

# Confession and Public Life in Post-Apartheid South Africa: A Foucauldian Reading of Antjie Krog's *Country of My Skull*

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## Summary

Truth commissions around the world have given the technique of confession a new public currency and political power. Many works of literature thematising these commissions have also adopted the technique of confession for literary purposes. In this paper I bring Foucault's understanding of the technique of confession, and his discourse on the role of public intellectuals in modernity, to bear upon an examination of Antjie Krog's literary reflection of the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), entitled *Country of My Skull* (1998). I look at how this text, and Krog's subsequent public intellectual status as a witness of the TRC, perpetuate the technique of confession without problematising it in ways that Foucault's work would suggest is necessary.

## Opsomming

Waarheidskommissies die wêreld oor het die tegniek van skuldbelydenis met 'n nuwe openbare geldigheid en politieke mag bekleed. Talle literêre werke wat hierdie kommissies dokumenteer het ook die tegniek van skuldbelydenis vir literêre doeleindes ingespan. In hierdie referaat pas ek Foucault se opvatting van die tegniek van skuldbelydenis en sy diskoers oor die rol van openbare intellektuele in moderniteit toe op 'n ondersoek na Antjie Krog se werk *Country of My Skull* (1998). Ek kyk hoe hierdie werk, en Krog se daaropvolgende openbare intellektuele status as getuie van die Waarheids-en-versoeningskommissie (WVK) die skuldbelydenis-tegniek perpetueer sonder om dit te problematiseer op wyses wat Foucault se werk suggereer noodsaaklik sou wees.

## Introduction

One of the most insightful contributions made by Foucault towards an understanding of the Western subject was his investigation into the extent to which confessional practices have long permeated the fabric of Western societies and their writings. In the introduction to *The History of Sexuality* in particular, he points out that confession has, since the Greco-Roman

period, been used to shape a particular type of self-disclosing, self-knowing human subject while at the same time compiling bodies of scientific knowledge about the human subject itself. “We have become”, says Foucault, “a singularly confessing society” (1976: 59):

The confession has spread its effects far and wide. It plays a part in justice, medicine, education, family relationships, and love relations. In the most ordinary affairs of everyday life, and in the most solemn rites; one confesses one's crimes, one's sins, one's thoughts and desires, one's illnesses and troubles; one goes about telling, with the greatest precision, whatever is most difficult to tell. One confesses in public and in private, to one's parents, one's educators, one's doctor, to those one loves; one admits to oneself, in pleasure and in pain, things it would be impossible to tell anyone else, the things people write books about. One confesses or is forced to confess.

(Foucault 1976: 59)

With regard to the question of literature in particular and in relation to what Foucault describes as a metamorphosis in literary forms, he refers to the extent to which we see a change from works which recount marvellous tales of heroism and sainthood to a literature attempting to extract “from the very depths of oneself” “a shimmering mirage” which confession always holds out as the truth to be found and expressed (1976: 59). In this literature, he suggests, the belief that there are secret truths within the soul that must be extracted and brought into the light, is powerfully taken up and explored. Linking this exploration of the deepest reaches of the self to his interest in technologies of self-construction, Foucault shows how writing and reading have, over the centuries, been privileged as particular methods of confession in this search for the true self (1994: 207):

Writing as a personal exercise done by and for oneself is an art of disparate truth – or, more exactly, a purposeful way of combining the traditional authority of the already-said with the singularity of the truth that is affirmed therein and the particularity of the circumstances that determine its use.

(Foucault 1994: 212)

In other words the author as confessor writes, and in writing, creates a unity from the different components of experience by bringing them together in such a way as to make the world meaningful and applicable to the self. The practice of writing is both an introspection and “objectification of the soul” (Foucault 1994: 217) but also a way of manifesting oneself to others (p. 216). To return to *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault points out that in all forms of confession this excavation of the truth is tied to the expectation of being unburdened and hence liberated (1976: 62). But, he also points out,

the confessional mode is always implicated in relations of power and often domination (the extraction of deep truths is also present in torture and the use of force by systems of policing and judgement), and is also always connected to systems of classifying information and compiling knowledge. But in order to accumulate and archive knowledge the content of confession requires the important dimension of interpretation, the hermeneutic function (pp. 66-67) which operates as a corollary to confession. By highlighting the confessional as a mechanism of self-knowledge, which by way of Christian roots, is implicated in practices of domination, obedience and self-sacrifice, Foucault is pointing to the dangers of confession as an invisible, unquestioned technique in the construction of certain kinds of selves and in the objectification – maybe even sacrifice – of those selves for the purposes of both knowledge and power:

[O]ne can distinguish three major types of techniques in human societies: the techniques which permit one to produce, to transform, to manipulate things; the techniques which permit one to use sign systems; and the techniques which permit one to determine the conduct of individuals, to impose certain wills on them and to submit them to ends or objectives. That is to say, there are techniques of production, techniques of signification and techniques of domination.

(Foucault [1980]1999: 161-162)

In the modern disciplinary society in which the crafting of a particular type of individual has become the focus of concentrations of power, confession is an important technique in the aim to instil within each person a self-disciplining, self-policing mechanism. The authority to which the individual is now answerable is not an external god or sovereign, but the true inner and unique self. As van Zyl and Sey point out,

What lends special significance to confession then, is that it plays a crucial role in the production of a self believed to be a type of work or project. Because the self is always prone to error, which can be seen as a direct descendant of Stoic weakness and Christian sin, it is always in need of reworking. What the discourse of confession thus expresses as the celebration of the flawed, Foucault suggests, is part of that wider relation – the articulation of individuality, error and responsibility which the era of psychological power demands.

(van Zyl & Sey 1996: 82)

In an essay “About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self” ([1980]1999) Foucault refers to a “deep contradiction, or if you want, a great richness” in confession as a technology of the self. Its embedding in Christian practices, he continues, specifies that “no truth about the self [can

be obtained] without a sacrifice of the self”, but over the last two centuries judicial, medical and psychiatric institutions have tried to use confession to produce a “positive ... emergence of the self” (p. 180). Foucault concludes this essay by asking whether the time has come to ask whether this “hermeneutics of the self” should be abandoned, so that instead of trying to discover the positive in such technologies, that altogether different technologies should be explored (p. 181).

My interest in adducing Foucault’s understanding of the pervasiveness – and, perhaps, insidiousness – of the confessional mode is to read *Country of My Skull*, a text about one of the most significant and powerful recent events in South African history, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), which harnessed confession on a national scale to effect a peaceful, political transition.<sup>1</sup> The book is a subsequent literary act of confession by already-established poet Antjie Krog, one of the journalists who covered the full duration of the Commission’s hearings as leader of the SABC radio team and drew on this material for her book. My interest in undertaking a Foucauldian reading of an overt literary performance of confession against the backdrop of a heightened political moment in South Africa’s history stems from two main components: firstly, it is interesting to note that the confessional mode seems to have gained social and political momentum recently via the worldwide emergence of truth commissions of various forms which have become integral to practices of transitional justice, designed to deal with the aftermaths of political conflict and the abuses of human rights in particular. Secondly, it stems from the fascination of examining how a well-known Afrikaans poet has attained international status as a public figure with expertise on issues of transformation and reconciliation by means of her own (significantly) confessional writing about the South African TRC, arguably the most widely publicised truth commission of all.

In tracing the theme of confession against the backdrop of the TRC, from *Country of My Skull* to Krog’s public persona as “expert witness of trauma”, I am touching on three different moments in which confession is activated as a technique. My central concern is to explore the use of the confessional mode in *Country of My Skull* and to investigate whether its harnessing by an accomplished creative writer problematises a method deployed fairly

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1. The Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act 34 of 1995 states that the pursuit of national unity and peace requires reconciliation between the people of South Africa and the reconstruction of society and that “amnesty shall be granted in respect of acts, omissions and offences associated with political objectives and committed in the course of the conflicts of the past”.

unquestioningly in the reconciliation process. I then turn to the question of Krog's resulting international acclaim, and, finally, against the background of Foucault's views on public intellectual practices, ask whether truth commissions can be considered to have given new energy to the use of confession as a legitimate mode for political, public engagements.

## Commissions of Confession

Within the last two decades, truth commissions have sprung up all over the world as the preferred mechanism to effect political change in situations of political impasse and to deal with a past characterised by atrocity and injustice.<sup>2</sup> The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings led by Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Alex Boraine (both, notably, ordained ministers in the Anglican and Methodist churches respectively) encouraged both victims and perpetrators not merely to provide full disclosure (as required in a court of law) but to also reveal their emotional and personal states of mind and to seek and give forgiveness and reconciliation where possible. The legal provisions outlining the responsibilities of the Commission did not require this further step, but Archbishop Tutu, as the moral authority guiding the process, directed it into this territory. As a result, this dimension of the TRC has provided material for the generation of literary and artistic work focusing on victims and perpetrators in conciliation – or confrontation – around particular atrocities committed.<sup>3</sup>

Literary theorists point out that accompanying what could be described as the rise of truth commissions and their revelations, is a notable rise in autobiographical and confessional literature documenting engagements with

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2. Since 1982 truth commissions have been held in Argentina, Bolivia, Chad, Chile, East Timor, Ecuador, El Salvador, Germany, Ghana, Guatemala, Haiti, Nepal, Nigeria, Panama, Peru, Philippines, Serbia and Montenegro, Sierra Leone, South Africa, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Uganda, Uruguay and Zimbabwe. Groups and individuals in Afghanistan, Angola, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Cambodia, Colombia, Indonesia, Jamaica, Kenya, Mexico, Morocco, Philippines, Uganda, Venezuela, and Zimbabwe have since called for new truth commissions (<<http://www.usip.org/library/truth.html#tc>>, accessed 7 December 2006).
  3. The TRC has even inspired "Rewind – A Cantata" composed by Philip Miller to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the TRC, which uses the voices of actual testifiers. It premiered in St George's Cathedral on Reconciliation Day 16 December 2006.

those who have stepped into public space to testify – often for the first time officially (see for example Gallagher 2002, Whitlock 2001 and 2004, Schaffer & Smith 2004). However, in South African literature in particular, the confessional form, as Gallagher points out, has both a long history and a new dimension:

[T]he confessional mode is a prevalent form ... appearing in texts from both the apartheid age (1948-1990) and the post-apartheid period. In the 1990s, with the unfolding drama of the Truth and Reconciliation hearings, confessions and confessional literature proved a particularly appropriate mode for a society struggling to carve out a new national identity based not on race but on geography. As South Africa attempts to become a postmodern nation, acknowledging moral authority other than that possessed by the state, confessional discourse provides a way of articulating these moral claims.

(Gallagher 2002: xx)

In her reading of literature dealing with the “Stolen Children” issue in Australia,<sup>4</sup> Whitlock points out that much of this literary production is not generated by those who themselves have suffered the atrocities of the past, those whom she designates as the “first person” speakers saying “I” in public for the first time, but by the “second person” addressee ... the narrator and witness, who is vital to the narrative exchange established through testimonial speaking and writing” (Whitlock 2001: 199). It is important to note then that literary acts of confession of this kind do not refer to the experiences of victims or even perpetrators themselves, but result from witnessing the horrors as related by others. In a way reminiscent of Foucault, Whitlock adds the dimension of witnessing selves to that of self-witnessing.

This listener, the “second person” in the narrative transaction, is fundamental to the testimonial contract. S/he is placed in a situation of hazard and struggle, “at the same time a witness to the trauma witness and a witness to himself” (Felman and Laub 1992: 58). It is this dimension of “witnessing the self” in a profoundly different way that we see ....

(Whitlock 2001: 199)

It is important to note that the confessional mode is activated differently in different commissions and in subsequent literature. As Whitlock makes

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4. The 1997 National Inquiry into the forcible removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait children from their families from 1910 to 1970. The report by the Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission is called *Bringing Them Home*.

clear, the writer-listener is not just recounting events that have happened, but is also, in the present, listening and adjudicating her own reaction to the telling and weighing up the extent to which she is, or might be, implicated in them. The literary confession therefore, interestingly, entails weighing up the reaction to the testimony against an “authentic self” which has been misled by structures of oppression and injustice. Of the Australian situation, Whitlock says: “[R]ecognising how ruthlessly and completely race has been an organising grammar here can induce an estrangement and loss of self” (2001: 199). And it also induces a shaming which requires a reaction of responsibility.

In her dealings with several South African confessional texts (including *Country of My Skull*) and her engagement with the Foucauldian understanding of the operations of confession in the Christian church, Gallagher points to the fact that traditionally confession involved not only the required admissions of sin, error and guilt, but also the acknowledgement or declaration “that something is so” (2002: 3), as expressed in the “confessing of the faith”. She also points out that in church tradition confession is used as a means of returning the one who confesses to the community of the faithful.

Confession – both admission and testimony – provides both the act of signature and the necessary witness that contributes to the formation of the communal yet individual self. In theological terms, what confession entails is less a renunciation of the self than a decentering and subsequent recentering of the self with the community of faith.

(Gallagher 2002: 29)

Both forms of confession – those employed by the TRC to elicit the truth from those who actually experienced the events, and by Krog as a witness within *Country of My Skull* – concern themselves with admission and testimony, the two dimensions highlighted by Gallagher. Firstly, against a history of official denial, they assert the actual experience of a set of unacknowledged situations and, from now on, locate these previously unacknowledged atrocities in personal memory and public documents; and secondly, by way of confession, perpetrators are, as it were, purified and remade so as to enter the newly constituted nation of ethically responsible citizens.

## Krog the Confessor

Krog was editor of the magazine *Die Suid-Afrikaan* and an established, award-winning poet with seven volumes of poetry in print when she joined the SABC radio parliamentary team in January 1995 as the journalist responsible for reporting in the Afrikaans language. When in 1996 the SABC decided to form a team to travel the country covering all the activities of the TRC, Krog<sup>5</sup> was appointed head of that unit. Soon after the TRC's hearings got underway, she was approached by Anton Harber, then editor of the *Mail&Guardian*, to write a piece as part of a special series of features called "Two Years of Transition: A Series by Leading South African Authors, Celebrating the Second Birthday of Our Democracy and Exploring the Nuances of a Changing Society". Starting on 24 May 1996 with "Pockets of Humanity", Krog wrote a series about the effects that the work of covering the TRC process had on her personally.<sup>6</sup> The newspaper articles were searingly honest about the horrors encountered during the process of recording and reporting on the hearings. Krog documented the physical effects (smoking excessively, losing her hair) of witnessing the witnesses' trauma, and the shock of discovering the nature and extent of the events denied or kept hidden by the apartheid regime. As a result of these articles and their direct engagement with the process as an affected white South African, she was approached by book publisher Stephen Johnson of Random House, who persuaded her to work these writings and the reporting materials into a book. In April 1998, *Country of My Skull* was released.

It had an immediate and powerful impact. It was the first book to document the TRC process from a personal point of view, with the narrator operating both as a journalist (and therefore with a journalist's privileged observer status and access to sights and information denied to the public) and as a witness – a white, Afrikaans witness – to thousands of stories of atrocity. Its blend of journalistic reportage, verbatim testimony, poetry and other literary material made it a work reviewers found difficult to categorise. Literary theorist Mark Sanders called it "a hybrid work, written at the edges of reportage, memoir and metafiction" (Sanders 2000: 16), and

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5. Her reports were filed under her married name (Samuel), but the newspaper articles and the book are in the poet's name (Krog).

6. The others are: "Truth Trickle Becomes a Flood". *Mail&Guardian*, 1 November 1996; "Overwhelming Trauma of the Truth". *Mail&Guardian*, 24 December 1996; "The Parable of the Bicycle". *Mail&Guardian*, 7 February 1997; "Unto the Third or Fourth Generation". *Mail&Guardian*, 13 June 1997.



fellow author Rian Malan (whose work *My Traitor's Heart* shares *Country of My Skull's* confessional affiliations) called it “a great impressionistic splurge of blood and guts and vivid imagery, leavened with swathes of post-modern literary discourse and fragments of brilliant poetry”.<sup>7</sup> It was widely reviewed in South Africa, Krog was interviewed countless times, and it drew substantial international attention. *Country of My Skull* received the *Sunday Times* Alan Paton Award (shared with Stephen Clingman for *Bram Fischer: Afrikaner Revolutionary*); the BookData/South African Booksellers' Book of the Year prize; the Hiroshima Foundation Award (shared with John Kani) and the Olive Schreiner Award for the best work of prose published between 1998 and 2000.<sup>8</sup>

As a result of this extraordinary literary enactment of bearing witness and of confession, Krog has become internationally known as a writer profoundly engaged with the events and human drama uncovered by the TRC, and her voice read as that of an expert witness of trauma, forgiveness, and the means by which the horrors of the past may be ameliorated. In addition to being called upon as a journalist with specialist knowledge to write press articles about situations arising from the TRC (for example, a piece in the *Sunday Times* on Gideon Niewoudt, implicated in the murders of Steve Biko and Sphiwo Mtinkulu), Krog has also become, as it were, an international resource, invited to speak for the South African transition and to other similar situations (such as Rwanda where she led the English session at a conference on “Writing as a Duty of Memory” in June 2000) in a number of arenas.<sup>9</sup>

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7. “A guilt-stricken orgy of self-flagellation” in *Finance Week* 2-8 July 1998: 36.
  8. *Country of My Skull* received an honourable mention in the 1999 Noma Awards for Publishing in Africa and appears as one of “Africa’s 100 Best Books of the Twentieth Century” (an initiative of the Zimbabwe International Book Fair). It had an initial print run of 15 000 in South Africa and was also published in London and New York with rights being negotiated to have it translated into Italian, German, Spanish, Danish and Dutch. It has also been made into a film (called *In My Country*, directed by John Boorman with actors Juliette Binoche and Samuel L. Jackson).
  9. For example, her book is prescribed at universities as essential reading for students studying South African history or issues of dealing with the past: At Ohio University it is prescribed in History 342B/542B for the course “South Africa Since 1899”. In this case it is the only book for the section “The Transition and the New South Africa 1989-2000” and at Brandeis University Krog lectured and was read as part of the course “Mass Violence and Literature: An International Perspective”.

Krog's particular "expertise" became not that of theoretical knowledge around trauma and atrocity or on questions of transitional justice, but stemmed from her personal engagement *as a writer* with the testimonies of atrocity. Van Zyl and Sey point to the value for the technique of confession, of the emergence of the "voice of actual experience – the attempt to unite 'positivism' (the discourse of the body, the object and the empirical) with 'eschatology' (that of the self, the subject, the transcendental)" (1996: 83). It is then, as the voice of what can only be described as a "confessing witness" that Krog has emerged as an unusual, perhaps unique, form of expert on the TRC process. If one makes use of Bové's definition of an intellectual as someone who has a "perspicacious intelligence" and who produces "symbols and values" for society (1994: 222), then Krog simultaneously operates in South Africa and internationally as a particular kind of intellectual purveyor of symbols and values around the recent phenomenon of commissions of confession. This confessional ingredient adds an interesting dimension to the inquiry about what constitutes the practice of a public intellectual in contemporary societies. It seems that the public presentation of the problems of the past have inserted a moral claim into the performance of the public intellectual requiring an ethical response of listening, weighing guilt and admitting complicity, even via confession where necessary.

As I pointed out in the introduction, I am touching on three different moments in which confession is activated – in the TRC hearings themselves, in Krog's literary account of the TRC, and as a platform for Krog's subsequent international acclaim. To turn very briefly to the first moment as a background against which to evaluate Krog's acts of confession as a writer and public intellectual: the TRC process conducted by the Christian ministers Tutu and Boraine unquestioningly embraced the Biblical statement "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8: 31-32) and with that also embraced a very traditional idea of confession as revealing, healing and liberating. There is no doubt that the corollary of confession, the hermeneutic dimension of interpreting and compiling new bodies of knowledge about the past, was also a significant task of the TRC. My concern is to inquire of Krog's literary confession, which has given her the platform to operate as an expert on the witnessing of atrocity, whether she questions this single-minded embrace of confession as a technique with only positive gains. But first I wish to turn to Foucault's understanding of a critical public intellectual practice that could serve as a backdrop to a reading of *Country of My Skull*.

## Foucault on Intellectuals

When questioned about the role of intellectuals in the world today (“Truth and Power” [1977] 1980: 126), Foucault marked the shift since the Second World War from the “universal” intellectual to the “specific” intellectual:

For a long period, the “left” intellectual spoke and was acknowledged the right of speaking in the capacity of master of truth and justice. He was heard, or purported to make himself heard, as the spokesman of the universal. To be an intellectual meant something like being the consciousness/conscience of us all .... Some years have now passed since the intellectual was called upon to play this role. A new mode of the “connection between theory and practice” has been established. Intellectuals have got used to working, not in the modality of the “universal”, the “exemplary”, the “just-and-true-for-all”, but within specific sectors, at the precise points where their own conditions of life or work situate them .... This has undoubtedly given them a much more immediate and concrete awareness of struggles ....

(Foucault [1977]1980: 126)

Remarking that this universal intellectual was most often also a writer and that there still exists a nostalgia for those who can speak of “new philosophy” and “a new world-view”, Foucault, nevertheless, is of the opinion that a “reconsideration” of the function of the specific intellectual engaged in particular struggles is very important (Foucault [1977]1980: 130). Taking issue with the kind of intellectual who has come to be popularly characterised as “speaking truth to power” (and associated most often with Edward Said (see his *Representations of the Intellectual* 1994), Foucault points out:

[T]ruth isn’t outside power, or lacking in power ... truth isn’t the reward of free spirits, the child of protracted solitude, nor the privilege of those who have succeeded in liberating themselves. Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its “general politics” of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and the instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true.

(Foucault [1977] 1980: 131)

Thus Foucault questions the very possibility of anyone, even the intellectual, occupying a position outside of the particular regime of truth

operating in every society at any given time. In a conversation with Deleuze, Foucault goes further:

Intellectuals are themselves agents of this system of power – the idea of their responsibility for “consciousness” and discourse forms part of the system. The intellectual’s role is no longer to place himself “somewhat ahead and to the side” in order to express the stifled truth of the collectivity; rather, it is to struggle against the forms of power that transform him into its object and instrument in the sphere of “knowledge”, “truth”, “consciousness”, and “discourse”.

(Foucault [1972]1980: 207-208)

When questioned about the possible role of an intellectual in [militant] political struggles, Foucault replies:

The intellectual no longer has to play the role of an advisor. The project, tactics and goals to be adopted are a matter for those who do the fighting. What the intellectual can do is to provide instruments of analysis, and at present this is the historian’s essential role. What’s effectively needed is a ramified, penetrative perception of the present, one that makes it possible to locate lines of weakness, strong points, positions where the instances of power have secured and implanted themselves by a system of organisation dating back over 150 years. In other words, a topological and geological survey of the battlefield – that is the intellectual’s role. But as for saying. “Here is what you must do!”, certainly not.

([1975]1980: 62)

From these statements it is clear that for Foucault the critical or public intellectual engaged in struggle would need to acknowledge firstly that their power to speak with authority is implicated in already existing relations of power and regimes of truth; secondly, that their task is not to give the legitimacy of universal truth to the struggle but to harness their expertise towards an analysis and problematisation of the particular situation. Finally, the intellectual would need to place her analysis at the service of those who will choose a course of action. Presumably she would then be required to make her own complicity with power and “truth” clear and to make visible the complexity of the struggle and the danger involved in any course of action that might be taken. As Kritzman remarks:

If the intellectual, as Foucault conceives of him, is to engage in political action, he can only do so by transcending the forms of power that transform him into a discursive instrument of truth within which “theory” is just another form of oppression.

(Kritzman 1994: 29)

With Foucault's reformulation of the role of the public intellectual in making visible regimes of truth and power in mind, I am going to examine Krog's confessional text *Country of My Skull*, in order to raise the question as to whether confession can be seen as purely liberatory and positive.

### ***Country of My Skull***

Just before midnight, six black youths walk into the Truth Commission's office in Cape Town. They insist on filling out the forms and taking the oath. Their application simply says: Amnesty for Apathy. They had been having a normal Saturday evening jol in a shebeen when they started talking about the amnesty deadline and how millions of people had simply turned a blind eye to what was happening. It had been left to a few individuals to make the sacrifice for the freedom everyone enjoys today. "And that's when we decided to ask for amnesty because we had done nothing."

(Krog 1998: 121-122)

This concern with the millions of normal South Africans, both black and white, also infected and affected by apartheid permeates *Country of My Skull*, and leads Krog to take up for herself the white, Afrikaner position as a beneficiary of apartheid – both in her witnessing the testimonies at the TRC and her subsequent speaking as a public figure.<sup>10</sup> Critics of the TRC have pointed out that one of its major failings was to focus, almost to exclusion of all others, on certain acts of extraordinary atrocity (torture, murder) and to divide those appearing before it into the victims and perpetrators.<sup>11</sup> The hearings were divided into human rights violations hearings in which victims testified, and amnesty hearings in which the perpetrators came forward in what was required to be full disclosure of their politically motivated crimes. Tens of thousands of submissions were reduced to thousands in order to make the public appearances manageable. But in the process, the pervasiveness of the apartheid system which made non-citizens of millions, robbed them of rights, condemned them to

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10. Krog introduced herself as "a beneficiary of apartheid" at the special reconciliation event at the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown on 4 July 2003.

11. See for example Mamdani's 2000 critique cited by Schaffer and Smith 2006 and by Krog 1998: 112, and Mark Sanders's discussion of the acknowledgement within the TRC report that focusing on the "exceptional perpetrator led to a 'fail[ure] to recognise the "little perpetrator" in each of us'" (2002: 3).

substandard housing, education and opportunities while privileging an entire stratum of people because of the colour of their skin, received little attention.<sup>12</sup> The beneficiaries of apartheid, mostly white South Africans, were treated as a ghostly cloud of witnesses vicariously participating through the media. The fact is, in reality, those suffering from human rights abuses numbered in the tens of millions, not thousands.

Mamdani (2000) points out that such a commission should have investigated how the system had impoverished millions by enriching millions. While most commissions worldwide have confined themselves to dealing with extreme abuses of human rights they have also opened up the possibility that these abuses have structural roots and that entire societies are constructed in unjust and oppressive ways. It is my contention that the TRC commissioners certainly recognised this to be the case in South Africa but were hoping, via the reach of the media and subsequent personal acts of contrition, to engage the nation as a whole vicariously in a dimension of examination that the TRC process could not encompass.

Schaffer and Smith (2006: 1580) point out that “[e]thically, Krog claims the beneficiary position, but that claim conflicts with the psychic, affective, and familial challenge of distancing herself from the figure of the perpetrator that lies too close for comfort – the Afrikaner, who both is and is not part of Krog’s narrative identity”. This positioning puts Krog the observer, listener and witness into a position of complicity, and while she does at points identify with the perpetrators because of shared language and culture (see 1998: 96 “they are as familiar as my brothers ...”), the fact is that the beneficiary position is a complex and uncomfortable place to be. It suggests that one’s entire life, as a white South African, is built upon the denigration and oppression of others, which has been centuries in the making. From the beneficiary position Krog speaks to other beneficiaries and implicates them – her readers – in the discomfort of hearing and then having to respond to the testimonies by weighing up their own lives in these terms.

I would like to suggest that as a journalist Krog (Samuel) might have chosen the “objective” position of reportage mandated by professional practice which would have put her at a remove from the personal implications of the testimonies. By adopting the beneficiary position Krog

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12. When at some point in the hearings it became clear to the commissioners that such an individualising of atrocity was taking place, “institutional hearings” were set up into specific social structures such as the media, the business world, the faith communities, the medical sector and the legal sector. See Volume 4 of the TRC Report at <[http://www.doj.gov.za/trc/trc\\_frameset.htm](http://www.doj.gov.za/trc/trc_frameset.htm)>.

makes complex, even challenges, the TRC's binary of victim-perpetrator as the primary relation underpinning abuse of power, damage and forgiveness. It calls into question the one-to-one personal relationship demanded by confession in order for forgiveness to be sought and given. If millions were guilty and millions held the power of forgiveness, how would that be given effect except through an assumed hermeneutic value of vicarious participation which turned on affect? But as Krog the author demonstrates through her literary enactment of confession, it is a difficult and complex task to produce a work which not only documents a process faithfully, but seeks also to allow others to understand and participate in the larger project of national renewal and reconciliation. As Whitlock points out (2001), in responding to testimonies of atrocity, a writer witness has to modulate her performance of culpability so as to be seen to act ethically and sincerely in response to the seriousness of the testimonies aired. The credibility of Krog's performance of beneficiary culpability in *Country of My Skull* has been subjected to intense debate in reviews of the book both by academics and in the media. Meira Cook comments that "*Country of My Skull* is a radically overdetermined narrative":

[H]er protestations of unworthiness, self-indulgent guilt, and a frequently expressed ambivalence about the project that she has undertaken undermines our reliance on her objectivity as a witness ... her pain is represented in the fractured voice of her narrator, the jaggedness and angularity of her address, and the ambivalence with which she insists on her contingent position as interlocutor. At times forceful, even strident, at other times diffident, alternately addressing the reader directly and mediating her position through the reported speech of others, Krog's narrator seems pathologically uncertain of her place in this text.

(Cook 2001: 80)

This "radical overdetermination" extends into Krog's mixing of genres and her melding, in particular, of the poetic with the journalistic with their different conventions of the factual, the experiential and, indeed, the emotional and affective. The sincerity and credulity of Krog's performance of contrition and awareness of complicity is always at risk as she mobilises heavy-handed journalistic factual horror (a well-worn media technique for getting attention and conveying seriousness), as well as literary devices designed to solicit heightened affect. The paradox is that atrocities of this order should draw from a listener a requisite intensity of feeling and remorse, and even breast-beating. But Krog's overwriting, overstating and over-emoting show clearly that in the face of these impossible demands the author is struggling to find a register for her confession which is adequate to the complexity of the task.

Bearing in mind Foucault's point about the intimate relation between writing and confession, it is interesting to note that in *Country of My Skull* Krog makes the struggle to write the "unspeakable" (that nevertheless must be confessed) overt. She explicitly links her project with the widely asserted tenet of the unrepresentability of the Holocaust. She visits this dilemma in several ways and most directly in the envoi where she says:

How do I thank a publisher who refused to take no for an answer when I said, "No, I don't want to write a book about the Truth Commission", stuck with me when I said, "No, I can't write a book," and also, "I dare not write a book"; and was still there when I came around to saying, "I *have* to write a book, otherwise I'll go crazy."

(Krog 1998: 280)

She then turns the problem of writing about unspeakable atrocities into a scene in which a fictitious lover of the narrator discusses the much-repeated statement by Th. W. Adorno, that "it is barbaric to write a poem after Auschwitz". The lover talks about Celan's "Fugue of Death" and its beauty, and comments: "That is precisely why I say that maybe writers in South Africa should shut up for a while. That one has no right to appropriate a story paid for with a lifetime of pain and destruction" (Krog 1998: 237).

Yet "appropriating" others' words – using direct testimony that has been captured for the purposes of radio reports on tape – is exactly what Krog has done to make her account of the TRC's processes emerge as authentic. But in combining reportage and fiction, by putting the voices of living, suffering people alongside the voice of an imaginary lover (and then the imaginary conversation with an enraged husband) is to test her readers' credulity.

But Krog goes even further: she takes the sense of horror at committing such words to paper and compares it to her own mother's [Dot Serfontein's] shock at the death of Verwoerd and subsequent account of this moment and its connection to the "sanctity" of the Afrikaans language.

"And I prayed that my hand should fall off if I ever write something for my personal honour at the cost of my people and what has been negotiated for them through years of tears and blood; that I will always remember that to write in Afrikaans is not a right, but a privilege bought and paid for at a price – and that it brings with it heavy responsibilities."

(Krog 1998: 98)

This three-way juxtaposition – Auschwitz, the sorrow over the assassination of the architect of apartheid and Antjie Krog's own anguish over writing about atrocity – only reinforces the idea of the impossibility of writing "truly" about atrocity. The TRC activated the Christian understanding that



confession by both victims and perpetrators would reveal a liberating truth by revealing the circumstances under which victims were murdered, maimed and tortured. And this truth would be added to a national database of forensic information that would become part of history and establish legal precedents. Krog's own position and relation to "truth" is, however, far more nuanced than that of the Commission. She adopts a sceptical position towards "truth" throughout the book, even in journalistic passages, and quite often confesses her symptomatic relation to it in rhetorical terms:

The word "truth" makes me uncomfortable.

The word "truth" still trips the tongue.

"Your voice tightens up when you approach the word 'truth'", the technical assistant says, irritated. "Repeat it twenty times so that you become familiar with it. *Truth is mos jou job!*" ["Truth is your job, after all!"]

I hesitate at the word, I am not used to using it. Even when I type it, it ends up as either *turth* or *trth*. I have never bedded that word in a poem. I prefer the word "lie". The moment the lie raises its head, I smell blood. Because it is there ... where the truth is closest.

(Krog 1998: 36)

This is not the stance that accepts the Commission's apparently unwavering view that "truth" will be unearthed through confession. Nor does Krog assume that it will automatically be liberatory. Even while writing in journalistic conventions, such as inserting verbatim quotes from testimony, and declaring her intention to enlighten her readers, she declares herself to be an unreliable narrator. In the envoi to the book, she confesses, "I have told many lies in this book about the truth" (p. 281). Through various interviews and reviews and a careful scrutiny of the text, it has become known that she invented a love affair and a subsequent fight with a husband in order to highlight the problem of betrayal and the difficulties of forgiveness on a personal scale (pp. 196-197). To achieve these effects she employs some literary devices that subvert chronology and confesses to merging various testimonies:

"Hey Antjie, but this is not quite what happened at the workshop," says Patrick. "Yes, I know, it's a new story that I constructed from all the other information I picked over the months about people's reactions and psychologists' advice ..."

"But then you're not busy with the truth!"

"I am busy with the truth ... *my* truth. Of course, it's quilted together from hundreds of stories that we've experienced or heard about in the past two years. Seen from my perspective ..."

(Krog 1998: 170-171)

By insisting on poetic licence claimed for a book situated within the public (and by then almost sacred) confessional space created by the Commission, in order to reveal the truths that liberate and make history, Krog unsettles the reader's trust in what would be considered to be "the truth" in the book itself.

Returning to Foucault's criticism of the universal intellectual who tries to locate specific struggles in universal truths, it is interesting to look at Krog's theoretical readings that were shared between both the proponents and the critics of the TRC. The text contains references, both explicit and indirect, to many discussions featuring trauma theory, narrative truth-telling, politically motivated violence and the Holocaust. She draws on this work in a way that has led some theorists and journalists to accuse her of "plagiarism".<sup>13</sup> Krog's "referencing" involves folding into one paragraph a range of sources. For example:

The texts grow next to one another in the vapour of freshly mown language. Nomonde Calata, Priscilla Zantsi, Isabel Hofmeyr, Nontuthuzelo Mphelo, Nqabakazi Godolozzi, Elaine Scarry, Feziwe Mfeti, Nohle Mohape, Art Spiegelman, Govan Mbeki, Phyllis Maseko, Ariel Dorfman, Lucas Sikwepere, Abdulhay Jassat, Johan Smit, Ms Mkhize and Ms Khuzwayo, Marta Cullberg Weston, Cyril Mhlongo, Bheki Mlangeni's mother, Colette Franz, Yehuda Amichai.

(Krog 1998: 47)

It could be argued that by ignoring standard academic referencing style and inserting references in the body of her text, Krog undermines the project of the truths that the proponents of the TRC demand.

There is no doubt, from a careful reading of *Country of My Skull*, that Krog has embraced confession as a technique in all its facets to create a personal, literary account of her experiences of the TRC hearings. But whereas the Commission continued throughout its processes to hold to a view that confession would necessarily be both liberatory and healing and in that sense contribute to both a new national community and sense of history, the work of confession by an author of a literary text introduces a volatility which destabilises this belief. While this may not amount to a "problematization" of confession itself, it is nevertheless interesting to note that the literary text introduces fissures through which the assumed redemptive promise associated with confession can be interrogated.

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13. See this debate on Krog's work at <<http://www.litnet.co.za>>.

## **The Public Intellectual as Confessor**

It seems that the rise of truth commissions worldwide has given new life to confession as a technique which is now being harnessed not just in the personal sphere where Foucault demonstrates that it has long been one of the West's most distinctive technologies of self, but perhaps most vividly of all, now surfaces in the political and judicial spheres and more especially in the arena of gross violation of human rights. Confession has, it seems now, also become one of the public modalities used to establish and maintain the democratic enterprise by providing a way to deal not just with apartheid, but with many other forms of political and social injustice. In this context those public figures who demonstrate an ability to recognise their own culpability and who can express not only their remorse but also their commitment to personal change, now find themselves supported by this activation of confession as a valid method of public performance. I'd like to explore two reasons for the ascendancy of confession in public life, and for the way in which it serves the aims of Krog as a public figure.

### **1 Confession in the Interests of a New Community**

Foucault asks the question about what kind of human subject would emerge without the technique of the confessional having its roots in self-sacrifice (in Carrette 1999: 180-181). Gallagher takes issue with Foucault's insistence on confession as linked to self-sacrifice and points out that the Christian confessional is also used to re-establish community, to place the self within the larger communal whole. By acknowledging that while some suffered immeasurably, the many suffered too. Krog, in seeking a new community of South Africans, appeals to the many to allow her and other beneficiaries entry into this new communality. Foucault's writings on confession seem to focus on its individualising (and therefore self-policing) aspects, but confession's power to unify and create community – while perhaps not free of these same mechanisms of regulation – is a very attractive possibility given the worldwide problem of creating peaceful and functional nations from disparate groups of people. In the case of the Christian confessional the church is the already established community of the faithful that the penitent rejoins by shedding guilt and sin. In the case of the troubled nation the desired political community does not yet exist and needs to be made, but there is no doubt that the power to remake is symbolically in the hands of those wounded, aggrieved and newly recognised. Deploying the affective power of poetry in the final lines of the book, Krog uses words associated with confession and the call for

forgiveness directly and in this way seeks to become part of the making of a new country.

I want this hand of mine to write it. For us all; all voices, all victims ....

I am changed forever. I want to say:

forgive me

forgive me

forgive me

You whom I have wronged, please

take me

with you.

(Krog 1998: 279)

The attempts of South African public intellectuals to renegotiate the self into a new community have been explored by Mark Sanders. He points out (2002: 1) that when the national society to which one belongs has been constructed at every level by apartheid, the intellectual, even in opposition, is shaped by this social structure. If the intellectual is white there must be recognition that one is a “little perpetrator”, if black, the intellectual is theorising and negotiating “mental complicity” (as in the case of Biko (p. 15)). Sanders argues that the South African intellectual “identifies [as complicit in apartheid] in order to dis-identify” (p. 3), but this is only the first step. He then activates a second definition of complicity which he reads as “a folded-together-ness – in human-being” (p. 5). He sees in his exploration of South African public intellectuals an affirmation of that larger complicity – the “being of being human” (p. 5) which then drives their intellectual projects.

## **2 Speaking out, Affirming Affectedness**

The second reason for the ascendancy of confession as a technique is allied to the first (the building of social and political community) in its aim to give voice and expression to those previously denied both. In the case of South Africa, the procedures underpinning the TRC were enshrined in the Interim, and to a lesser extent, in the new Constitution of 1996. Simultaneously, it interpellates the new South African citizen, the subject entirely recognisable in the confessional mode of self-construction. According to Deborah Posel: “A particular kind of faith in the production of selfhood is at the heart of the

South African Constitution”.<sup>14</sup> Posel’s argument is that the TRC became the “first vector” of the project to reconstitute the South African self through the Constitutional provision that every single South African has the right to speak: “The mutuality of damage and the shared need to be healed gives access to a shared community and a shared humanity predicated on the shared experience of pain” (Posel 2005).

Dealing with its shameful past has not only allowed South Africa to rejoin an international community politically but also to enter the “global community of suffering ... which leads to mutual humanity” (Posel 2005). Posel remarks that the notion of the person which underlies liberal democracy is the rational, deliberative subject. But the TRC, and the many related processes around the world, have consolidated the “emotional, affective, damaged” subject of the confessional as another important type, not only nationally, but globally. This new sense of the human subject in the community of affected human beings permeates the performance of public intellectualism as evidenced by the work and subsequent fame and platform afforded to Krog. It is because Krog has demonstrated not only confession but a search for a new self and one folded into a new community in a new way, that she is called on to speak across national borders and into other troubled situations.

## Conclusion

In the reading of *Country of My Skull* presented here, I have tried to show, through insights concerning the technique of confession drawn from Foucault, that while the value of confession is endorsed by the TRC and by Krog herself, the assumption that confession is inherently liberatory should not go unquestioned. As literary work, *Country of My Skull* destabilises its own factual, forensic, and historical status and in doing so deliberately undermines its own status as “Truth”. In so doing, I believe it also (perhaps unwittingly) troubles confession’s capacity to operate as a way of knowing the self and reconstructing the past by acknowledging its injustices, in the interests of creating a new, “purified” community. The desire to discover culprits, allocate blame for acts of atrocity and see justice for victims has not disappeared. But in the move away from the form of retribution enacted by the Nuremberg Trials, we are seeing confession harnessed anew and on an international scale as a mechanism to construct credible, empathetic, self-policing subjects. What is more, this resurgence of confession now extends

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14. My notes from the oral presentation on 18 October 2005 at WISER, Johannesburg.

to the realm of the public intellectuals in countries such as South Africa, where the admirable ability to show recognition of wrongdoing and evidence of attitudinal change nevertheless runs the risk of becoming too easily aligned with long-established, ideologically underpinned technologies of the self, and the discourses in which they are instantiated, that Foucault's work suggests we approach with the appropriate circumspection.

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