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Translating Transition

The politics of Nostalgia and Provincialization in Antjie Krog's
A Change of Tongue and *Begging to Be Black*

Abstract – This paper explores the historical dimensions of Antjie Krog's prose texts written in the 2000s and engaging with the process of post-apartheid transformation against the background of travelling in space and time, from early colonial periods to post-apartheid present, between different African countries and places in Europe. Weaving an intricate network of memories, these texts focus on the challenges of imagining new ways of being that require de- and reconstructing colonial genealogies. Krog's work with personal and collective archives involves consistent production of nostalgic representations. I am approaching these representations as being different from what has often been discussed in terms of melancholia (in relation to white South Africans' and particularly Afrikaners' grappling with the issues of collective identity and responsibility) or colonial nostalgia. The distinctiveness of nostalgia in Krog's writing, I propose, is based on the texts' translation of varied temporalities – a process which not only displaces the narratives of transition but also facilitates deconstruction of cultural differences. This reading inquires particularly into the link between this variety of nostalgia and the motifs of provincialising the idea of Europe as a repository of originality which has been haunting South Africa's literature and culture.

Although South African society and literature, as critics claim, have moved into a post-transitional period,¹ a sense of transitionality – of redefining selves, imagining new communities and searching for new homes – is still impressed into most of the country's cultural production. For Afrikaans literature in particular, 'transition', since the late 1980s, has signified grappling with the darkest sides of history and collective identity: constructing new ways of being in South Africa for Afrikaans writers has been contingent on re-conceiving the self in relationship to the black 'other' and re-inventing a sense of belonging. In most notable and inquisitive examples of post-apartheid Afrikaans literature this process occurs through estrangement of the narratives of history and place that were taken for granted by earlier generations. In her article 'Five Afrikaner Texts and Rehabilitation of Whiteness', Zoë Wicomb highlights such trajectories of re-writing history and the self in the work of several renowned writers, reading their texts as attempts to imagine a new 'Africanized' ethnicity that deconstructs the general invisibility of whiteness. At the same time, Wicomb argues, imagining a minoritarian position of 'becoming' for the self (as part of the Afrikaner community) in these texts involves another colonizing impulse as it implicates a construction of 'black-as-other' (Wicomb 1998: 366).² In particular, she reads episodes of

¹ See special issues of *English in South Africa* 'Post-transitional South African Literature in English' 53 (2010) 1, particularly Ronit Frenkel's and Craig MacKenzie's introduction 'Conceptualizing Post-transitional South African Literature in English'.

² This formulation, following Wicomb's critique of race and ethnicity, also includes the 'coloured'.

Antjie Krog's *Country of My Skull* and the ways in which the book was publicized, as an example of such commodification which, in an attempt to re-write the old Afrikaner identity and delink it from liberal discourses, 'invoke[s] [...] old myths and translate[s] them from whiteness into a new discourse of conciliation' (Wicomb 1998: 371).

Returning to Wicomb's reading that underlies much of contemporary critique interrogating the white South Africans' attempts of re-imagining collective identity in a dialogue with the 'other',³ I would like to revise some of its assumptions by examining nostalgic representations in Krog's later works of creative non-fiction, *A Change of Tongue* (2003) and *Begging to Be Black* (2009). I hope to show that these two books carry the project started in *Country of My Skull* much further in that they do not simply posit the possibility of translation, but reflect on the very process of attempting to carry meanings over cultural boundaries. These narratives are equally, if not more than the first book of the trilogy, permeated with a sense of longing; yet this nostalgia is very different from 'classical' examples of yearning for the lost position of power and security by a (formerly) privileged community, usually referred to as 'colonial nostalgia'. The specific kinds of nostalgia alluding to an imagined belonging that is lost, in these books, is contingent on translation as a project of mediating between meanings and interpretations practiced by different communities in South Africa and beyond (other African countries and Europe). Like professional translators, Krog's autobiographical narrator looks into the roots of these meanings, going back to epistemological frameworks pertaining to different culturally configured worldviews. In the following I shall argue that the nostalgic motifs, which some critics have viewed as a strategy of appropriating the 'other,' are in fact the major vehicles of reflection and creativity in Krog's texts, since they involve practices of cultural translation and a critique of any straightforward attachment to or detachment from the past.

Translation in Krog's narratives, including the rich metaphors she uses, has been extensively discussed by critics (Viljoen 2006, Strauss 2006, Collier & Odendaal 2007, Scott 2009), yet the temporal and spatial aspects of such translating processes have remained rather unexplored. In my reading of the two texts, I will approach translation processes in a broad sense, focusing, firstly, on how translation is embedded in the temporal structure of the narratives, and secondly, on how the texts represent the possibilities and limitations of cultural translation as a process of acting across different systems of thought and varied worldviews. Looking at the 'translational' aspects of temporalities, I find particularly interesting how they provide antidotes to conventional narratives of transition (for example the ways these have been employed in post-Cold war contexts of changing political regimes and social transformation). My focus will therefore be on the processes of translating 'transition' which take place when standardized narratives are put into new contexts; the resulting 'provincialization'⁴ of different his-

as-the other. In her own creative writing, she highlights the processes of commodification in white characters' attempts at including 'colouredness' into their identities as well as coloured characters' mimicking of whiteness.

³ See, for instance, studies on performances of (Afrikaner and English) whiteness after apartheid by Melissa Steyn (2001, 2004) and Leon de Kock (2010).

⁴ Throughout this essay, I am using the notion of 'provincialization' with reference to Dipesh

tories of socio-political change creates a condition of possibility for developing new visions of transformation. Focusing on the translations involved in the depiction of 'provincial(ized)' spaces in Africa and Europe reveals Krog's critique of Eurocentric visions that have been 'internalized' by South African culture. A key aspect of these translations of temporalities and spaces, I will suggest, is a particular type of nostalgia that often enables and reinforces the mentioned impulses towards postcolonial 'provincialization.' These impulses become particularly strong in Krog's latest book in which nostalgia for a sense of belonging, central to *A Change of Tongue*, is being succeeded by a more confident recognition of one's co-being with the other and by an idea of translation that acknowledges and values untranslatability.⁵

1 Translating Disappointment

In South Africa, as in many societies that have experienced transition from authoritarian to democratic regimes, nostalgia has become one of the prominent modes in literary writing among other cultural expressions (film, popular music, styles, etc.) – according to David Medalie, reflecting on post-apartheid literature in English, we can even speak about the 'literature of nostalgia'. Medalie's approach to the politics of remembering in 'white' South African literature recognizes 'the many differences which are apparent within the backward glances which are discernible in the literature of the post-apartheid period' (Medalie 2010: 36). However, juxtaposing an example of what he calls 'evolved' nostalgia (like Anne Landsman's *The Rowing Lesson*), which combines criticism towards both the past and the present, with more straightforward instances (such as Jo-Anne Richards' *The Innocence of Roast Chicken*), he concedes that the latter represents 'the majority of cases' in South African literature in which 'the nostalgia is glib, unambitious and utterly lacking in self-consciousness' (Medalie 2010: 37). Such a critical approach relying on a variety of the terminological distinction between 'restorative' and 'reflective' nostalgia (Boym 2001) – in which restorative denotes efforts of recovering the 'origins' while reflective refers to practices of juxtaposing experiences of different times – can be extended to much of contemporary cultural production in South Africa. In Afrikaans literature, it could be related to post-apartheid re-writings of the *plaasroman* that involve uses of 'nostalgia'.⁶ But

Chakrabarty's critique of Eurocentrism in (post)colonial historical narratives, which has, since the publication of his book, become one of the major concepts of postcolonial critique. More particularly, I am drawing on the ideas of de-centering the hegemonic presence of 'Europe' as a location and frame of reference in narratives written about non-European locations and histories, often by non-European authors.

⁵ In my use of 'untranslatability' here and further on, I am referring to Emily Apter's (2008) theorisation of this concept as a residue involved in the process of translating which highlights singularity of cultural meanings beyond difference and 'the foreign'.

⁶ Among most prominent re-writings are Etienne van Heerden's *Toorberg* (1986), Eben Venter's *Foxtrot van die vleisetters* (1993), Karel Schoeman's *Hierdie Lewe* (1995), Marlene van Niekerk's *Agaat* (2004), J.M. Coetzee's *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life* (1997) and *Disgrace* (1999.) For a discussion of nostalgia in *Agaat* as one of the most explicit re-writings see Caren van Houwelingen's essay (2012).

an even more important aspect of Medalie's reading is that it posits nostalgic representations against the background of the idea of 'post-transitional' literature, noting that identifying nostalgia as a prominent tendency allows us to recognize dystopian elements within post-apartheid culture and critically approach earlier celebrations of 'transition'. This implication of Medalie's article is an important departure point for my reading of Krog's work.

Emerging at an interface of English and Afrikaans South African writing, Krog's texts have not come into the focus of discussions around nostalgia, although, as this reading will demonstrate, they are permeated with a certain kind of nostalgic feeling. Krog's prose does not lend itself to any direct criticism of nostalgia as it addresses political facts, discourses and challenges of transformation, often entering in conversation with politicians and other South African intellectuals in an attempt to discern trajectories of future development. The overt political engagement implicit in the genre and the mode of journalistic writing to which Krog often resorts in her books make them very different from the narratives of 'apartheid child revisited' discussed by Medalie. Speaking together with Stewart Motha, I would like to emphasize that Krog's is a 'relatively unique approach, where [...] a descendant of a colonizer un-homes herself in the new dispensation rather than retreating to the safety and security of the European metropolis, or disavowing the morality, ethics and abilities of the new rulers' (Motha 2010: 293). The un-homing highlighted by Motha in his reading of *Begging to Be Black* implies a longing for home, which brings us to the nostalgic aspect of Krog's narratives. I would argue that only understanding the nature and function of nostalgia in Krog's writing can we do justice to her political projects.

When placed within the framework of 'restorative' vs. 'reflective' nostalgia, Krog's writing will most certainly be categorized as involving more elements of self-reflexivity than attempts at recovering authenticity. But even more productive for interpreting these texts seems to be Eric Worby and Shireen Ally's conception of nostalgia as 'a practice of coincident temporalities' and 'a specific way of enfolding the past into the present, and indeed the future' (Worby & Ally 2013: 457) in their discussion of remembering in present-day South Africa. Drawing on Ackbar Abbas' theorization of 'dis-appointment' as 'an awareness that things are not at their appointed places' (qtd. Worby & Ally 2013: 474), they read nostalgia as a mode of expression that opens up a realization of such dis-appointment. In place of the disappointment (in the literal sense) that dominates South Africa now, at the time when the expectations of transition have not materialized for the majority, they argue, nostalgia might provide a release from melancholic repetition and show a way of imagining the future differently (Worby & Ally 2013: 474). This formulation refers to and is based upon the authors' critique of the social amnesia that was imposed by the reconciliation process in South Africa, including the work of the TRC. Although they do not explicitly mention the notion of transition, their position seems to be closely linked to Dipesh Chakrabarty's (2000) well-known critique of 'transition narratives' in (postcolonial) historiography that take the experience of some European societies as their point of reference. This critical genealogy also helps to understand Worby and Ally's emphasis on 'coincident temporalities' in the practices of nostalgia as a part in a long-standing debate about the role of cultural difference in the perception and signification

of time, and the ways in which in postcolonial multi-cultural settings different temporalities can be negotiated and translated. It is in this context that nostalgia in Krog's narratives can be read most productively, as involving an experience of (dis)appointment and a translation of different histories and memories.

Both narratives, in fact, open with an articulation of disappointment. The first part of *A Change of Tongue*, titled *A Town*, relates the narrator's visit to her hometown Kroonstad (the place where Antjie Krog grew up and lived most of her life). Guided by the purpose of writing an article about 'Food and Reconciliation', she is collecting her own observations and other opinions about the directions of change in the South African province. At the same time, she is visiting her family and becomes immersed in memories of childhood as well as remembering events that preceded her departure from the town in the early 1990s. As she approaches the farm where her family used to live, she increasingly senses being attached to the place:

The closer to Kroonstad, the more my eyes fall into the place. I have come to accept that there is earth that never leaves one's soul. My ancestors were one of the first six Boer families who settled along the Valschrivier long before the Great Trek. For eight generations my story has run with this town and this river. My great-grandfather, Daniel Serfontein, was the first member of parliament for Kroonstad after the Anglo-Boer war. My family fills the entire district. On the banks of this river, I was made (Krog 2003: 34).

This poetic narration, affectionately recalling one's connection to the 'earth that never leaves one's soul' as a place where she as part of her family lineage came into being, at the same time invokes major events of collective Afrikaner history and identity. This conflation of intimate memories and communal history reinforces nostalgia that embraces both personal and political, and stresses the devastation the narrator feels as she observes what has happened to her beloved lawn on the river bank:

I cross the bridge spanning the river like a harp. I turn off to the right in order to go and greet the river before I continue home. What the hell? ... where are the willows? They must have been chopped down. While I'm looking for them, I almost drive into a tree trunk. An enormous pine has fallen across the road. It must have happened a while ago, considering the weeds growing amongst the roots. I see heaps of paper and tins. I smell before I see the plundered toilets (34).

The nostalgia for the earlier, familiar state of nature (and sociality) is expressed here through extreme disappointment, which becomes one of the main emotions throughout the text of this and other chapters: when one learns that the narrator's family had to lease out their farm and move to the town, or when through her eyes one observes the persistence of racist attitudes within the local white community and the hardships with which the new officials have to deal in trying to rebuild the black communities. This disappointment rendered by the autobiographical narrator is, however, very different from the stereotypical grievances of the local whites not being able to come to terms with the loss of privilege, as pictured in several anecdotal episodes at the beginning of the book.

The political nature of the narrator's frustration is emphasized by the episode when she visits her former colleague with whom she taught at a 'coloured' school

and with whom she in 1989 was participating in a protest march that was almost shot down by the police. Now Sheridan has completed a master's degree and become a civil servant; although he still lives in the black township, his children are going to a 'white' school. The meeting of the old friends and comrades, however, ends up in expressions of disappointment on both sides: Sheridan expresses his resentment towards the lack of real transformation which he attributes to the fact that 'the whites have twisted things here and there, and taken the power with them' (117), while Antjie⁷ is upset by the narrative that reduces the impasses of the transition to racial stereotyping ('If I am stereotypical white, then you can avoid the complexities of good and bad whites, and good and bad blacks. You can avoid complex moral decisions, and continue to serve your middle-class black interests with a clean conscience' (119)).

This episode reveals the disappointments in the contemporary state of politics that inhere in the nostalgias experienced by the two characters: Sheridan's nostalgia for a genuine decolonization, which slides into racist arguments and self-victimization, and Antjie's longing for the experience of unity and purposefulness in the common struggle during the 1980s, which romanticizes this past and often remains blind to the continuing coloniality of power⁸ in South Africa, encompassing white privilege and Eurocentrism that lie at the heart of many discourses and institutions. Both of these nostalgias, however, seem to be moving the narrative as it focuses on the challenges and deadlocks of decolonization, picturing the disappointing present against the memory of the ideals that guided the narrator's imagination and activities and providing insights into the perspectives of other characters. These differing perspectives often create a situation of conflict and even impossibility of communication. This conflict becomes formative in Krog's writing as the sentiment expressed by Sheridan, if not the argument itself, resurfaces in other characters' statements and as the narrator's grappling with the processes of transformation becomes even more evident in *Begging to Be Black*, where the necessity of more profound decolonisation takes central stage.

2 Nostalgia for Transition?

Interestingly, Krog's latest book begins with a rendering of the events that defined her experience of the transitional period, in both political and personal terms. Following these events, as we learn at the end, she moves away from Kroonstad and begins a new chapter in her life. In *A Change of Tongue* the conflicted experiences of the period of transition are hinted at through the type of the episodes recalled by the narrator (her memory of the first inclusive march, mentioned above, or the march of school children who were brave enough to cross the line drawn by the police). In *Begging* the difficulty of remembering is confronted as a subject of its own: speaking about the events that made the narrator question her ideas of 'living a righteous life' (Krog 2009: 4) is rendered painstaking:

7 Here and elsewhere I use 'Antjie' to refer to the autobiographic narrator in both books.

8 I am drawing on the concept that has been proposed by Anibal Quijano (2000) and developed by 'decolonial' critics with regard to Latin America and other global 'peripheries'.

So let me try again to describe this moment. A very precise moment in which the terrible has already happened but has not yet reached you, and it's only looking back that you realize how protected, fortunate and naïve you were at that moment, in the car along the familiar streets in which you grew up (5).

Confessing 'the real terror of moral bewilderment' (5) in this story addressed to an invisible interlocutor, the narrator introduces the theme of confusion and re-considering old notions of ethics as a framework for discussing the period of transition: the multiplicity of overlapping events during this period could not be comprehended fully at the time when they were taking place; hence only through remembering one can approach the deep conflicts that have been shaping the society since then. The reconstruction of these events in *Begging* is also textual: it takes place through Krog's re-writing of her earlier prose text – a novella published in Afrikaans in 1995, titled *Relaas van 'n Moord*. Thus the difficulty of retelling might also be referring to the difficulty of translating the narrative from one language and genre into another (Robbe 2012).

The question underlying this earlier narrative is carried over into the new one – how to live a morally responsible life and have an honourable position in conditions that are deeply immoral (or perhaps require using a different ethical framework). Having decided to move into a coloured suburb together with her family and teach in a coloured school, Antjie puts her resources and dedication at the disposal of a local ANC group. One evening, the leaders of the group whom she considers her friends ask her to give them a lift, which appears to be a way to cover up the tracks of their murder of Wheetie, the leader of a gang terrorizing the community. Realizing that she has been used by the 'comrades' to hide the evidence she resents the immorality of this act and reports to the police. Finding herself in a situation that purports her to question what she thought of as morally right – human life as a value that cannot be violated – she decides to move with her family to Cape Town. In the follow-up to this story, woven into the last part of the book, Antjie reveals how during the TRC amnesty hearings it turned out that the Three Million gang was set up and sponsored by the government and the secret police to incite 'black on black violence' that was used in support of the apartheid regime at the time. This reveals the manipulated – not only negotiated – character of the transition. Remembering this period of political transition in the narrative present, Antjie realizes how all the events and motifs have been translated into a majoritarian discourse – of overcoming and redemption, reconciliation and nation-building, common past and common future.

The major experience of this time for the narrator is that of extreme confusion. This is a confusion of a relatively informed person who has spent all her life in the country and who nevertheless is unable to comprehend the way in which members of the black community living in the same town conceive of what is and is not moral. Trying to reconstruct this alternative conception of the moral she concludes that this is a vision within which the centre rests not with the autonomous individual, but the interests of a community as an assemblage of individuals.⁹ The focus on the possibility of a different moral philosophy, experienced and acted

9 Krog has explored this vision of individual and community also in academic work (2008).

out in everyday life, which characterizes much of Krog's latest work, provides a counterpoint to the mainstream narrative of South Africa's transition which was based on largely Eurocentric concepts of transitional justice combined with often simplified and commodified versions of Ubuntu¹⁰ that ultimately supported what many critics see as the 'transition pact' (Gibson 2006: 3). This implicit critique is reinforced by the narrator's emphasis on her experience of moral confusion prompted by events around and involving her, which serve as a metaphor for the national transition.

Recalling the experience of being naïve and having only a limited vision of the situation reflects a developing perspective in Krog's writing, which finds the most explicit expression in *Begging to Be Black*. Reading the TRC amnesty reports, the narrator realizes that all the frameworks of understanding, legal or moral, that were available to her (and the commissioners) were not able to capture the essence of the local community's morality – what kind of crimes Wheetie was guilty of and why it was right to kill him. Her search for understanding this essence can certainly be interpreted as an expression of postcolonial white benevolence and naivety, as is implied in the remark of the narrator's husband: 'Listen, this is the twenty-first century. What is just and civilized has been globalized and being patrolled by human rights watchers with money' (260). This ironic attitude to the commodification of morality is precisely what Krog is trying to resist by circumventing the networks of meaning in which both Western and African notions have been translated into another 'global' narrative. The search for what the narrator calls 'a grounded way of life on this continent' (260) relies on a different kind of translation – close to the one proposed by Chakrabarty as a model of 'cross-cultural and cross-categorical translations that do not take a universal middle term for granted' (Chakrabarty 2000: 83) which underlies his concept of provincialization. In the following I shall trace some of the trajectories of the narrative movement between different locales, in time and space, the logic of which can be understood through this concept of postcolonial translation, which aligns itself to the notion of nostalgia that is rooted in disappointment.

3 Translating Transition

Returning to the 'site' and the events of the killing and her (symbolic) role as a witness in the book written seventeen years after signifies more than a case of melancholic repetition. Going back to the 'archive' of an already written story (*Re-laas*) and the events that have become 'history,' Krog does not simply translate the earlier text into English, but confronts this text as an unfinished matter – a tangle of unanswered questions, of partly repressed desires, of untranslated subjectivities. In her attempt to unpack the meanings of this recent transition, she ventures into examining earlier periods of 'transition' focusing on the ways they were experienced by different actors (white and black, 'Western' and 'African'). While the

10 Critical perspectives on commodification of Ubuntu philosophy, in relation to the 2010 World Cup campaigns and discourses, have been discussed by Hanneke Stuit (2014) and Mukti Lakhi Mahgaram (2011).

recent transition is remembered as a profound confusion, comparing this moment to other periods of (post)colonial transition creates a historical perspective which translates between the experiences of more distant and recent pasts. Within such translational perspectives, we might see clearer what happens during transition and which elements remain specific and resist translation.

A major historical narrative in *Begging to Be Black*, which intertwines with the one about Antjie's involvement in the murder story, traces the relationship between the French missionary Eugène Casalis and King Moshoeshoe. This part is reconstructed and re-imagined by the author based on Casalis' account of his life with the Basotho – the book that he first wrote in French and then translated into English (which parallels Krog's re-writing of *Relaas* in English, following the imperatives of her time and place). The major theme engaging the narrator here is the impeded communication between Moshoeshoe and Casalis which she ascribes to the latter's inability to see beyond the frameworks of European rationality. In spite of his deep sympathy towards Moshoeshoe, his knowledge of the language and the customs of the Basotho, Casalis, in Krog's reading, 'seemed unable to grant Moshoeshoe a position of integrity if it was not founded in Christianity' (85). All Casalis' attitudes and actions seem to be permeated, in the end, by the goal of conversion since outside the framework of Christianity and Protestant values, he sincerely believed, one cannot achieve a higher degree of being human and civilized. Hence, in Krog's representation, he is acting as an agent of conversion, of anticipated transition. Translating her own memory of trying to 'assist' the black community – and 'provincializing' her ambitions as she relates them to the missionary goals of the past – she provides a critical perspective on transition.

Casalis is learning from Moshoeshoe, but this exchange of knowledge is definitely asymmetric. The missionary is bringing knowledge that claims to be universal together with the idea and experience 'transition,' which Moshoeshoe welcomes, to a degree, as a way of educating his people, modernizing the society and keeping the power balance. Yet, the king also resists any complete translation-transition: while allowing conversion to his people, he himself refuses to convert and defends the most fundamental traditions and values of his society. He thus remains 'untranslated,' even for Casalis who was proud of his knowledge and understanding of Moshoeshoe. This remaining part which Moshoeshoe kept 'for himself' explains the logic of double strategies – his pragmatic use of the idiom of Christianity, as only one of several possible frameworks of meaning-making which he masters, one of the languages he speaks.

Krog's reading of this tragic chapter in the history of the Basotho's loss of land and sovereignty and of Moshoeshoe's attempt to resist this turn of events is permeated with nostalgic motifs. This nostalgia is, however, forward-looking in the sense that the narrator is interested in recovering the figure of Moshoeshoe, or more precisely the side of his personality which has been misinterpreted in colonial history: Moshoeshoe the 'Great Binder-Together', as he is called in Basotho poetry (226-7). The nostalgia with which the Basotho remember the legendary king can be read as a way of 'soothing' the pain of transition¹¹ to coloniality that

11 This function of nostalgia – of consolidating the 'self' in the time of transition that brings identity into crisis – has been highlighted and discussed from psychoanalytic and cultural perspectives

ensued with the death of the leader. By building an associative bridge to remembering Moshoeshoe in folk memory, as captured by a local poet, Krog's narrative might be attempting to perform a similar function with regard to the recent transition. This becomes feasible, however, only as she critically identifies a link between her own writing and Casalis' missionary narrative with its Eurocentric attempts at converting the local into the Western.

In *A Change of Tongue* a similar juxtaposition between the experiences of transition in a distant and recent past or present takes place in the second part titled 'A Hard Drive'. The text of this chapter is built from the bits and pieces of testimonies of the victims of genocide in Rwanda and of concentration camps in South Africa during the Anglo-Boer war. The records of these testimonies were stored on Antjie's hard drive as she was revising her mother's book of accounts from the Boer war and working on her own impressions from a writers' conference in Rwanda before the computer crashed. Serving as a metaphor for remembering in the aftermath of trauma and post-violence imperatives of forgetting, the recovered pieces are joined into a textual patchwork that encourages readers to translate the experiences. Reconstruction of the narratives as reconstruction of memory and identity becomes possible when it takes the route of translation.

One of the themes that connects the two disjunctive narratives and ties them to contemporary dilemmas of transition is the amnesia imposed by the official narratives of nation-building and reconciliation. The logic of public 'forgetting' has resulted in either omitting the records of human rights violations in 'white' and especially 'black' camps during the Anglo-Boer war or in mythologized versions of suffering promoted by Afrikaner nationalists (Smith & Stucki 2011: 426-31). Similar critiques have been developed with regard to contemporary official narratives in Rwanda (Nyirubugara 2013). A typical response of a young South African in the early 2000s is depicted through the words of the computer specialist Moses who recovers data from Antjie's hard drive: 'Why do you keep *vroetel-ing* in the past?' (153). His refusal to live his life 'in the state of victimhood' (153), tied to the narratives of globalization, is described by the narrator as a state of being 'a drug addict with a destroyed memory' who 'because he cannot remember, he cannot imagine a new kind of life for himself' (154).

This desire of remembering with the focus on marginalized histories to imagine a different future is what guides the narrator's project. The framing of the survivors' accounts or the memories that live on in oral storytelling – through the narrator's own childhood memories or her emotionally charged rendering of African writers' responses to the Rwandan tragedy – is nostalgic. This is, however, not a nostalgia for the 'real' state before violence, but rather for what could have been. Moreover, this nostalgic rendering affectively connects different experiences of loss and in so doing 'provincializes' any privileged narrative of mourning. While nostalgia is often used as a way of suturing identity and surviving transition, in Krog's latest narratives nostalgic remembering helps to inquire into the mechanisms of forgetting that have inhered in transitions at different times and places, thus charting a framework of what could be called 'postcolonial disappointment.'

4 Unsettling Nostalgia: Making the Provincial Matter

The question pertaining to all articulations of ‘disappointment’, the way it has been conceptualized by Abbas and developed by Worby and Ally, is what kind of decolonizing visions such narratives might involve. If relating different histories (seen through personal experiences and testimonies) to each other can enable a more de-centred, ‘provincialized’ narrative of transition, how can writing about a place aid these processes of transnational provincialization? In the following, I shall argue that the focus on the provincial in Krog’s writing and nostalgic ‘recovery’ of details and senses of these places emphasizes the importance of ‘local’ stories while relating them to marginalized historical narratives. In what I read as Krog’s critique of globalization narratives, nostalgia helps to unsettle the versions of transition that have followed Eurocentric blueprints and that have been adopted by South African ‘official’ discourse.

Among all the places in the two books, Kroonstad plays the most prominent part. The way it is pictured on the first pages of *A Change of Tongue* is, however, deeply unsettling. Witnessing the dilapidating landscape of the river bank, paralleled by the neglected state of the leased out farm, prompts the narrator to remember episodes from her childhood that were intimately connected to these places. Along with that, in her capacity as a journalist, she starts to inquire into the policies of the municipality regarding the environment and facilities. In her conversations with new local officials, committed to the wellbeing and transformation of the town yet encountering endless obstacles, she realizes that ‘the real struggle in South Africa is happening here in ordinary towns and districts, where access to resources is being worked out’ (65). This induces her to see Kroonstad not only as a place where she used to feel deeply rooted and ‘at home’ as a child, but also as a typical South African town where inhabitants of black townships, Afrikaner farmers, emerging black middle-class, Jewish and Muslim diasporic communities, people in squatter camps, among others, are searching for ways of living together. Reflecting on the possible routes of creating common spaces, she takes up the river as both a physical reality and a symbol of transformation. This double function is visible in the narrator’s rendering of the local official’s comment: ‘The town has so much potential, but people fight each other over a rubbish bin here or a pavement there. My biggest task is to convince people that *Kroonstad and its river are for all of us*’ (66, emphasis added).

As the narrative proceeds, the affective and imaginative elements of it constitute a dominant way of approaching the hardships of transformation. A clear example is a series of episodes in which the narrator speaks about and reflects upon the issues of land rights and the inefficiency of transformation in this vital sphere. Progressing from the accusations against the new government flung out by Joep Joubert, the new tenant on her parents’ farm, which reflect the stereotypical discourse of blaming and to which Antjie can formulate no response, the narrative moves to her reflection on the situation of Petrus Sithole,¹² formerly a manager of

12 The choice of the name here signifies Krog’s reference to the eponymous character in J.M. Coetzee’s novel *Disgrace*. In *Begging to Be Black*, bearing a dedication ‘To Petrus’, Krog explicitly returns to Coetzee’s character, discussing the ethical implications of the novel with a character based on phi-

a farm who bought a piece of land at the first opportunity that opened with the new dispensation. The new opportunity, however, turns out to be a false promise since the conditions of the bank loan do not allow Petrus to make profit in spite of hard work and excellent skills. Countering Joubert's interpretation that relies on a politics of blaming, the narrator's response to this story draws on the resources of nostalgia: she imaginatively recalls the aspirations of people like Petrus 'to walk the veld of one's dreams, among grazing cattle, to covet with one's eye freshly ploughed fields and feathering sunflowers' (75). This nostalgia for liberation is then juxtaposed to Joubert's nostalgia for land that 'has become a mythical ideal representing the ultimate freedom, the ultimate independence, the ultimate of being human' (76). An alternative to mythologization of land in Afrikaner culture, for the narrator, becomes a relationship 'to this breath-taking earth' (76) that cannot be captured through discourses of ownership.

The experience of unhomeliness in the place where one was previously at home also permits the core narrative of *Begging to Be Black*, but here the emotion of longing is translated into an explicitly ethical narrative: it outlines Antjie's realization of a disjunction between the values guiding the moral choices of her black friends and neighbours and those she has internalized as part of the local Afrikaans community. The narrative lending importance to places outside of South African political and financial hubs, in this book, also becomes linked with what could be called 'provincializing the self'. By the latter I refer to the growing tendency in Krog's writing to present the autobiographical narrator's perspective as erring and limited. Contrary to critical interpretations that regard this perspective as a way of inventing and asserting one's 'indigeneity' (Lieskounig 2011), I read it as an important step towards reflecting on the limitations of one's vision resulting from the 'Eurocentricity' of knowledge. In *Begging to Be Black*, Krog's writing about two places – Sebokeng, a village in Lesotho, and Berlin – represents this tendency.

Perhaps the most important aspect about the rural landscape of Lesotho which Krog describes in two short chapters is its history of not having been part of apartheid South Africa and thus not being 'contaminated' with racism. Compared to Kroonstad, remembered as a place of crime and violence during the 1990s, the area around Maseru invokes a sense of tranquility and peace. The 'ancient, undisturbed landscape' with 'slow-flowing river that cut the stillness with absolute stillness' (179) where descendants of Moshoeshe and his people live is experienced by the narrator as a place where the anxieties of living in post-apartheid South Africa and the nostalgia for unrealized dreams can be stilled. However romanticized, this place represents an ideal of what South Africa could have been if it were not for apartheid. Most importantly, this is a place where she feels accepted by the family of the student she visits, where she is treated without exaggerated caution and distance, but where a simple, unpretentious act of sharing daily food signifies for her deep care and connection. Nostalgia for the pre-apartheid (and precolonial) time here involves imagining a possibility for future interaction with black South(ern) Africans on an equal basis and even at times being taught or

philosopher Paul Patton. In this discussion Krog foregrounds her wish to 'hear' the story of Petrus, by understanding the roots of his 'untranslatability' (2009: 99–102).

forced to accept a different view. The latter is demonstrated in the episode when Bonnini, the student whom Antjie interviews, refuses to fit her narrative into the framework suggested by the former teacher (217-218).

This pattern of provincializing the place and the self continues in the episodes depicting Antjie's stay in Berlin as a fellow at Humboldt University. This stay in Berlin, she admits, is different from previous visits to Europe which 'simply confirmed alienation, an irrefutable Africanness and, above all else, my Third World-ness' (89). But even then her experience of being fully welcomed by the university and the city is permeated with a feeling of her own 'strangeness' in this place. This is most clearly expressed in her descriptions of the peculiar things about Germany such as different 'phases' of snow (182-187), local shops and ways of advertising, the Opera and the libraries, the behaviour of the inhabitants of the city, all of which she renders in letters addressed to her mother. In fact, the very form of the letter chosen for communicating almost ethnographic descriptions of the life and people in Berlin implies a parallel to Casalis' diaries about his life with the Basotho. The narrator's address to her mother is not incidental, since it was the mother who introduced her to the German language, through music and poetry; thus Antjie's impressions of Berlin become both a continuation of engagement with German culture as part of nostalgic memories of her childhood and a revision of the romanticized vision of everything German inherited from the mother's appreciation of Romantic music and poetry. This revisionist impulse is introduced in the episode when during the New Year's party Antjie sees a bus arriving at the stop four minutes past midnight, exactly as it should. Astonished by the sense of '*geborgenheid* – something being rescued and being kept safe by people (or God) who care' (154) in this city, she is suddenly overwhelmed by a vision of thousands of dead bodies, victims of the many wars and large-scale crimes which this place has seen:

It felt like I was sitting in the heart of whiteness. And shivering. From my half-baked but intended Africanness (a continent where 'only' twenty million people were killed during the twentieth century), and could simply say over and over 'The horror! The horror!' at some image, at some vision, at that thing producing the Grunewald M19 bus (154).

The allusion to Joseph Conrad's novel places the narrator at the boundary of being a colonizer (being white) and a colonized (being African). Even more importantly than a gesture of 'writing back', this is a foregrounding of the 'locality' of her knowledge and position. More than simply asserting a *different* positionality, this account 'provincializes' a European locus of knowledge by questioning the authority of its perspective. In several episodes of the Berlin narrative, Antjie feels rather dissociated from the coherence of European and German culture with its violent past turned into history; she finds herself more at ease in the chaotic streets of a Third World city:

Our daily Third World lives are broken into hundreds of shards of unrooted, incoherent experiences. (Visiting Jakarta with a group of Dutch and Flemish writers, one of them remarked how they navigate with difficulty the streets checking for 'undesirabilities' – unequal surfaces, unexpected holes, open sewers, pedestrians, bicycles, etc. – while I seem to walk the streets with a different sensibility, as if I know the geography beforehand) (125).

The metaphors of ‘unrootedness’ and incoherence adopted here as a self-description, also relate the narrator’s experiences to those of the Basotho king and the European missionary. Like Casalis, Antjie attempts to live with the ‘others’ (while in Kroonstad); like in his case, the feeling of superiority inherent in the ‘missionary’ worldview, however sympathetic it is, does not allow her to be accepted as part of the community. In a movement mirroring that of Casalis, she is travelling to Berlin, as an ethnographer deciphering the signs of the past in this divided city, but on a different mission – carrying out a self-ethnographic project of a white Afrikaans-speaking subject. Like Moshoeshoe, she remains partly ‘untranslated’, resisting, for instance, to be assimilated into international perspectives on the TRC (202–206); instead, she asserts her ‘provincial’, and more ambiguous, understanding of the conflicts that have been taking place in South Africa.

5 Conclusion

To summarize my observations about Krog’s two latest books of creative non-fiction, I consider them as an important contribution to the body of discourses and representations that contest accepted histories of transition and attempt to develop different imaginaries of change and transformation that could speak to both local and global communities. In this process, nostalgic remembering that focuses on the forgotten and the neglected (attitudes, relations, aspirations, etc.) becomes a vehicle for communicating the disappointment of transition, the way it has been established in the collective imaginary. The affective powers of nostalgia, present in a series of episodes discussed in this essay, create the possibility of associating and relating different kinds of disappointment to each other and thus imagining new communities. The translational possibilities are realized in the two texts by way of juxtaposing several historical periods of transition in South Africa. In contrast to more common melancholic remembering in the ‘white writing’ of the 2000s that zooms into the apartheid or colonial periods, Krog’s narratives focus on the time of transition from the pre-colonial to colonial (in the story of Moshoeshoe) and from early colonial to apartheid (in the memories of the Anglo-Boer War) intersecting them with memories of the latest one, from apartheid to post-apartheid. Such intersection of memories and temporalities becomes important in so far as it explores moments of intensive interaction between different cultures and worldviews.

One of the most interesting aspects which Krog’s narratives emphasize in these processes of translation is questioning the assumption about translatability that inheres in Eurocentric epistemologies. We can read this interrogation in her critique of the narratives of conversion (that obscures processes of mutual hybridisation) and transition (that relies on the idea of ‘homogenous, empty time’ (Benjamin 1968: 261)). Resistance to the latter becomes a key motif of *Begging to Be Black*, where defiance is represented through the figures of Moshoeshoe, Bonnini as well as the narrator herself during her stay in Berlin. Translations beyond the centre that uncover the value of the local which can partly be communicated globally, but which also partly remains untranslatable, form the backbone of the two books. The ‘provincial’ is carefully rendered in these narratives as a residue that

nostalgically reminds us about what has not been included in collective memories (and what cannot be addressed directly) and what can be recovered through listening to others and interrelating marginalized memories.

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