, Pieter Conradie (1996) has shown that her poetic output is dominated by her concern with gender and identity. Her response to the strictures of patriarchal society is complex and ambivalent, "'n bevestiging van die voorskrifte, sowel as 'n verset teen die beperkinge van sodanige geslagtelike rolle". (1996:1) This applies equally to *Country of My Skull* which must therefore be read within that dialectic nexus of Krog's work as a whole where the intensely personal and private and the purely literary and poetic constantly touch upon, merge with and confront each other in a perpetual movement of rejection and acceptance or rebellion and acquiescence.

From the outset, the text is marked by these ambiguities. Thus the author, praised on the dustjacket and in most of the reviews of her book as a member of the SABC's award winning radio team who had covered the TRC hearings, published the book under her literary name Antjie Krog and not under her professional byline Antjie Samuel, the name she uses for her broadcasts. The use of the poetic persona is already a signal that *Skull* is not to be read as journalism in the first instance, but as literature. With this stratagem the author, by declining to use her husband's name, also implicitly rejects his control over her social identity. But the 'maiden name' is also the mark of her paternal descent and thus of a stronger bond with patriarchy.

Krog chose to write *Skull* in English, her first venture of this kind.!!) One may speculate about the reasons for this decision - if it was because she wanted to reach a wider audience the recent announcement that the book is to be turned into a film by a US company would appear as enough vindication. In the Beeld interview she expresses a sense of unhappiness that the book did not ultimately appear in Afrikaans which makes one suspect that part of the reason may lie elsewhere. Afrikaans is the language of her roots, her mother is a well-known Afrikaans writer, she herself situated herself within the male-dominated canon of Afrikaans literature. Her MA dissertation of 1982 dealt with the work of DJ Opperman, at that time not only the eminence grise of Afrikaans poetry, but also her adviser and mentor in matters poetic from her beginnings as a writer up to the mid-eighties. (Cf Conradie 1996: 43) The decision to write in English can thus also be seen as a deliberate dissociation from the language and the world of the fathers.

Afrikaans language, culture and identity has an important place in *Skull*. The title expresses a personal involvement in the theme of the book, an involvement that is mediated time and again via the language and identity route:

What I have in common with them <perpetrators> is a culture - and part of that culture over decades hatched the abominations for which they are responsible. In a sense it is not these men but a culture that is asking for amnesty. (Krog 1998: 96)

Once, when singing the anthem in Sesotho, she says, she is caught unawares by "the knowledge that I am white, that I have to reacquaint myself with this land, that my language carries violence as a voice, that I can do nothing about it, that after so many years I still feel uneasy with what is mine, with what is

me." (1998: 216) Seen in this context, the dedication to her book achieves a special significance: "for every victim who had an Afrikaner surname on her lips".

This opening gambit restates the double-bind represented by the authorial name on a different plane. As a woman, Krog can express solidarity with 'every victim', as an Afrikaner she shares the responsibility and guilt associated with 'Afrikaner surnames'. To the peculiar black-white, victim-perpetrator dichotomy is added the gender dialectic wrapped in a notion of ethnic identity. Those Afrikaner men for whom the author harbours a deep sense of aversion are the very people closest to her. She may wonder aloud, "what do I have in common with the men I hate the most?" (1998: 92) and reject them because they represent the "nightmare" of her youth (1998: 90), and even though she may have been fighting for a lifetime, as she avers, against all the codes she grew up with (and which she recognises in them) (1998: 92); yet they are her shadow, and the cause of her shame, linked to her by a common umbilical cord.

Thus the "Vlakplaas five" share certain characteristics which, the author implies, have predestined them for dedication to a cause they never questioned: Apart from their humble background, they all were devoted to Church and Party and to "the role their fathers had in their lives" (1998:95); some of them refer to their father in terms "reserved only for God". This is the key to these men and, I would suggest, to their female researcher as well: the bond with the Father, in whatever guise he may appear. Conradie (1996: 19 - 25) has shown convincingly how certain core themes in Antjie Krog's poetic corpus appear as early as her first published volume, *Dogter van Jeffa*. (Krog 1970) These are: subservience to the father (the volume is dedicated to the youthful poet's father), guilt, sacrificial offering of the daughter's virginal self to "die God van die vader en die nasie" (1996: 19), and the patriarchal world of Afrikaner culture, embedded in a Biblical code and in references to the icons of Afrikaans literature, a world, it must be added, that is not accepted blindly and without resistance.

The question of guilt requires closer attention. In her panegyric to the Truth Commission with which she closes her book, Krog gives poetic expression to the cathartic effect the Commission and its work have had on her. It is also a confession of guilt, expressed in unmistakable religious terms:

I am changed for ever. I want to say:
forgive me
forgive me
forgive me

You whom I have wronged, please
take me

with you. (1998: 279)

It would perhaps be inappropriate at this point to refer to Breyten Breytenbach's recent sardonic plea for mercy with the wealthy who are struggling with problems relating to rising prices and the decline of the currency, crime, health food and the fate of the white rhino:

wees jammer vir hulle,
gaan buig diep met saamgevoede hande:
"vergewe ons ! vergewe ons !" ("ootmoedigheid" in Afrika 1998: 40)

But this cynicism does throw a different light on Krog's desire for absolution and raises the question what it is she wants forgiveness for and whom she has wronged. I suggest that one would not go far wrong in recognising in her

attitude a sense of failure in terms defined by Karl Jaspers with regard to German guilt after World War II:

<...> passivity knows itself morally guilty of every failure, every neglect to act whenever possible, to shield the imperilled, to relieve wrong, to countervail. <...> Blindness for the misfortune of others, lack of imagination of the heart, inner indifference toward the witnessed evil - that is moral guilt. (1961: 69/70)

This is a fine and incontestable position from which in the post-war period the large majority of Germans could, or should, have viewed their own lives in the Nazi years. "The morally guilty", says Jaspers, "are those who are capable of penance, the ones who knew, or could know, and yet walked in ways which self-analysis reveals to them as culpable error - whether conveniently closing their eyes to events, or permitting themselves to be intoxicated, seduced or bought with personal advantages, or obeying from fear." (1961: 63) But Antjie Krog did 'know', she did not conveniently close her eyes, at least not from the mid-eighties on. From that time on, she became increasingly involved in 'the struggle', and had a brief (albeit somewhat disastrous) career as an activist in Kroonstad. (See Krog 1995b)

The TRC hearings could surely not have opened her eyes to the horrors of the past, except in the gruesome detail, the extent of operations, the breathtaking depravity and cold cynicism of those involved, the heart-wrenching heroism of most victims, the intensity and unrelenting nature of it all. In fact, what the TRC may have and probably did, reveal to most 'outside' observers were the clandestine deeds, the many violations of human rights, the brutal underbelly of a system of repression. But what was common knowledge, and common experience, to all and sundry was the everyday face of apartheid, the daily humiliation people of colour had to endure as second and third class citizens in the land of their birth, the denial of their human dignity, whether this manifested itself in open acts of racial insult or other, more, or less, subtle forms of deprecation, the racism that contaminated every aspect of South African life. Years ago, Patrick van Rensburg, an Afrikaner nationalist turned liberal, had this to say:

The real tragedy of South Africa is that many Afrikaners have come round to recognizing that the policies of the Nationalist Government are oppressive, and that the oppression may be responsible for giving African nationalism the goal of dominating the Whites. And having given to African nationalism a goal it never had before, they now feel obliged to stick with Afrikaner nationalism and to press on until one side is finally crushed by the other. (1962: 134)

I would like to suggest that there are different approaches to the guilt syndrome in Skull. The one derives from a question that Max Frisch noted in his diary in 1948 with regard to Nazi atrocities:

If people who have enjoyed the same education as I, who speak the same words as I and love the same books, the same music, the same paintings as I do - if these people are not secure against the possibility of becoming inhuman and doing things we would previously not have believed people of our times to be capable of - except in pathological individuals - how can I be sure that I am secure against it? (1983: 287; my translation)

Antjie Krog's vehement rejection of the men responsible for apartheid's dirty work, her open contempt towards accepted leaders such as Terre'blanche, de Klerk or Botha, her praise for those not accepted by the Afrikaner establishment such as Tutu, Boraine, Bram Fischer can be seen as the aggressive defence of a lady protesting too much. It always seems to be the others, even when they are Afrikaners, mostly it is the men: "<...> it's a male thing, this obsession with evil. <...> the smell of male bonding, male culture, misguided bravery - the machismo fascinates men. With women it's different, and I think it has to do with giving birth." (1998: 261) The question of one's own potential guilt: 'how can I be sure that I am secure against it?' becomes irrelevant, if not

impossible, in view of this fixation on the stereotypical binarism of men as aggressors and women as sufferers.

Yet the question of guilt remains. The question arises whether the stigmatization of male culture is not an unconscious repressive mechanism. Antjie Krog's position is close, but not identical, to that of Karl Jaspers:

<...> the fact of my being German - that is, essentially, of life in the mother tongue - is so emphatic that in a way which is rationally not conceivable, which is even rationally refutable, I feel co-responsible for what Germans do and have done. (1961: 80)

It is this ambivalence, being morally compelled to reject what is emotionally closest to one, which is at the basis of many of the contradictions, and the emotional force, of Country of My Skull: "I am powerless to ignore what vibrates in me - I abhor and care for these five men <the Vlakplaas five>." (1998: 97) However, this is the closest she seems to get to stating a sense of co-responsibility - and that only with the 'ordinary' Afrikaners among the perpetrators; her rejection of those in power is outright. Her disgust at FW de Klerk - sarcastically referred to as "the Leader" - and his ilk is so strong precisely because unlike the Vlakplaas killers and "hundreds of Afrikaners" he has not acknowledged his "shame and guilt":

And some say it, most just live it. We are so utterly sorry. We are deeply ashamed and gripped with remorse. But hear us, we are from here. We will live it right - here - with you, for you. (1998:99)

This is what she does in Skull.

Her text concludes with a resounding mea culpa, the desire to be released from the bondage of sin. Sin means transgressing the Law, disobeying the command(ment)s of the Father. Acknowledgement of guilt signals an acceptance of paternal authority and a desire to return to the fold. Or finding acceptance within a new matrix of peace and love, "transforming the Blood River ritual of my personal history into a new ritual of reconciliation and responsibility." (1998: 271) It would be too easy - although perhaps not entirely incorrect -

to say that Antjie Krog has been in revolt against the God of her fathers, the super-ego of Afrikaner patriarchy, and has now replaced him with the non-aggressive, non-authoritarian, non-Afrikaans, non-white šbervater who is personified by "the man in the dress", Archbishop Tutu, whose presence invites "some infantile gesture or other. To kiss his ring, to touch his dress." (1998: 128) The feminine as father - or the father as woman - embodying those values yearned for in the poem "1995": healing, soothing, "iets sagsinnig/ iets mildadig mens". (1995a: 7) He embodies "humanity as it was meant to be" (1998: 154), a humanity from which the author has been excluded by virtue of her association with Afrikaner culture. Her desire for atonement and acceptance by the other is predicated by her sacrificial bearing of the collective guilt of her people. This finds its concrete, and metaphorical, expression in the land.

The land is a powerful and recurrent theme in Krog's writings. Repeatedly, in poems of exquisite beauty she has sung the praises of the Free State landscape in lyrical evocations of the farm where she grew up, and described the 'country of her skull, the landscape of her bones':

This is my landscape. The marrow of my bones. The plains. The sweeping veld. The honey-blond sandstone stone. This I love. This is what I'm made of. (1998: 210) But the farm is also ancestral land that has been in the hands of (male) members of the family since the times of "Great-great-grandfather Delpont", and according to her mother, "land is the essence of the Afrikaner, because land brings freedom". (1998: 273) Clearly it is an economic and political commodity, steeped in history, a history of unrightful expropriation and dispossession to be sure, yet, next to the Afrikaans language, perhaps the most powerful single icon of Afrikaner identity. Although not presented in economic, nor in overtly political terms, Antjie Krog has expressed an unease about possession of the land. In a poem published in 1981 she asks rhetorically how long Afrikaners

believe they can last in this continent on which they were stranded without ever arriving in Africa. ("5. visioen van 'n nasie"; Krog 1981: 25) And in one of her most recent interviews she reiterates this conflict:

One feels deeply attached to a country which actually does not belong to you. The tension between describing the country and the country itself, between possessing the land and landscape poetry, is crucial for us <Afrikaans poets>. (Vloet 1999; my translation)

Time and again she has taken recourse in her poetry to mythological or historical figures associated with exploring southern Africa, Adamastor, the Voortrekker woman and visionary Susanna Smit, the "Jerusalem-gangers", Boers who trekked to the north in search of the Holy Land, Lady Anne Barnard - and rejected them as "useless metaphors". It is as if the elusive land keeps slipping away from the quest for possession which therefore has to be repeated over and over. Inscribing it in landscape poetry as a form of fixing and possessing it. In this sense, much of Krog's writing consists of grappling with the father-land. In Krog's writings there occasionally surfaces a desire for a kind of romantic utopia, an unblemished land, untouched by man, not unlike her youthful dream of 'our beautiful land' where peace and happiness will reign and black and white will walk hand in hand (Conradie 1996: 3):

Sometimes when classes are abandoned I climb through the hole in the fence and go down to the river and then it smells of thorn trees and river water - but then I see a beer bottle or a turd or a shoe or plastic and I get so fed up with how peopled <"gemens"> the country has become, how one can never never get away from the breath and shit of people any more. (1995b:61; my translation)

Krog's desire for release from guilt is expressed in the yearning to be freed of the burdens of "Blood River rituals" and their association with violence, injustice and a culture contaminated with sectional exclusivity, and to belong to the land as a liberated zone, where conflict, violence, and therefore guilt are absent, where God will know that "our hearts" are yearning for one thing: "That we all just want to be human - some with more colour, some with less, but all with air and sun." (1998: 216) It is precisely this state of grace of belonging and acceptance that the Truth Commission makes possible. This realisation comes to her in a blinding inspirational moment of revelation and epiphany:

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 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 mine. (1998: 259)

Significantly the moment occurs when "blacks are deciding among themselves what they regard as right and wrong" (1998:258), when the Archbishop has made the Mother of the Nation admit that something had gone horribly wrong, and good can triumph over evil: it is significant, because for once white, and Afrikaner, guilt are not the issue.

Country of My Skull is framed by two scenes where the author is depicted in the bosom of her (extended) family on the ancestral farm, which rather than a haven of peace and security now has become contested ground. In the first scene, the brothers, male heirs to the family farm, have to go out in the small hours of the night to track down cattle rustlers while the family wait in fear and anxiety. (1998: 4/5 and 11 - 13) It is the brother who gives vent to the sense of displacement and frustration: "it is the value of my life they steal". (1998: 11) The same brother, in the scene at the end, when the family are together for a Christmas braai, dissociates himself - and by implication the Afrikaners he typifies - from the (post-apartheid) country: It is not his any more, he is not prepared to die for it. (1998: 274) In the poem "nuwe alfabet" (1989: 91) to which the braaivleis scene in Skull owes key elements, a different political

awareness (different from that of the brother's, that is) is associated with learning to write in a 'new alphabet', but also with the assertion, "net vir my kinders/ l' ek my lewe neer".

In *Skull*, the brother's views are contrasted with the author's new-found solidarity with the Truth Commission and its ethos which she experiences in the final passage of the book, on the boat from Robben Island and gazing at the African continent. No longer will she lay down her life for her children only: There is a rawness in my chest. It is mine. I belong to that continent. My gaze, my eyes are one with the thousands of others that have looked back over the centuries towards Africa. Ours. Mine. Yes, I would die for this. It slips out, like a smooth holy sound. And I realize that it is the Commission alone that has brought me to these moments of fierce belonging. (1998: 277)

They, "these people", give her strength and faith: her new family and spiritual home.

For Antjie Krog the future, to paraphrase Karel Schoeman, is another country. It is a country where men do not hold sway and where truth is a woman:

She is sitting behind a microphone, dressed in beret or kopdoek and her Sunday best. Everybody recognizes her. Truth has become Woman. Her voice, distorted behind her rough hand, has undermined Man as the source of truth. And yet.

Nobody knows her. (1998: 56; cf also the heading of chapter 16, p. 177)

The "first narrative", that of the victims, is not just told in another voice but in "another language" (1998: 79) and it tells the story of "the power of women to care, endlessly. The moment surpasses all horror and abuse." (1998:

186) Always, women are the victims, their bodies used as a "terrain of struggle", as Krog has Thenjiwe Mchintso say. (1998: 178) And if the white manne are the chief culprits as agents of "destruction, brutalization and fear" (1998: 90), their black counterparts are also capable of violence and aggression. And even in the heat of the struggle there was a male solidarity and contempt for women that seemed to transcend political and racial differences. (1998: 179) It is a shared view that is evident even in the corridors of power where parliamentary committees consisting only of women are ignored by politicians, political parties and male journalists alike. (1998: 271)

Perhaps this then, beyond the stereotypes and the personal obsessions, the generalisations and the intense emotional appeal, is the value of the book, that it challenges the reader and opens up the space for a critical debate about alternatives beyond the conventional power structures, as a form of Ernst Bloch's "concrete utopia" dreamed of by the student revolution a generation ago. Or, to quote the Caribbean saying: "When the antilope tells its tale, the skills of the hunter will not be praised."

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