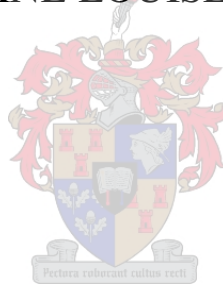


**Confession, Embodiment and Ethics
in the Poetry of Antjie Krog
and Joan Metelerkamp**

by

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DECLARATION

By submitting this thesis/dissertation electronically, I declare that the entirety of the work contained therein is my own, original work, that I am the sole author thereof (save to the extent explicitly otherwise stated), that reproduction and publication thereof by Stellenbosch University will not infringe any third party rights and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it for obtaining any qualification.

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Abstract

This thesis examines the work of two contemporary South African poets, Antjie Krog and Joan Metelerkamp. Through an analytical-discursive engagement with their work, it explores the relationship between confession and embodiment, drawing attention to the ethical potential located at the confluence of these theories and modes. The theory informing this thesis is drawn from three broad fields: that of feminism, embodiment studies and ethical philosophy. More specifically, foundational insights will come from the work of Simone de Beauvoir, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Emmanuel Levinas. While much of the theory used originates from Western Europe and North America, this will be mediated by sensitivity towards Krog and Metelerkamp's South African location, as is fitting for a study focused on embodied confession and the ethical treatment of the other.

The first chapter will establish Krog and Metelerkamp as confessional poets and explore the ethical implications of this designation. It will also explore the contextual grounds for the establishment for a confessional culture in both the United States of America of the 1950s that gave rise to the school of confessional poets, and in South Africa of the 1990s. The second chapter will use embodiment theory to discuss the relationship between poetry and the body in their work, and the ethics of this relationship. The remaining chapters concentrate on three forms of embodiment that frequently inhabit their poetry: the maternal body, the erotic body and the ageing body. Throughout the analyses of their poetic depictions of, and engagements with, these bodies, the ethical potential of these confessional engagements will be investigated.

Through the argument presented in this thesis, Metelerkamp's status as a minor South African poet will be re-evaluated, as will that of Krog's undervalued English translations of her acclaimed Afrikaans poetry. The importance of confessional poetry and poetry of the body, often pejorative classifications, will also be asserted. Ultimately, through drawing the connections between confession, embodiment and ethics in poetry, this thesis will re-evaluate the way poetry is read, *when* it is read, and propose alternative reading strategies.

Opsomming

Hierdie tesis ondersoek die werk van twee kontemporêre Suid-Afrikaanse digters, Antjie Krog en Joan Metelkamp. 'n Analities-beredeneerde benadering tot hulle werk verken die verband tussen belydenis en beliggaming. Klem word gelê op die etiese implikasies waar hierdie teorieë en vorme bymekaarkom. Die teorie waarop hierdie tesis berus, word vanuit drie breë velde geput: feminisme, beliggamingsteorie en etiese filosofie. Daar word meer spesifiek op die fundamentele beskouings van Simone de Beauvoir, Maurice Merleau-Ponty en Emmanuel Levinas gesteun. Alhoewel die teorie grotendeels ontstaan het in Wes-Europa en Noord-Amerika, sal dit met begrip benader word ten opsigte van Krog en Metelkamp se Suid-Afrikaanse agtergrond, wat meer gepas is vir 'n studie wat fokus op beliggaamde belydenis en die etiese hantering van die ander.

Die eerste hoofstuk vestig Krog en Metelkamp as belydenisdigters en verken die etiese implikasies van hierdie benaming. Die kontekstuele beweegredes vir die vestiging van 'n belydeniskultuur word ook ondersoek, in beide die Verenigde State van Amerika van die 1950s (wat geboorte geskenk het aan die era van belydenisdigters) en in Suid-Afrika van die 1990s. Die tweede hoofstuk rus op beliggamingsteorie om die verband tussen poësie en liggaam in hul werk te bespreek, asook die etiese implikasies binne hierdie verband. Die oorblywende hoofstukke fokus op drie vorme van die liggaam wat dikwels in hulle digkuns neerslag vind: die moederlike lyf, die erotiese lyf en die verouderende lyf. Die etiese implikasies van hierdie belydende betrokkenheid word deurgaans in ag geneem in die analise van hulle digterlike uitbeelding van en omgang tot hierdie liggame.

Die argument in hierdie tesis herevalueer Metelkamp se status as 'n meer geringe Suid-Afrikaanse digter asook Krog se onderskatte Engelse vertalings van haar bekroonde Afrikaanse gedigte. Die waarde van belydenispoësie en gedigte oor die liggaam, dikwels pejoratiewe klassifikasies, sal ook verdedig word. Deur belydenis, beliggaming en etiek in digkuns met mekaar te verbind, herevalueer hierdie tesis uiteindelik die manier waarop gedigte gelees word, *wanneer* dit gelees word, en stel alternatiewe leesstrategieë voor.

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Scrutiny 2 16.1 (2011): 53-65. (“‘stripping’ in English: Antjie Krog’s poetry, translated and transformed”.)

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English Academy Review 26.1 (2009): 120-123. (Review of Antjie Krog’s *Body Bereft*.)

Scrutiny 2 11.1 (2006): 152 - 154. (Review of Joan Metelerkamp’s *carrying the fire*).

Litnet 2010. (Review of Joan Metelerkamp’s *Burnt Offering*)

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Introduction

This thesis will analyse the confessional poetry of the body of Antjie Krog and Joan Metelerkamp, arguing that connections can be drawn between confession, embodiment and ethics and exploring the critical implications of these connections. Krog and Metelerkamp are important voices in contemporary South African poetry; however, their (English) work has been critically ignored, especially with regards to its use of a confessional mode and its engagement with the body. This thesis will work towards rectifying this neglect whilst developing an argument about the ethical potential that exists at the intersection of confession and embodiment.

This introduction will present brief biographical sketches of the poets,¹ an overview of their works and their critical reception. From this, the reasons for choosing to study these two poets in conjunction will be established. It will discuss the current academic, literary-critical status of poetry, and particularly that of confessional poetry and poetry of the body. The theoretical framework, structure and methodology of this thesis will be presented, before brief overviews of the chapters will be given. The second part of this introduction focuses on reading Krog's poetry in translation, and thus forms the foundation for my engagement with Krog's translations of her poetry in English *independently* from the original Afrikaans poems.

Reading Confession and Embodiment in the Poetry of Krog and Metelerkamp

Krog was born in 1952 “near Kroonstad in the old homestead of Middenspruit farm”. (Knox 60). She attended a boarding school in Kroonstad. In the first section of *A Change of Tongue*, titled “A Town”, Krog presents an autobiographical portrait of her childhood, in the third person (33-135). This focuses on her development as a writer, from “keeping a diary ever since she learnt to write” and the writing of her first poem, at the behest of a teacher on the occasion of Hendrik Verwoerd's assassination, when she was in Grade Eight, to the publication of her first volume of poetry when she was seventeen and in her final year of school. (40; 100-135). “A Town” also emphasises how her relationship with her mother, the renowned Afrikaans writer, Dot Serfontein,

¹ As I am focusing on Krog and Metelerkamp as confessional and embodied poets, their authorial context is valid in this study.

influenced her development as a writer. It also charts the process that led to her first volume: from the publication of her Eisteddfod winning-poems in the school yearbook, to the local outcry against these “explicit” poems, leading to a local-interest news story by national journalists, inciting a media controversy which led not only to the rapid publication of her work but also its political usage, being translated in the African National Congress’s journal *Sechaba* as an example of dissidence within the young, white, Afrikaans-speaking community (125; 129-35).²

She completed a BA, majoring in Afrikaans, English and Philosophy, at the University of the Orange Free State (Knox 65). After a short, failed marriage to pianist Albie van Schalkwyk, she returned to this university, to study an Honours degree in English, and then completed an MA thesis on DJ Opperman’s (Afrikaans) poetry (*Familiefigure in die Poësie van DJ Opperman* [Family Figures in the Poetry of DJ Opperman]) (Knox 64-5).³ Around this time she married her high school boyfriend, John Samuel, whose presence, along with that of Krog’s mother, dominates the secondary cast of “A Town” (Knox 65). They have four children.

Krog continued to publish volumes of Afrikaans poetry, throughout the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s and 2000s. They are: *Dogter van Jefta* [*Daughter of Jephthah*] (1970); *Januarie-suite* [*January Suite*] (1972); *Beminde Antarktika* [*Beloved Antarctica*] (1975); *Mannin* [rather hard to translate, perhaps: *Wo-man*] (1975); *Otters in Bronslaai* [*Otters in Watercress Salad*] (1981); *Jerusalemgoers* [*Jerusalem-goers*] (1985); *Lady Anne* (1989); *Gedigte 1989-1995* [*Poems 1989-1995*] (1995); *Kleur kom nooit alleen nie* [*Colour never comes alone*] (2000); and *Verweerskrif* [literally: *Apologia*; though Krog self-translates it as *Body Bereft*] (2006). She also published three collections of children’s poetry, as well as occasional drama and prose works. In 1998 she came to prominence for English-speaking South Africans with the publication of *Country of My Skull*,⁴ her prose account of covering the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) as a radio journalist for the South African Broadcasting Commission. This was followed by two other prominent English-

² Anthea Garman explores this development in depth in her article “Antjie Krog and the Accumulation of ‘Media Meta-Capital’” (9-13).

³ The alternation between English and Afrikaans in her studies seems indicative of her later creative writing career in both languages.

⁴ Though this work was originally written in Afrikaans and then translated into English, it has not been published in Afrikaans.

language creative non-fiction books: *A Change of Tongue* (2003)⁵ and *Begging to Be Black* (2009). In 2000, a selection from her oeuvre of Afrikaans poetry, self-translated into English, was published as *Down to My Last Skin*. In 2006, *Body Bereft* was published simultaneously with its Afrikaans original, *Verweerskrif*. Beyond her poetic labour, she has also worked as a teacher, an editor, a journalist and a literary translator.

Krog's Afrikaans poetry, since its dramatic entry into the literary scene with *Dogter van Jef*, has garnered accolades and acclaim, winning various awards such as the Eugene Marais Prize, the Rapport Prize and Herzog Prize. As such, it has been the subject of considerable academic enquiry.⁶ Her English prose, particularly *Country of My Skull*, has also been highly valued, winning the Alan Paton Award, the Hiroshima Peace Culture Foundation Award and the Olive Schreiner Prize. It has been carefully considered by literary scholars writing in English, who frequently attend to its interlinked themes of politics, landscape and language (regarding translating, witnessing, and voice appropriation).⁷ Due to this, as well as the significant "media meta-capital" that Krog has accrued (Garman 1), Krog is not only a highly-visible public intellectual, but is a major figure in contemporary South African literature (along with JM Coetzee and Nadine Gordimer), and is unarguably the most renowned poet. However, despite this status, and even despite *Down to My Last Skin* winning the FNB Vita Poetry Award – being described as "better and fresher than almost everything that is being written currently by English-language poets in SA" (Honey 104) – it has received little literary-critical attention, beyond short reviews, as has *Body Bereft*.⁸

⁵ This was published in Afrikaans as *'n Ander Tongval* in 2005.

⁶ Louise Viljoen, who has been engaging intensively with the poet's work for over a decade, can be seen as the foremost scholar of Krog's Afrikaans poetry, as is attested by the recent publication of her book *Ons Ongehoorde Soort: Beskouings oor die Werk van Antjie Krog [Our Unheard Kind: Perspectives on the Work of Antjie Krog]*. Other scholars of Krog's poetry include Marius Crous, PP van der Merwe, Andries Visagie, Marthinus Beukes and Pieter Conradie. Numerous theses on Krog's Afrikaans poetry have also been completed (for example, by HM Olivier, Janean Rautenbach and Gertina Cornelia van Rooyen).

⁷ Articles on these subjects in Krog's prose have been written by, amongst others, Judith Lütge Coullie, Carli Coetzee, Sarah Nuttall, Mark Sanders, Helene Strauss, Louise Viljoen and Kim Wallmach.

⁸ As I will discuss in the translation section at the end of this chapter, only two articles (by Meyer and Marshall) have been written solely on *Down to My Last Skin*, both from the perspective of translation theory. A third article refers to *Down to My Last Skin* to extend and enrich a comparative study of complicity in the work of Krog and Yvonne Vera, though the Krog section is primarily focused on *Country of My Skull* (Murray). Thus far, there are no articles on *Body Bereft*. One MA thesis (by Scott) examines these two collections of English poetry (alongside *A Change of Tongue*).

Metelerkamp was born in Pretoria in 1956, “grew up on a farm in the Lidgetton Valley of KwaZulu-Natal” and attended a boarding school in Pietermaritzburg (Metelerkamp in McGrane). From her mother, who “was the librarian of the Hebron Haven Library in the Dargle” she developed her love of literature (Metelerkamp in McGrane). Her first poem, written when she “was nine or so [was] about rhythm: about riding, and the pulsating hiss of the milking machines’ (Metelerkamp in McGrane). While she wrote poetry in school, some of which was published in *English Alive*, she tells Michelle McGrane:

I didn’t really write poetry with any dedication or belief until I had already given up as an actress. I wrote quite a lot then, in my early twenties, and have unpublished stories from that time, but the first real poem I wrote was in 1984. It’s the one that opens my first collection: ‘Jeremy Cronin (from inside) calls’ By then I had moved house and city I don’t know how many times, was writing a [MA] thesis [through the University of Natal] on Ruth Miller [*Ruth Miller and a Poetry of Loss*, completed in 1990], was aiming for an academic job (I did in fact teach for a bit [at the universities of Natal and the Western Cape]), got married, and had two children. I got my first manuscript together when my second child, my son, was about 18 months old. It was only in 1993, when I began to write *Floating Islands*, that I began to openly acknowledge how important poetry was to me.

Metelerkamp’s debut collection, *Towing the Line*, which won the Sanlam Literary Award, was published in 1992. Her second, *Stone No More*, followed in 1995. Although her next work in progress was *Floating Islands*, published in 2001, her third collection to be released was *Into the day breaking* (2000). Her fifth volume, *requiem* (2003), which is an elegy for her mother, was followed in 2005 by *carrying the fire*. Her most recent volume, *Burnt Offering*, was published in 2009. Other than teaching and writing poetry, Metelerkamp also worked as the editor of the poetry journal, *New Coin*.

Metelerkamp has been called “one of South Africa’s most significant poets” (Berner 131). When Paul Wessels introduced Metelerkamp and her work at the launch of *requiem*, he asserted that “[t]his is poetry, this is art” (63).⁹ Reviewers have variously described her poetry as “arresting” (Sole, “Bird” 30), “achingly introspective”

⁹ Similarly, in his review of this collection, Kobus Moolman writes: “Often in my reading and re-reading of the poems, I found myself flinching or gasping. These are poems that do not pretend or dissemble. They are often raw, red and angry as any wound is, and they refuse to accept simple consolations. The poems are stubborn and adamant; they insist on the beauty and the power of their own truth (however terrifying, for the writer foremost) (32).

(Klopper 133), “vital” and “powerful” (Thorpe 435). Catherine Woeber declares that Metelerkamp’s “is the kind of poetry that resists a prosaic analysis, so stirring the reader with its exquisite use of words and ruthless honesty, that the only honourable response is on the level of *soul: art*” (137). *Burnt Offering*, though receiving a provocatively critical review from Karina Magdalena Szczurek,¹⁰ was nevertheless judged by Kelwyn Sole as containing ““some of the best lines [he has] come across in SA Poetry”” (in Higgs “Praise”).

Along with winning the Sanlam Literary Award for an author previously unpublished in book form (for *Towing the Line*), Metelerkamp won third prize in the Sydney Clouts Memorial Award for “Poem for my Mother” from *Stone No More*. The importance and value of Metelerkamp’s poetry is also notable in its inclusion in numerous anthologies, both locally- and internationally-published, of contemporary South African verse.¹¹

Despite these adulatory comments, awards and frequent inclusion in anthologies, her poetry has received little academic attention. My MA (see Weyer), which will be discussed shortly, has thus far engaged with her work in the greatest depth. While reviews of her volumes do appear, full-length articles interacting with her work are rare; there is no thorough engagement with her poetry in the literary-critical sphere.¹²

¹⁰ See Kobus Moolman’s response to Szczurek’s review, which was published in the *Sunday Independent* and asserts that *Burnt Offering* is ““like a bad exercise in stream of consciousness””, and the many comments solicited by his counter-argument that it is rather “a powerful example” of “the long poem” that in “structure, content and style ... is meditational and processive ... eschew[ing] a linear sense of narrative and time in favour of an irregular and repetitive accumulation of effects” (“Kobus Moolman reviews *Burnt Offering*”).

¹¹ As I noted in my MA: “These include Cecily Lockett’s *Breaking the Silence: A Century of South African Women’s Poetry* (1990), Ian Tromp and Leon de Kock’s *The Heart in Exile: South African Poetry in English, 1990-1995* (1996), Dennis Hirson’s *The Lava of This Land: South African Poetry, 1960-1996* (1997), Isabel Balseiro’s *Running Towards Us: New Writing from South Africa* (2000), Robert Berold’s *It All Begins: Poems from Postliberation South Africa* (2002), and Michela Borzaga and Dorothea Steiner’s *Imagination in Troubled Space: A South African Poetry Reader* (2004)” (Weyer 2). More recently, her work has also been included in Gerald de Villiers’s *Clusters: A Teaching Anthology of Poetry* (2006).

¹² Woeber’s review, developed into an article titled “‘Text’ and ‘Voice’ in Recent South African Poetry” interacts most closely with her work. Other articles which direct attention to Metelerkamp’s poetry, though only in a paragraph or two, are Nicholas Meihuizen’s “Shaping Lines: New South African Poetry, 1994-1995”, Sole’s “Bird Hearts Taking Wing: Trends in Contemporary South African Poetry Written in English”, “The Witness of Poetry: Economic Calculation, Civil Society and the Limits of Everyday Experience in a Liberated South Africa” and “‘The Deep Thoughts the One in Need Falls Into’: Quotidian Experience and the Perspectives of Poetry in Postliberation South Africa”, Sally-Ann Murray’s “Lyric ↔L/language: Essaying the Poetics of Contemporary Women’s Poetry” and Michael Chapman’s “‘Sequestered from the winds of history’: Poetry and Politics”.

In terms of postgraduate research, other than my MA, there is only an MA mini-dissertation by Sarah Frost that discusses Metelerkamp's poetry alongside that of Ingrid de Kok and, as it was completed in 1998, it only engages with Metelerkamp's first two collections.

My MA, completed in 2007, examined patterns of connectivity in Metelerkamp's poetry. It explored how her work is shaped by her literary, mythological, academic, sociological and familial legacies, how it draws a connection between the political and the personal, and how it insists on the materiality of self and language, thereby drawing connections between language and body, self and world. While valuably indicating trends in the content of Metelerkamp's poetry, rather than concluding an interest in this author's work, my MA opened up my interest to bigger, more far-reaching questions, questions which started clustering around the ideas of confession, embodiment and ethics.

In my MA, I suggest that "Metelerkamp's work can be read as confessional poetry", but rather than exploring the implications of this designation – either in terms of the definition or legacy of this lyrical subgenre or in terms of the historical context in which the confessional school emerged and how Metelerkamp is working from within a different, but similarly-enabling confessional context – I simply use this designation to refer to the apparent autobiographical character of Metelerkamp's work (Weyer 8). Rather than engaging with theories, or histories, of confessional poetry, my MA uses Philippe Lejeune's prose-focused study, *On Autobiography*, to briefly set up Metelerkamp as an autobiographical poet in my introduction (Weyer 9-10), in order to justify, from the outset, my inclusion of biographical details when analysing the poetry (Weyer 10-11) and my decision "to reject the abstract signifier 'speaker' in favour of the poet-speaker's real name, Joan Metelerkamp" (Weyer 11). Coming out of the MA, I realised that, in designating Metelerkamp a confessional poet I had, in fact, detonated a whole series of new questions for myself – about what confessional poetry is and does, why it arises, why it is critically ignored or maligned, and yet why it attracts and compels me so – questions that could only be answered within the expansive scope of a PhD, and that would best be engaged by extending my focus to include other confessional poets working from a similar context to Metelerkamp's. Antjie Krog, the only other South African writer whose poetry was provocatively

similar enough to Metelerkamp's to cause me to reference her work in my single-author study (incidentally yet tellingly, the only other referenced poet is Sylvia Plath), but whose conception of truth is productively dissimilar (as will later be discussed), seemed the ideal choice.

My MA initiated a general discussion of embodiment in Metelerkamp's poetry; what it couldn't do, due to its methodological, thematic and theoretical constraints, was fully explore specific forms of embodiment. While the maternal body is briefly glimpsed, it is only partially and momentarily visible in a discussion about motherhood as "an obstacle to, and instigator, or enabling factor, of poetry" (Weyer 97), a topic that is examined in greater theoretical and poetic detail in chapter three of this thesis. The erotic body is occasionally allowed a metaphorical presence (see Weyer 54); the idea of the erotic grotesque, central to my reading of Metelerkamp's erotic poetry in the PhD, briefly bursts through, but is neatly, if rather ironically, contained in a discussion of Metelerkamp's poetic language (see Weyer 46-50). The ageing body is altogether elided – another blindspot which the PhD enabled me to explore. By widening my project from the MA into the PhD to engage with Krog's poetry, not only were the maternal, erotic and ageing bodies emphasized comparatively – each poet reflecting, refracting and occasionally rejecting the images of embodiment presented by the other – but the establishment and interrogation of a more rigorous theoretical framework was also enabled. Moreover, by placing these two poets side by side, the poets' representations of whiteness and femaleness, as well as their more specific representations of maternity, eroticism and ageing, can be analysed within their South African context. Lastly, while the MA only examines poetic statements about embodiment presented in the poetry, the PhD explores not only the forms of embodiment presented in the poetry, but also the embodied form of the poetry itself which, especially when intersecting with confessional poetry, has a particular ethical potential. This endows the PhD project with wide-ranging implications for literary theory concerned with the reading of poetry.

The final main area of development of my PhD in relation to the MA centres on the idea of ethics. In the years since I completed my MA, ethics has become an increasingly popular area of academic interest. Whilst my MA concentrated more on the idea of the political (though Levinasian ethics is narrowly used to discuss

Metelerkamp's bodily identification with non-human others in her poetry in my MA – see Weyer 34-36), which reflects the great significance accorded this category during South Africa's transition to democracy (as examined in Krog's poem "Parole"), my PhD is shaped by what might be seen as the post-post-apartheid turn to ethics. My recent prioritization of ethics is not merely a product of a current trend in literary studies; it is also a result of my intersecting interests in confession and embodiment in this project, both of which seemed to me to have profound ethical value and vulnerability independently, which increases exponentially with the intersection of these terms, as occurs in confessional poetry of the body.

This PhD study is moreover not only able to engage with new poetry by Metelerkamp (*Burnt Offering*, published in 2009), but also with more recent scholarship on her work and on women's poetry in South Africa. Whilst still a neglected poet, since the MA Metelerkamp's work has been responded to in articles by Sally-Ann Murray and Michael Chapman. Moolman's rejoinder to Szczurek's review of *Burnt Offering* explored the form of Metelerkamp's poetry, placing it within the tradition of the long poem, and commenting on its processive, non-linear style; similar comments were made in my MA, and in my PhD they are further developed and used to make a particular and original argument about Metelerkamp's writing from the maternal body (see chapter three). My MA was assisted by both Woeber's contention of Metelerkamp's voice-centred poetry and Sole's longstanding interest in her poetics of quotidian experience, both of which continue to shape my reading of her work in the PhD. Murray's exploration of the relationship between lyric and language in contemporary women's poetry positions Metelerkamp as an experimental poet whose work "tilt[s] line and language at the lilt[ing] loveliness of lyric form" (25). While evocative in its views, Murray's project is rather tangential to my own: we share the view that "it is time to develop a vocabulary for Metelerkamp's poetics", and this study attempts to achieve precisely this, though with its focus on embodiment the vocabulary it develops is angled in a different direction to that which Murray's interest in "linguistic experimentation" suggests (26). In Chapman's article in his edited collection (with Margaret Lenta), *SA Lit: Beyond 2000*, he credits Metelerkamp's literary criticism (in a multi-volume review in *Current Writing*) and interview comments on literary production in South Africa as "instructive" (179), and positions her alongside Tatamkhulu Afrika, Karen Press, Ari Sitas, Stephen Watson,

Ingrid de Kok, Jeremy Cronin, Kelwyn Sole, Lesego Rampolokeng and Chris Mann as one of the “poets who made their mark in the 1990s and [have] since ... been granted the authority of their pronouncements” (186). He does, however, accuse her poetry of being “absorb[ed] in an experience that is either too domestically claustrophobic (2010 [*Burnt Offering*]) or too painful (2003 [*Requiem*]) to open itself to the reader’s own field of emotional empathy” (196). The development of this project – from the MA into the PhD – can be seen as working to argue against this judgment.

Beyond these specific interactions with Metelerkamp’s poetry, the reorientation and expansion of my research is also influenced by the changes in the critical climate of contemporary women’s poetry. This can be sketched out from the recent *Scrutiny*2 special issue focused on this topic, which acknowledges the “dizzying activity of women’s literary wor(l)ds” postliberation that is unmatched by a critical responsiveness, and emphasizes that “women’s poetry is profoundly attentive to historical context” and is a “powerful site of political engagement with ‘the most visible macropolitical discourses’ at the same time as expanding what counts as political” (Gqola 5-6). Among the contributions to this special issue, my project has most in common with that of Gillian Schutte, which uses the French feminist ideas of *jouissance* and *écriture féminine* to engage with subversive feminine writing, particularly of the erotic body, and thereby create a space for the female voice, and body, within literary-critical discourse.

Other than reasons mentioned above that relate to the development of my project from the MA to the PhD, I also decided to place Metelerkamp’s and Krog’s poetry in relation to each other for more basic comparative reasons. Krog is better known, so placing Metelerkamp beside her in an equitable discussion will help to elevate Metelerkamp’s literary prominence. However, Krog’s predominantly self-translated English-language collections have not been thoroughly analysed (they have tended to be treated as marginalia in comparison to her Afrikaans poetry and English prose), therefore contextualizing her work against that of a more established *English-language* poet will demonstrate the richness of her work as a contribution to South African poetry in English.

Furthermore, there are many similarities in their lives and work: both these white, middle-class women were born in South Africa in the 1950s, both grew up on farms, attended local boarding schools and completed their formal education by writing an MA thesis on a South African poet, both are wives and mothers and have spent significant portions of time as stay at home mothers, and, of course, both are accomplished writers. Krog has described her collections as containing “love poetry” and “political material”; they are about “being a mother or being a daughter, being a housewife. And then the act of writing poetry comes in, when and how to, what to do when it doesn’t happen... And the love of the land is always there” (“Exclusive”). This list of subjects is also perfectly applicable to Metelerkamp’s entire poetic oeuvre. There are thus many similarities in their work: both have written poems about the TRC (Krog’s “Country of grief and grace” [*Down*], Metelerkamp’s “Truth Commission” [*Into*]); both write of the land (Krog’s “red grass” [*Down*] and Metelerkamp’s “All through the long grass” [*carrying*]); as the titles suggest, Krog’s “Birth” (*Down*) and “marital song 1 [and -2 and -3]” (*Body*) resonate with Metelerkamp’s “Birth Poem” (*Towing*) and “Song of marriage” (*Into*); Krog and Metelerkamp describe recognisably similar states of mental, emotional and physical fatigue due to their roles as stay at home mothers in “how and with what” (Krog, *Down*) and “Dove” (Metelerkamp, *Towing*); they express similar ideas about writing as an embodied activity (Krog’s “poet becoming”, *Down* and Metelerkamp’s “Tea with Janet Frame”, *Into*). Notably, both poets were granted writers’ residencies at the Chateau de Lavigny in Switzerland, where work was initiated on their recent collections (*carrying the fire* and *Body Bereft*), which are both overtly concerned with the ageing and eroticism of the female body. The most important similarities for my thesis are, of course, that Metelerkamp and Krog are confessional poets who write poetry of the body, as will be argued in the following two chapters.

There are, of course, also significant differences or points of tension between these two poets. Metelerkamp’s poems are more formally experimental and through the progression of her career, she has increasingly written long serial or cycle poems. While this tendency is also visible in Krog’s oeuvre, for example, the cycle “Four seasonal observations of Table Mountain” that concludes *Body Bereft*, it is less pervasive. Certainly to English readers, with *Down to My Last Skin* containing only selections of her vast Afrikaans body of work, the formal experimentalism of *Lady*

Anne and the poetic cycles that appear in this collection and its predecessor *Jersalemgangers* are less notable in Krog's work. While both poets relate scenes from their intimate, family lives, Metelerkamp tends to be more elliptical, using a personal system of references and symbols that can leave readers feeling locked out while they are simultaneously invited in by the intimate subject matter and confiding tone. In contrast, Krog's poems often eschew the traditionally confessional for the dramatic or theatrical. Although both poets write confessional poetry in which the reader is an interactive listener – as the next chapter will argue – sometimes Metelerkamp's poems seem overheard, a poet whispering to herself, while Krog's can be experienced as a performance, with the readers as an acknowledged audience. The next chapter will discuss how the poets can also be seen in tension over the idea of truth, with Krog exhibiting markedly more caution and concern over this notion. As the second chapter discusses, another difference between the two poets is their overt engagement with socio-political realities: Krog clearly and concretely explores issues of race, national identity and the political legacies of colonisation and apartheid, whilst Metelerkamp is less noticeably engaged with these social issues. This is also visible in how they write about place. While both poets' work evokes a strong sense of place and explores their physical locatedness, Metelerkamp's is more particular and regional, while Krog's often extends this into a national awareness.

The statement: "Poetry is Dead" has become commonplace in recent years.¹³ While performance or spoken word poetry seems to be flourishing (Wilcox), traditional 'book poetry' is unequivocally in decline. One reason for this is "the oversaturation of the industry" (Zomparelli): "There is far too much poetry being written and published. Never before in the history of English literature has so much text been generated by so many self-designated poets" (Salemi). While the high levels of poetry *production* might suggest that poetry is, in fact, growing in popularity, this does not translate into high levels of consumption: "there are too many poets and not enough readers" (Zomparelli). Some arguments about the death of poetry focus on its alienation from ordinary life due to the professionalisation of poetry, which caused the movement of

¹³ A recent genealogy of this attitude would include Joseph Epstein's "Who killed poetry?" (1988), Dana Gioia's "Can Poetry Matter" (1992), Vernon Shetley's *After the Death of Poetry: Poet and Audience in Contemporary America* (1993), Stephen Goode's "Dead or Alive: Poetry at Risk" (1993), Bruce Wexler's "Poetry is Dead: Does Anybody Really Care?" (2003), Joseph Salemi's "Why Poetry is Dying" (2008) and Daniel Zomparelli's "Poetry is Dead: What the Hell Happened?" (2010).

many poets into academia, and resulted in poetry becoming an elite practice, as the cause of this decline. However, coming from within academia, I am more aware of, and interested in, the decline of poetry within its walls.

In John Guillory's *Cultural Capital*, he writes that the "perceived devaluation of the humanities curriculum is in reality a decline of its market value" (46). DMR Bentley extends this argument by asserting that

[n]owhere ... is the 'large scale "capital flight"' of which Guillory writes more evident than in current student attitudes to poetry: once the very foundation of humanistic studies, the reading and analysis of poems is now anathema to all but a very few students in the honours-graduate stream because a knowledge of poetry is no longer regarded as a necessary or even desirable component of an education for social and financial success. (3)

Within academia itself, which is often thought of as a bastion, or final outpost, of poetry in contemporary culture, there is a clear "devaluation of poetry" (Bentley 3). Although poetry lacks the notable utilitarian value of other, more business- and career-oriented university subjects, it is nevertheless "useful", as Metelerkamp, inspired by Marianne Moore, explains, "for the insights it gives us ... into the grappling of individual, gendered, historical psyches with the complex struggles of experience" ("Ruth Miller" 256). Beyond being "useful ... as a process of working things out" (Edwards 58), she also asserts that it enables "the hidden, the solid, the truth, to reveal itself" (McGrane 3). Krog similarly maintains that poetry is "triumphantly powerful because it places people in a heightened state of consciousness, with enlightening consequences. It's as if you break through the mirror for a moment and touch the riddle" (Krog, "Defence").

Despite the power of poetry, prose forms, particularly the novel, have gained academic ascendancy, in terms of what is taught and researched at university.¹⁴ Describing this devaluation, Metelerkamp writes that poetry has been "shoved ... / into the corner of the syllabus" (*Stone* 6). Similarly, and authoritatively, Chapman declares that, in contemporary South Africa, "poetry is a minority genre, which does

¹⁴ An examination of the current undergraduate curriculum at Stellenbosch University (including both compulsory and elective options) notes that courses on novels vastly outweigh those on poetry – and so too do those on film (showing evidence of the incorporation of cultural studies in a literary studies curriculum). Only plays receive less attention than poetry.

not feature prominently in university literature syllabuses or in book prize-recognition” (183).

Describing the state of poetry in South Africa in the mid-1990s, Metelerkamp states that “[i]n the present political context, lyric poetry ... has been marginalised for men as well as for women and the authority of the academy sees to it that more critical attention is given to other forms of writing than poetry” (“Ruth Miller” 256). While poetry has been displaced by prose in university curricula and research, it is lyric poetry in particular that has been most severely marginalised. As a form of lyric poetry (as the following chapter will examine), confessional poetry has been academically marginalised, though its marginalisation is even more extreme. Judith Harris summarises the current academic dismissal of confessional poetry and the pejorative associations of “confessionalism”, which has come to mean to “exhibitionistic, self-indulgent, narcissistic, melodramatic” (254). The chosen title of Kate Sontag and David Graham’s collection of essays on confessional poetry, *After Confession: Poetry as Autobiography*, can thus be seen as trying to free “autobiographical” poetry from the associations of “confessionalism”, though it does also serve to indicate historical temporality and identify confessional poetry with a particular historical school of poets.¹⁵ While “confessional” is typically derided in poetry, or responsible for its neglect, the confessional mode in prose writing is gaining increasing attention in this “age of memoir” (Sontag and Graham 3). Jo Gill’s edited collection of *Modern Confessional Writing: New Critical Essays*, only contains four (out of eleven) essays on poetry, all of which are on poets associated with the confessional school,¹⁶ seemingly implying that the confessional mode no longer exists in poetry today, or that if it does, it is not worthy of attention.¹⁷ Similarly, Susan VanZanten Gallagher’s *Truth and Reconciliation: The Confessional Mode in South African Literature*, while interacting in depth with Krog’s prose engagement with the TRC in *Country of My Skull*, does not refer to her poetic engagement with this process in *Down to My Last Skin*, and while she refers to an essay by Ingrid de Kok, “Cracked Heirlooms: Memory of Exhibition”, she does not refer to her poetry in *Terrestrial Things*, or

¹⁵ As will be discussed in the following chapter, this school primarily includes WD Snodgrass, Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton.

¹⁶ The first three focus on the confessional school through the work of Plath, Sexton, Lowell, John Berryman, Allen Ginsberg and Adrienne Rich, the fourth is on Ted Hughes’s final volume *Birthday Letters*, which speaks of his relationship with Plath.

¹⁷ Tellingly, the specific prose texts that are studied have all been published since 1996.

needless to say, Metelerkamp's "Truth Commission" in *Into the day breaking*. Confessional poetry is thus either viewed as an artefact of an earlier historical moment (as implied by the title of Diane Middlebrook's article "What was Confessional Poetry?") or a peripheral literary practice remaining outside the scope of contemporary academic interest.

Another poetic practice that is marginalised or neglected in the current literary-critical climate is poetry of the body. Alicia Ostriker attests that there is "a backlash of critical opinion emphatically preferring the abstract to the sensuous": "What most contemporary critics seem to want is less body and less feeling in poetry.... Less desire – these topics are so sticky, so embarrassing, so impolite, so troublesome – can't we, please, have a poetry that's *clean*, with the messy and horrifying fluids and emotions scrubbed off it?" (39, emphasis in original).¹⁸ In the South African publishing world which is still male-dominated, this more typically feminine poetry is "dismiss[ed] ... as irrelevant and unmarketable ... [and] women's writing about their sexuality is not seen as ... respectable or creative" (Schutte 45). This perspective can be seen in Stephen Gray's scathing review of *Body Bereft*, where he warns prospective readers of the ordeal awaiting them when they are forced "to meet [Krog] undressed and ever so candid" in these poems (4).¹⁹ As Nic Dawes points out, Gray, who holds a well-established position in South African letters, "is disgusted" by Krog's unflinching exposure of an ageing female body: "Gray does not want to know about menopause or breasts or a 'drooggebakte poes [drybaked cunt]'" (13).²⁰ As a result of this critical attitude, poetry of the body has been dismissed or misread, and poets of the body, like Krog²¹ and Metelerkamp find themselves excluded from academic attention. As Pumla Dineo Gqola has recently attested, despite the

¹⁸ Giving an example of this attitude, Ostriker discusses Vernon Shetley's "sniffy dismissal" and "misreadings", in *After the Death of Poetry*, of Olds's poetry, due to his "horror of eros in [her poems]" (40). One could also note Adam Kirsch's review of Olds's *Blood, Tin, Straw*, which lambasted her for her "pointed prurience", "vulgar language [and] ... programmatically unfeminine sexual bravado" (39, 41).

¹⁹ See also the review of *Verweerskrif* by Lina Spies and the strong counter-argument by Amanda Gouws, which explains "Waarom die lyflike nie ontken kan word nie [Why the bodily can't be denied]" (10).

²⁰ In fact, Gray's review of *Body Bereft* eerily echoes James Dickie's review of (groundbreaking 1960s poet of the body as well as confessional poet) Anne Sexton's *All My Pretty Ones*, of which he complains: "It would be hard to find a writer who dwells more insistently on the pathetic and disgusting aspects of bodily experience" (106).

²¹ While English critics have largely ignored the centrality of the body in her work – a centrality which will be explored in depth in Chapter Two – some Afrikaans critics have attended to it, notably Viljoen, Crous and Visagie.

“proliferation of poetry by women after apartheid”, “few sites demonstrate the inadequacy of existing critical vocabulary as spectacularly as contemporary women’s poetry” (6; 5). Through this thesis I am seeking to expand this critical vocabulary by academically including and attending to Krog and Metelerkamp as confessional poets of the body, and thereby re-evaluate their work, as well as the academic status of the fields of poetry of the body, confessional poetry, as well as poetry itself.

Despite the critical rejection of the body, the past few decades have seen an intensification of theoretical interest in the body.²² The area of embodiment studies covers many diverse fields of thought and academic disciplines, such as cognitive psychology, neuroscience, phenomenology, and forms of feminist and cultural studies. This thesis will primarily be informed by embodiment theory from a phenomenological and feminist perspective. The foundational principles will be taken from Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception*. Simone de Beauvoir’s feminist interaction with and revision of this text, primarily in *The Second Sex*, will be used to provide the basis for my study of the embodiment of women.

Emmanuel Levinas’s theory of embodied ethics, as described in the face-to-face encounter, will be used to develop the crucial bridge between ethics and the body in this thesis. This will also be explored through De Beauvoir’s ethics of the erotic, which is most explicitly discussed in *Must We Burn De Sade?*, but is also alluded to in *The Second Sex*. Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of the grotesque body, developed in *Rabelais and His World* will be explored and used throughout the thesis, from both an ethical and ontological perspective. The attention to the grotesque body also invites an interrogation of Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection, which is developed in *Powers of Horror*.

While no coherent theory of confession is privileged in delineating a field for the study of confessional poetry, Michel Foucault’s influential study of it in *The History of Sexuality* provides a valuable starting point. This theory is juxtaposed with that developed by Gallagher in the context of the TRC. The work of various critics of confessional poetry is used to construct a definition of this mode, though that of AR

²² This will be thoroughly explored in Chapter Two.

Jones and Lawrence Lerner is most productively engaged with; and in developing an account of the context in which the confessional school rose to prominence, Richard Gray's *American Poetry of the Twentieth Century* provides detailed assistance and Deborah Nelson's *Pursuing Privacy in Cold War America* is highly insightful and influential.

The argument in this dissertation is divided into five chapters. The first two, on confessional and embodiment, are broadly more theoretical, while the final three, on the maternal, erotic and ageing body, work more on an analytical level. Of course, these theoretical and analytical divisions are not absolute, and I have tried, whenever possible, to create theory out of an analytical engagement with the poems. (In this way, the development of a theory of embodiment in the second chapter is principally constructed out of an analysis of an extract from Krog's "Four seasonal observations of Table Mountain" [*Body* 93-4].) Therefore, rather than applying theory to the poetry, the idea is to demonstrate how poetry creates its own theory. It does not, of course, assert a dogmatic argument, but it opens up ambiguous spaces in which theory can flourish, and works to construct a productive discourse, to form a useful vocabulary, from and in which theory can be produced. Moreover, this method also enabled me, through the bodies of the poems, to literally embody the theory, to ground it in bodily realities and show how it affects the body.

This thesis will name Krog and Metelerkamp directly when referring to the speakers in their poems, due to their status as confessional poets, which will be established in the first chapter. As this thesis is about the real, material, individually-lived bodies in their poetry, it would be counter-productive to read the body so intimately and evocatively described as a conceptual construction of an abstract 'speaker'. It would disguise these confessional and embodied aspects in their poetry, thereby encouraging a misreading of the poetry, by causing me to be "cut off from something / out of sight, just / out of earshot" due to the "polite / formality" of "academic" language (Metelerkamp, *Floating* 24).

As a further methodological and stylistic note, this thesis has retained the usage of upper case and lower case letters in the titles of individual poems and poetic volumes as they appear in their published forms (hence, for example, *Into the day breaking*,

carrying the fire, Burnt Offering) rather than sticking to an abstract system of referencing conventions. As I am discussing poetic embodiment, the way a poem appears on the page, the size and shape of the letters, is important. Furthermore, when quoting critics from the US, standard American spelling will be retained (this is particularly evident in the chapter on “ageing”, which is referred to by some critics as “aging”), again with the intention of asserting that writing, and theory, is embodied, and is shaped by context and culture.

The first chapter concentrates on the idea of confession, examining the historical origins of the term in religious, legal and psychoanalytic discourses that attempted to produce the individual, autonomous self, and the way the meaning of this term has more recently been shaped through the confessional mode operating within the TRC that works to emphasise the ways in which identity is interdependent, relational and communal. Next, a definition of confessional poetry as a subgenre of lyric poetry that came into prominence in the confessional school of poets in the United States of America in the 1950s and 1960s is presented, and how this context functioned as a catalyst for this school is explored. Drawing from this discussion, Krog and Metelerkamp are established as confessional poets, whose situation in South Africa in the 1990s and 2000s also contains significant contextual grounds for the construction of a confessional culture. The final section of the chapter engages with the status of truth in confessional poetry, before exploring the ethical and political potential of this mode through its assertion of relational identity and its facilitation of empathy.

The second chapter examines the relationship between poetry and the body. It first presents a historical overview of how women’s bodies have been written by male poets, and increasingly, since the confluence of second wave, Anglo-American feminism and the rise of confessional poetry, by women poets, and examines how Krog’s and Metelerkamp’s work can be seen as continuing this tradition of women’s writing of their own bodies. While this section explores the cultural constructions of gender, the next looks at that of race, and discusses Krog’s and Metelerkamp’s writing of the white body. Their depictions of embodiment are then analysed to construct a theory of ontological, epistemological and ethical embodiment that develops out of their poetry. This is explored through reference to the theories of embodiment of Merleau-Ponty, De Beauvoir and Levinas. The centrality of the

grotesque body as informing Krog's and Metelerkamp's renderings of embodiment is also established in this chapter. This discussion of human embodiment will consequently be used to examine how poems themselves exist, and can be read, as bodies, and therefore how they have a similar ethical potential to human bodies in the face-to-face relationships they establish with readers.

The third chapter focuses on Krog's and Metelerkamp's poetic representation of and engagements with the maternal body in *Down to My Last Skin* and (primarily) *Towing the Line*. Analysing their poems of childbirth, it discusses the reasons for the relative scarcity of poems on this topic, and the dominance of medicalised over experiential narratives of childbirth, as well as the impact of the experience of childbirth on the mother's embodied sense of self. The next section analyses poems that reflect on the daily labour of young, stay at home mothers, and how this labour mechanises the maternal body and disrupts embodiment. The final section, rather than discussing how Krog and Metelerkamp write *about* the maternal body, discusses how they write *from* the maternal body, despite the cultural separation of procreativity and literary creativity and the quotidian experiences of motherhood being typically seen as antithetical to those that enable poetic production. This argument, drawing on the insights of Kristeva, also explores the ethical potential of writing from the maternal body.

The fourth chapter concentrates on the rendering of the erotic body in Krog's and Metelerkamp's poetry. The opening section explores the ambiguity in Krog's presentation of eroticism in *Down to My Last Skin*, with comparisons to that of Metelerkamp's in *Into the day breaking*: the erotic situation is depicted as responsible for the destruction of the subject, but also necessary for its construction. To explore this ambiguity, De Beauvoir's ambiguous engagements with the erotic body in her own work will be discussed alongside those of Krog. Metelerkamp's poetry of the erotic body in *carrying the fire* is analysed in the following section by means of the concept of the grotesque. The final section of this chapter extends the designation of poems as bodies in the second chapter, to examine how *carrying the fire* positions the poem as an erotic body, and exploring the ethics of reading a poem as such.

The fifth and final chapter focuses attention on Krog's and Metelerkamp's engagement with the ageing body. It sets up the field of enquiry by overviewing the existing narratives of ageing and the need for revisionary cultural narratives to be constructed. Krog's *Body Bereft* is read as an attempt to construct a new narrative, particularly regarding the relationship between ageing and eroticism. In contrast, Metelerkamp's *carrying the fire* is read as an attempt to create a personal narrative of *rejuvenation* through the erotic, in order to escape her familial legacy of matrilineal suicide that is exposed and explored in *Requiem*.

For my argument, as it deals with Krog's poetry, to be valid, I first need to justify my reading of her poetry in English in isolation from the Afrikaans originals. The final section of this introduction will use translation theory to examine Krog's translation practices, in order to support the non-translation based reading of her English poetry throughout the rest of this dissertation.

Reading Krog's Poetry in Translation

This section will discuss Antjie Krog's translation of her poetry into English, and the different critical receptions that these translations have, and could, receive. It will examine Krog's acknowledged attitudes toward translation, as well as her specific motives for the translation of her own poetry. As a case study, a comparative analysis will be performed on "man ek lus 'n twakkie" [man, I crave a fag] from *Gedigte 1989-1995* and its self-translated English rendition, "stripping", from *Down to My Last Skin*, and on the very different receptions of these two poems. This comparative analysis will demonstrate not only how different these two poems are, but also how complex and analytically-rich the English text is, often precisely at the points where it deviates from the Afrikaans original. What I therefore want to work against, or at least beyond, is the notion, expressed in Afrikaans by Henning Snyman, cited and translated by Christine Marshall, that although "one reads the texts in English [one] 'thinks it [sic] back into Krog's simultaneously supple and challenging Afrikaans'" (84). Despite the overt focus on translation in this section, its real motivation and underlying objective is thus to provide a space for the rest of this thesis to engage with Krog's English-language poems, not as exercises in translation from the inimitable

Afrikaans originals, but as texts that are worthy of analysis in their coherently-contained English-language publications.

Krog's perspective on translation has been well-documented. While always asserting that translation in this country performs an essential and unequivocal social good (as she reports Nelson Mandela saying in *A Change of Tongue*: ““That is why I believe in translation: for us to be able to live together”” [268]), she is more ambivalent about her own translation of her Afrikaans poetry into English. When asked by Yvette Christiansë, in an interview published to coincide with the release of *Down to My Last Skin*, “Antjie, do you actually want to be translated?”, Krog replied:

Ek weet nie Yvette, dis alles deurmekaar [I don't know, Yvette, it's all muddled]²³: how much of it is inferiority, how much arrogance, how much simply to be read by people whom you like? And I cannot explain why I feel like I have 'sold out', why I feel I have betrayed something or revealed an infantile desire to be grand, be 'English', be present in the Big Literature by publishing my poetry in English. (15)

Lawrence Venuti's argument that “[a] translation canonizes the foreign text” and “does not so much validate literary fame as create it” could partly explain Krog's uncertainty in this response (“Introduction” 7). If, by translating her poetry herself, she is not merely making herself “present in the Big Literature” but, in fact, canonizing herself, this certainly would be seen as indicative of “arrogance” and a “desire to be grand”. Additionally, Louise Viljoen has commented that Krog's response “has to do with the ambivalent position of Afrikaans in South Africa”; consequently, “[t]ranslating ... into English ... evokes complex and perplexing feelings that have their roots in history, filial loyalties, political associations, and even gender affiliations” (“Translation” 33).²⁴

Less uncertain or ambivalent was her proclamation to Christiansë: “I do not want to belong to English literature. This new volume [*Down to My Last Skin*] should always form part of Afrikaans literature, within South African literature” (13-4) This is because she ascribes to the “belief that there is an irrefutable knowledge within a

²³ The moments in this interview, and indeed in all of Krog's texts, when she switches code and reverts to Afrikaans, are important to note and worth detailed examination.

²⁴ Viljoen's article also utilizes Venuti's theories, however, as her text focuses on Krog's translation of indigenous South African poetry into Afrikaans, it proceeds from a slightly different vantage point, though it does offer occasional insights about *Down to My Last Skin*.

poet's language" and that therefore "you can only really contribute (in the sense of changing tradition and boundaries) to the literature of a language if you have grown up in that language" (Krog in Christiansë 14). What underpins these comments is the notion that there is an Afrikaans literary tradition that Krog's poetry has been informed by, and can, in turn, respond to and transform. As she explains in her "Translation note" that prefaces *Down to My Last Skin*, what is "lost" in her translation of her Afrikaans poetry into English

is the echo of other Afrikaans poets and the ways in which I have used their well-known works – for example the close relationship between the calm, beautiful motherhood verse of Elisabeth Eybers and my loud, noisy household poems; the traces of the first Afrikaans poems; and the response of my poems to the male voices of Van Wyk Louw, Opperman and Breytenbach. (3-4)

When translated, these echoes of, and innovations to, the Afrikaans literary tradition are absent, and this absence isolates and contracts the poem, amputating its figurative fingers that constantly reach beyond itself, flicking through and cross-referencing the canon of that literary tradition. Krog therefore asserts to Christiansë that, in the translation of poetry, "[w]hat is irretrievably lost is the sound of the poem, the resonance of specific words to others, the literary history of a word, the aura it brings into a poem. What is also lost is the specific place of a poem in its literary tradition, its literary 'line', the sound of it within its own language" (16). Krog has consequently argued: "In essence, I think poetry is untranslatable and, when reading a translation, I am always aware that it is just an approximation" (in Christiansë 16).

However, despite this limitation which Krog places on translation, she did decide to make her poetry available to English readers. As she tells Christiansë: "I wanted to be read in English ... the existence of my poetry, in English, became important enough for me to translate it myself" (13). There are various reasons for this. The first is that many of Krog's poems had already been translated by others, but that these translations often left Krog feeling uneasy. In a lecture entitled "In the Name of the Other – Poetry in Self-translation", Krog states that "[a]fter initially being pleased to be translated, I became more and more surprised at *what* was chosen for translation: mostly easier poems, mostly simple political outcries, and little of the more complex political, feminist or outspoken sexual work". As she explains in greater depth to Christiansë:

The problem is that people translated the poems they liked and, for some reason, those poems dealing with the issues of being a woman and being an Afrikaner woman were initially left behind. So, I began to feel *skeef* [skew], represented in English by some love poems and political poems, while my poems that really deal with being a woman ... never surfaced. Neither did the poems about children, nor about the violence within family life. (13)

Krog's self-translations were thus attempts to correct this subjective imbalance, "to cover all of [her] work" and, through this, to bring the culturally specific and gendered body of the "Afrikaner woman" back into prominence after its neglect by her previous translators (in Christinsë 18-19).

The other problem with the translations produced by these translators was that the poems were "too smooth, too English; that is, that any trace of the Afrikaans roots of the texts has been removed" (Marshall 81). Venuti would describe these as "domesticating translations that assimilate foreign literary texts too forcefully ... erasing the sense of foreignness that was likely to have invited translation in the first place" (*Scandals* 5). Krog thus complains that

when I read these poems they sounded so overwhelmingly English that I felt no relationship with them at all and could not read them aloud ... They felt too English and English was not how I wanted to sound. I wanted to sound Afrikaans, but in English. I wanted the reader/listener to be aware all the time that he or she was busy with somebody that is *not* English, somebody coming from another sensibility, another loyalty, another culture. ("In the Name")

What Krog is articulating here is a theory of translation expressed by Rudolf Pannwitz, and held to be exemplary by Walter Benjamin. Pannwitz argues that "[t]he basic error of the translator is that he preserves the state in which his own language happens to be instead of allowing his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue" (in Benjamin 81). These wrongheaded translators want to "turn Hindi, Greek, English into German instead of turning German into Hindi, Greek, English" (Pannwitz in Benjamin 81). When Krog writes that she "wanted to sound Afrikaans, but in English", this means that, translated into Pannwitz's terms, she wanted to turn English into Afrikaans; to foreignise English to the extent that it connects with, and becomes, Afrikaans, by stretching and transforming its linguistic boundaries. Her self-translations in *Down to My Last Skin* were thus as much about presenting a more complete overview of her entire oeuvre as attempting to translate one literary culture into another – to transplant the "Afrikaans roots" of her poems

into an English soil, and, in doing so, to alter the South African English literary landscape.

Although Krog has used translation as a tool to correct inadequacies and irregularities in the content and style of previous translations of her poetry into English, beyond this, she is hyper-aware that translation has a more wide-reaching social function. In a historically divided country, translation acts as a meeting point. As Krog writes, South Africa in the mid 1990s was a “country where people were desperate to find one another after so many years of being kept apart”, and while they couldn’t do so in their own disparate, insular languages (because “[t]o stay in your language meant to stay apart”), “within English a new South African literature was being formed for the first time” (“In the Name”).²⁵ Speaking to McGrane, Krog notes that English is “the language in which all South Africans can, for the first time, talk as (un)equals to one another”. Krog therefore insists that she translated her poetry into English primarily because she “wanted to be and become part of the new South Africanness that was being formed” (“In the Name”). In translating not only individual poems, but, through them, the Afrikaans literary tradition that echoes within these poems into English, Krog, like other writers involved in similar projects of translation, is creating a new, shared South African literary tradition. Translation into English is about dialogue, debate, community, connection; about attempting to create something communal and accessible out of our apartheid past.

Krog’s English poem “stripping”, from *Down to My Last Skin*, which is a translation, and transformation, of the Afrikaans poem “man ek lus ’n twakkie” from *Gedigte 1989-1995*, offers a particularly interesting case study in Krog’s self-translation and the translation’s reception. The reception of *Down to My Last Skin*, a collection of predominantly self-translated poems, selected by Krog from her Afrikaans volumes, has been rather sparse.²⁶ Despite the fact that Krog is a major South African poet, and that this is her first collection in English, I have found only two articles that analyse

²⁵ Similarly, in *A Change of Tongue* she asserts that “[i]n South African literature, English is the language in which writers reach each other, meet each other, get into conversation and debate” (270).

²⁶ The Afrikaans volumes have, of course, as previously described, received detailed attention (see Viljoen, Conradie, Crous and Beukes).

this collection in any depth.²⁷ The earlier article, Stephan Meyer's, "'the only truth stands skinned in sound': Antjie Krog as Translator", doesn't recognize "stripping" as a translation of "man ek lus n twakkie" at all (10). Christine Marshall's article, entitled "A Change of Tongue: Antjie Krog's Poetry in English", does acknowledge "stripping" as a translation, but describes it as a "particularly unsatisfactory" translation which loses "the robustness and subversiveness of the first version" (85; 87).

In contrast, "man ek lus 'n twakkie" has been much admired. Krog's own high esteem of it is evident in its inclusion in both her recent Afrikaans collection of selected poems, *Digter wordende: 'n keur uit die gedigte van Antjie Krog* [*Poet becoming: a selection from the poetry of Antjie Krog*] (31), and in her co-edited (with Johann de Lange) anthology of erotic Afrikaans poetry, *Die dye trek die dye aan: Verse oor lyflike liefde* [*The thighs attract the thighs: Poems about bodily love*] (70). Marthinus Beukes describes it as "ingenious" and powerfully political: "an ironic deconstruction of male sexuality and the construction of an own female image" that thus "serves as [a] directive gynogenetic text" by "suppl[ying] a clear demonstration of the image of the New Woman" (171-4). For Marshall, "man ek lus 'n twakkie" is "particularly striking ... a finely observed, judged and crafted rendering of a middle-aged woman's monologue" that is written

in a dialect and style that distances it from the poet's own persona without any question ... [The speaker's] particular vocabulary and idiomatic expressions, her manner of speaking and style are typical of a particular poor, working class community ... For the reader there may be a frisson of recognition and identification, as well as the slightly amused distancing a middle class reader experiences due to the social positioning of the speaker. (85-6)

To facilitate this discussion, "stripping", Krog's English self-translation of "man ek lus 'n twakkie", published in *Down to My Last Skin* (31-2), and a linguistically faithful English translation of "man ek lus 'n twakkie" from *Gedigte 1989-1995* (49-51), titled "man, I crave a fag", are reprinted alongside each other below. As "man, I

²⁷ Various scholars have mentioned *Down to My Last Skin*, or individual poems within it, in their work, but haven't engaged intensively with this collection. (J Murray's article that engages simultaneously with prose texts by Krog and Vera perhaps comes closest.) Frances Vosloo's and HP van Coller and BJ Odendaal's articles about Krog's role as a translator, for example, do refer to *Down to My Last Skin*, the latter in some detail, but strictly from a translation, rather than literary-analytical, perspective (101-5).

crave a fag” is an attempt at a “transparent representation” of the original Afrikaans poem, and will be quoted to support comments in this English-language argument about the original Afrikaans poem, it will be referred to as the Afrikaans poem (Venuti, “Introduction” 8).

Stripping

while you undress

I watch through my lashes
that bloody thick cock
prudish and self-righteous it hangs
head neatly wrinkled and clear cut

about its place between the balls – wincing in my
[* part of previous line*] direction

and I think of its years and years of conquest
night after fucking night through pregnancies
menstruation abortion pill-indifference
sorrow how many lectures given honours

received shopping done with semen dripping
on the everyday pad from all sides
that blade cuts

that cock goddamit does more than conquer
it determines how generous the mood

how matter-of-fact how daring the expenditure
standing upright it is bend or open-up
and you better be impressed my sister
not merely lushy or horny
but in bloody awe, yes!

everything every godfucking thing revolves around the
[*part of previous line*] maintenance of cock

and the thing has no heart no brain no soul
it’s dictatorial a fat-lipped autocrat
a mister’s Mister

somewhere you note numbers and statistics
that morning in Paris and again that night
your hands full of tit

I am waiting for the day
oh I look forward to the day the cock crumbles
that it doesn’t want to
that in a rosepoint pout it swings only hither and dither
that it doesn’t ever want to flare

“man, I crave a fag”

she says and digs in the sideboard for more Craven A

on the sofa she pulls up her legs
pulls deeply
blows with a haughty jaw the smoke towards the window

“I watched him last night
while he undressed, mán
and I think: that blood cock – look
so prude and selfish it hangs
his head delicately wrinkled and clean cut
in his place between the balls he hangs
pretend wounded

and I turn around and think of its many years of romping
night after fucking night pissed or not
through pregnancies babies abortions
mind you even when I had my period
from all sides that blade gorges
that sac hissed the way it lifted
until the balls were rock-hard

can I tell you something?: such a cock
does *more* than romp
he says how generous the mood is
he says who must be thrashed
when he gets up it’s bend over or open
and you’d better be impressed my baby
not just hard and horny
but in awe, hey

every thing, you hear me, every thing fucking turns on the
[*part of previous line*] maintenance of prick
and the thing hasn’t got brains
a Mister’s mister
it always shows off

you just want to seize up man, your clit and so

and now?
my god now that cock refuses
with pouted mouth lies the tip
whether it dangles limply this way or that
the balls’ straps all sagged

but wiggle waggles unwillingly
boils over like a jam pot or fritters away like a balloon

and come it will come
because rumour has it
that for generations
the women in my family kapater their men with
yes with stares
oh jesus, and then we slither away like fertile snakes in
[*part of previous line*] the grass
taking shit from nobody
and they tell me
my aunts and my nieces and sisters they laugh and tell
[*part of previous line*]me
how one's body starts chatting then how it dances into
[*part of previous line*] tune
at last coming home to its own juices

sometimes uncle wobbles half mast
but then comes right there
boils over like a pot of jam
ffritz like a balloon
it still bursts condensed milk, yes
but not at all like before

shame and he can't *take* it, you know
his eyes are quite dullish high rise he buys
and spanish fly and his attention is just there, *just there* all
[*part of previous line*] the time
his hands, were he to smoke, are so shaky, hey,
his beard's full of pus

give me that lighter...

now my mom said last night when I went down there
already for generations

our mas and grandmas and aunties have castrated their
[*part of previous line*] husbands
and if they then bob like that
the women become lusty, hey, really poisonous
like snakes that you release into the grasses
jesus! and then we take crap from nothing."

she gets up
legs skinny in multicoloured leggings
corners of the mouth chiseled towards the throat

"my whole body, hey, creaks with juices
my tits and fanny chat now
and for the first time my baby
I feel how I myself am slowly coming in tune."

The first notable difference between the original Afrikaans poem and its English rendition is the title. It has changed from a phrase of direct, colloquial speech, bracketed in the appropriate inverted commas, to the more general, ambiguous and unbracketed "stripping". Obviously this change focuses the English reader's attention on the fact that one is reading about a wife's observation of her husband's "stripping" ("while you undress / I watch through my lashes"). Not only does the female speaker observe her husband's physical "undress[ing]", her avowed yearning for his castration also strips him of his sexual prowess and dominance. Thus although her husband's penis has had "years and years of conquest" and "conquer[ing]", of being "dictatorial" and "autocrat[ic]", the speaker is now "waiting for the day" and "look[ing] forward to the day the cock crumbles" – a day that she is convinced will arrive because "for

generations / the women in [her] family kapater [castrate] their men”.²⁸ She describes this castrating day comically, using effeminate (“rosepoint pout”), domestic (“boils over like a jampot”) and childlike (“balloon”) images and sing-song nursery rhyme language (“hither and dither”; “wobble waggles”). But, in addition to this, the new title also draws the reader’s attention to the “stripping” of other key elements in the poem.

Most obvious of these is the “stripping” of the quotation marks and with them the use of direct speech by a dramatic third person speaker. In “man ek lus ’n twakkie” the “she” who we can safely observe from a distance while she “digs in the sideboard for more Craven A”, and whose words are neatly contained within inverted commas, is replaced by a more difficult and dangerous ‘I’. So while the Afrikaans poem could be read as a dramatic monologue with occasional stage directions in the first and second-last stanza, “stripping” could be read as an unmediated, stripped-down confession.

In response to this alteration, Marshall remarks that “[t]hough many of the same lines occur [in ‘stripping’ and ‘man ek lus ’n twakkie’], without the distancing and the well-matched dialect and character to balance them, as in the Afrikaans version, [the] effect [of the vulgar language and observations] becomes ... uncomfortably crude” (86). This critique of “stripping” closely reflects Lowell’s comment on Sexton’s poetry that “[m]any of her most embarrassing poems would have been fascinating if someone had put them in quotes, as the presentation of some character, not the author” (“Anne Sexton” 24).

Why did Krog strip “stripping” of its reassuring quotation marks and safely-distanced third person speaker? Why did she choose to present this poetic material in this “embarrassing” confessional form? Is it the retrospective re-engagement with original material that is divorced from its previous poetic and historical context that allows the personal into the poem? In her interview with Christiansä, Krog asserts: “Translating the poems for *Down to My Last Skin* was hard. It was as if ... *as off* [sic] *ek het niemeer my eie konteks gehad het* [as if I did not have my own context anymore]. I had to write myself back into the poems” (15). Is this why Krog literally “wr[o]te

²⁸ The effect of the retention of this key Afrikaans term will be discussed later in the argument.

[her]self back into” “stripping”, by exchanging the third person speaker for the unmediated, confessional ‘I’?

And, is it because this re-engagement is occurring at a time when Krog is highly conscious of the poetic, but also political and social role that the ‘I’ plays in literature? In an article about her autobiographical writing practices, “‘I, me, me, mine!’: Autobiographical Fiction and the ‘I’”, she lists eight reasons for her use of the ‘I’. These include the following:

it seems the most honest word I can speak, the only word I really know and can give an account of. It allows me access to fact ... [I]f I say the word ‘I’, I call forth the word ‘you’. You have to respond. And you will allow me to access you under your own conditions, within your own ambiguities and fractious facts. But if the ‘you’ who is not ‘I’, responds, then you and I can at last start trying to find ‘us’ as well as ‘he’ or ‘she’ or ‘they’... I find it less ostentatious to be upfront with the I. Many times I read works where the hiding of the I produces such cluttering, such loud echoing that one wants to say: for God’s sake, come out, be yourself, so that we can talk and stop hiding behind elaborate manifestations of yourself. (103)

Does the use of the ‘I’ make “stripping” more “honest” and “fact[ual]”? Was the third person speaker an “elaborate manifestation of [her]self” that she no longer needs to “hid[e] behind”? Is it Krog’s awareness of the dialogic power of the ‘I’, its ability to call forth a “respon[se]” from the reader or listener, that is responsible for this transformation in the translation? Is it therefore the case that, because Krog is now more aware of the power of the ‘I’, that she is encouraged to use it more pervasively?

Or, is it not only because Krog is retrospectively self-translating her own work, but perhaps because she is translating it into English? Krog’s reluctance, in the interview with Christiansö, to become part of “English literature” seems to be based, at least in part, on her status as an outsider to an English literary tradition (13-14). Because she wasn’t born and nurtured in this literary tradition – “I don’t have Eliot and Larkin in my bones ... I drank other sounds with my milk” – she claims that she can’t “contribute” to or “revolutionize” this tradition, or even “write anything that can find its place within that context” (Krog in Christiansö 14-15). In this interview, then, Krog views these independently co-existing literary traditions as impediments to her translation project. But isn’t there, perhaps, something more liberating in inserting your poetry into a language whose literary tradition is unfamiliar to you and not one

you even intend to engage with, let alone revolutionize? As “Christina, a Swedish expert on translation” in *A Change of Tongue* argues: “People who prefer not to write in their mother tongues often enrich a language precisely because they are not cluttered with tradition or intimidated by the great writers of that language” (270). Perhaps because “stripping” is not clothed in the weighty Afrikaans literary tradition a more intimate ‘I’ can emerge in English.

But is this truly an intimate, confessional ‘I’? Differentiating between dramatic monologue and confessional poetry, Jones asserts that the latter “is a dramatic monologue in which the *persona* is not treated dramatically, as a mask ... but is projected lyrically ... In other words, although the poem’s style and method is unmistakably dramatic, the *persona* is naked ego involved in a very personal world and with particular, private experiences” (14, emphasis in original).²⁹ Furthermore, Jones emphasizes the importance of the confessional “*volume* of poems”, which “creates a distinct and homogeneous world” and thereby produces a clear “autobiographical impact” that marks the collection, and the poems within it, as confessional (Jones 15, emphasis in original). In *Down to My Last Skin*, “stripping” is positioned at the conclusion of the second section, “Love is All I Know” which has a strong “autobiographical impact” and asserts a confessional context.³⁰ When read in this undisrupted (as will be discussed shortly) confessional context, “stripping” is neatly subsumed into this autobiographical recollection.

What clearly aids this subsumption is the change from a third- to a first-person speaker. But more important still is the nature of this new speaker. Krog has stripped the poem of all the overtly working class elements of the Afrikaans poem. In a total reconceptualization, this new speaker travels to “Paris” and uses words like “expenditure”, “autocrat” and “dictatorial”. The English speaker is thus educated, fairly affluent and worldly, much like the average reader of published poetry. But, more notably, she also seems much more like Krog herself, giving “lectures” and receiving “honours”.

²⁹ This is a rather brief and simplistic definition of the confessional speaker, which will be discussed in a much more nuanced way in the following chapter.

³⁰ Again, this will be examined in detail in the next chapter.

Krog's self-translation and recontextualization of "stripping" enables new themes to come to the fore. The poem's focus on finances and the relationship between sex and money within marriage strongly echoes the poem "sonnet (I will always remember)" which is positioned five poems before "stripping". (The Afrikaans version of this poem appears in Krog's 1989 collection *Lady Anne*.) Just as in "stripping" it is the "cock" that "determines how generous the mood" is and "how daring the expenditure" can be while Krog does her "shopping ... with semen dripping / on the everyday pad", in "sonnet (I will always remember)" her "monthly allowance" is placed "on the bedside table" in the "morning" – a clear evocation of payment for sexual services rendered (Krog, *Down* 26). Together these poems develop an awareness of the sexual-monetary economy of marriage, an awareness that "man ek lus 'n twakkie" doesn't even gesture towards.³¹

Similarly, "stripping" recalls concerns about "the violence within family life" that are voiced in "marital psalm", which appears typographically alongside "stripping", and also underpins and entrenches the questions of ethics raised by "marital psalm" (Krog in Christiansö 13). The former's violent and threatening phrases "years and years of conquest / night after fucking night", "from all sides / that blade cuts", "conquer" and "bend or open-up" echo this striking formulation in "marital psalm":

sometimes he catches me by the hind leg
as one big piece of solid treachery
persecutes me
fucks me day and night
violates every millimeter of private space
smothers every glint in my eye which could lead to writing. (Krog, *Down* 30)

In "marital psalm" Krog quotes her husband voicing his understandable concerns about the ethics of his wife's publication of her intimate poetry:

"do our children successfully in respectable schools have to see
how their friends read about their mother's splashing cunt
and their father's perished cock
I mean my wife
jesus! somewhere a man's got to draw the line." (*Down* 30)

³¹ Both the phrases "shopping done with semen dripping / on the everyday pad" and "how daring the expenditure" are *not* translated from "man ek lus 'n twakkie"; they are new additions to the English poem.

“Stripping” then shows us their mother’s body “coming home to its own juices” and their father’s penis that “doesn’t ever want to flare”.³²

Therefore, although one could argue that “[s]ome of the lines that do appear in the translation lose much of their original significance”, as part of a recontextualized and reconceptualized self-translation, they also gain new significance (Marshall 86). Due to the transformation of the speaker as educated, fairly affluent and worldly, the average “middle class reader” can no longer experience a “slightly amused distancing ... due to the social positioning of the speaker” (Marshall 86). Rather than being safely “amused” by the speaker, “stripping” calls on the reader to take her seriously. Rather than feeling merely a “frisson of recognition and identification” with the “poor, working class” speaker, the reader of “stripping” is “uncomfortably” implicated by the poem (Marshall 86). The average reader can all too easily “piggyback on the ‘I’ into the text”, but most readers don’t *like* that position (Krog “I” 103). They want to either reject marriage as a damaged and damaging legal construct, or accept it idealistically as the ultimate loving, equal partnership.³³ They don’t want to contemplate the violence and desire for vengeance within family life, or the messy and morally-dubious marital sex-money economy (in their own marriages, and those of their friends, parents, grandparents). These are not comfortable concepts. Krog therefore uses the translation of “stripping” to discomfort readers, thereby creating space for a reflection on, and interrogation of, the ambiguities and tensions that are experienced by so many.

Furthermore, unlike the Afrikaans speaker, in “stripping” the speaker is vulnerable. While the Afrikaans speaker is safely surrounded by her female confidantes, the English speaker is alone in her bedroom with her naked, “dictatorial” husband and his “bloody thick cock” that has perpetrated “years and years of conquest / night after fucking night”. Unlike the Afrikaans poem, in “stripping” the speaker’s husband is still virile and she is merely “waiting for the day” and “look[ing] forward to the day the cock crumbles” – it hasn’t happened yet. However, this speaker is also

³² Note that while the Afrikaans versions of both poems appear in the volume *Gedigte 1989-1995*, they are not positioned alongside each other, so this symbiotic relationship is less effective in their previous context (Krog 43; 49).

³³ This ambiguous portrayal of marriage and the erotic within marriage will be explored in greater depth in Chapter Four.

ambiguously presented as more powerful. Unlike the family legend recounted in “man ek lus ’n twakkie”, in “stripping” the “women in [her] family kapater their men with / yes with *stares*” (emphasis added).³⁴ The agency of the gaze, traditionally assigned to men, is here redirected to women.³⁵ Additionally, the retention of the Afrikaans term “kapater” paradoxically allows the English translation to more strongly signal that this castrating power is the legacy of her *Afrikaans* female forebears – it is an Afrikaans power. As this poem takes place while the speaker is “watch[ing]” her husband, we are also witnessing the speaker actively castrating her husband. The fact that this speaker, with her ambiguous victim-vulnerability and castrating-power, is positioned not only within an easily identifiable middle class marriage, but also, incontestably, as Krog herself, is what makes this poem so troubling, but simultaneously so rich for analysis.³⁶ It asks complex questions about the ethics of intimate representations of marriage, as, certainly, every time we read the poem we re-enact Krog’s castrating stare at her husband’s vulnerable body. Krog castrates him, but simultaneously we castrate him. Beyond the ethics of writing, what then are the ethics of reading?³⁷

As this section has argued, in Krog’s translations of her own poetry, as demonstrated in “stripping”, translation in the form of self-translation and recontextualization, acts as a space for transformation and reconceptualization. In her 2008 lecture on her translation practices, Krog explains:

One’s ‘loyalty’ as a translator lies to the work as it stands – one’s skills and creativity should be used to do justice to the existing text but within the new translation. [However] [t]he moment I translate my own poem, I feel no loyalty to the old text, because it existed, it was there, it was leading its own life, but my loyalty, my skill and creativity are directed to the new text, the new process and the new life of this poem. (“In the Name”)

Venuti has convincingly argued that “[a] translation ... can never be a transparent representation, only an interpretive transformation that exposes multiple and divided

³⁴ In this final stanza, Krog’s description of the castrating gaze and the women who are “like fertile snakes” and “laugh” as they “com[e] home” to their own bodies, invokes both Freud’s, and Cixous’s revisionist, use of the Medusa (in “The Laugh of the Medusa”).

³⁵ This evocation of the agency of the gaze is underscored by the poem’s new title, as well as the first line, creating another theme unique to the English translation. While traditionally men watch women strip in a display of their masculine dominance, in “stripping”, women watch men strip and thereby emasculate them.

³⁶ For this reason, I will return to this poem in Chapter Four, though from a different argumentative perspective.

³⁷ This question, which is central to this thesis, will be examined in Chapter Two, and then picked up again in Chapter Four and the Conclusion.

meanings in the foreign text and displaces it with another set of meanings, equally multiple and divided” (“Introduction” 8). This argument “makes possible the development of a hermeneutic that reads the translation *as a text in its own right*, as a weave of connotations, allusions, and discourses specific to the target-language culture” (Venuti, “Introduction” 8; emphasis added). Consequently, it is valid to appreciate and critically examine the “new text[s]” that Krog has produced, not merely as loyal (or disloyal) translations forever tied to the original poems, but as texts that are imbued with “new life” and thus able to live in their own right in the literary-critical sphere. The rest of this thesis is validated by this argument. By engaging with Krog’s English translations only, in an English Literary Studies dissertation, I thus demonstrate the vitality of their independent existence.

Krog’s assertion about the “new life” of the translated poem is evidence of a shift in her thinking about translation. In her 2000 interview with Christiansë, Krog categorically states that she “do[es] not want to belong to English literature” (13-14), however in her 2006 interview with McGrane, Krog reveals a desire “to access” and enter into “South African *English* literature” (emphasis added). Furthermore, she describes translation as “crucial for people in a country with such a divided, separated past to translate one another” (Krog in McGrane). In Krog’s 2008 lecture, beyond emphasizing translation’s important role as a social and political strategy, she focuses on the literary and linguistic advantages implicit in the progressing process of her poetic self-translation. She thus explains that although she “[i]nitially ... acted as a pure translator into English” who “stuck closely to the Afrikaans”

as my English improved through my working and functioning within a more or less English-speaking community, I became dissatisfied with the parts of the Afrikaans poems that did not work well in English, so I started to make changes. I rewrote, I used other rhymes, I started to make use of English poems and English echoes so that the translated poems often became new poems. I became more and more aware of the difference between translation and what was described as self-translation. (Krog, “In the Name”)

Through this developing process of self-translation, Krog started “to trust the creative instinct ... in a foreign language” and therefore “[her] ear, which [she] previously trusted only within Afrikaans, [she] started to trust more and more also in English” (Krog, “In the Name”). Self-translation, then, is the process of “making a new poem out of the old one” wherein “the second creative process bec[o]me[s] more important than staying faithful to the first” (Krog, “In the Name”).

In this lecture Krog gives the following account of her current poetic practices:

The poems I still write originally in Afrikaans. I cannot do otherwise. The poetic inner life comes to life only in my mother tongue. But then there is not enough time, or any good reason, to work and work on the poem until I am satisfied. So I would use this rough unfinished poem and begin to translate. I would work hard on the translation, but the solution to solving structural and content problems are now worked out directly in English. Afterwards I would sometimes translate that back into Afrikaans and then rechange the English, but more and more I find that I have captured something in English that I simply cannot find a good Afrikaans translation for, which means that for me the English poem is better than the Afrikaans one. (“In the Name”)

She names the poem “bronze bull of Lavigny”, one of the eight menopausal sonnets in *Body Bereft* (15), which is a translation of the Afrikaans “die blikbul van Lavigny” as an example of a pair of poems about which she “feels[s] that the English poem is better” (“In the Name”).³⁸ Whether or not we think that “bronze bull of Lavigny”, or “stripping” for that matter, is the better poem, what is incontestable is that Krog has used her considerable “skill and creativity” to enter new volumes of poetry into South African English Literature. And, by being a disloyal translator, recontextualizing and reconceptualizing her poems, she has transformed them into “new text[s]” that carry “new life” within them. As such, they could yield new insights for critics keen to examine them and could breathe new life into current literary-critical practices. In this thesis, they will invigorate an investigation of the complex intersections between confession, embodiment and ethics in contemporary South African poetry.

³⁸ In this lecture, Krog provocatively continues: “I am terrified of this [that the English poem is better than the Afrikaans one] because I do not know enough of English literature to be truly original in it. Yet how valid is it to battle to sound Afrikaans while one is beginning to think more and more in English anyway?”

CHAPTER ONE

Confessional Poetry

This chapter will argue that Antjie Krog and Joan Metelerkamp are confessional poets and that, as such, their work is endowed with a unique ethical potential, due to its demonstration of the relational model of identity and its enabling of reader-speaker identification and empathy. In order to do so, it will explore the historical and cultural concept and practice of confession, and present a definition of confessional poetry – both as a mode of lyric poetry and as the work of a specific school of poets working in the late 1950s and 1960s in the United States of America (US). It will discuss the historical context in which this school emerged, and then propose that there are significant parallels between the contextual emergence of this school and the context of South Africa in the 1990s and 2000s, which gave rise to an outpouring of confessional literature within which Krog’s and Metelerkamp’s poetry can be situated. Once Krog and Metelerkamp have been established as confessional poets, this chapter will explore the implications of that designation by examining, and responding to, typical critiques of confessional poetry, both in terms of the aesthetics and, more notably, the ethics of this mode.

Confession

Confession is deeply implicated in two powerful, and historically conjoined, institutions: the Church and the Law. In the fourth Lateran Council of 1215 the Christian (Roman Catholic) Church prescribed, for the first time, “annual confession and penance for the faithful” as an essential “condition for admission to Easter communion” (Gill, “Introduction” 5). The importance of such confessional acts was reiterated at the 1551 Council of Trent, where confession was decreed to be “necessary for one’s spiritual salvation” (Brooks 18). Even as the Reformation critiqued the practices and underpinning theology of the Roman Catholic Church, confession was nevertheless retained, in altered forms, in the emerging protestant churches (Gill, “Introduction” 5).

Prior to the separation of church and state, confession was a religious *and legal* foundational principle. In *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault describes how the “confessional [was given] a central role in the order of civil and religious powers” (58). The “codification of the sacrament of penance by the Lateran Council in 1215” was accompanied by

the declining importance of accusatory procedures in criminal justices, the abandonment of tests of guilt (sworn statements, duels, judgments of God) and the development of methods of interrogation and inquest, the increased participation of the royal administration in the prosecution of infractions, at the expense of proceedings leading to private settlements, the setting up of tribunals of Inquisition.... (Foucault 58)

With the rise of the secular state, the legal understanding of confession has been modified, though perhaps not as extensively as assumed. While there have been legal interventions “to regulate and police confessions ... the law still today – as in medieval times – tends to accept confession as the ‘queen of proofs’” (Brooks 3-4). The dangers of this are evident. As Foucault has demonstrated, “[s]ince the Middle Ages, torture has accompanied [confession] like a shadow”: when a confession “is not spontaneous or dictated by some internal imperative, the confession is wrung from a person by violence or threat; it is driven from its hiding place in the soul, or extracted from the body” (Foucault 59). That these “dark twins” of confession and torture have not been fully wrenched asunder by the dominant contemporary Western culture’s idealization of human rights can be seen not only in the highly-publicised instatement and defense of radical interrogation techniques post-9/11, but also in the methods of torture used by apartheid (and post-apartheid¹) police and ‘security’ personnel to obtain information and confessions from detainees. (For a chilling reminder, see Krog’s recounting, in *Country of My Skull*, of Jeffrey Benzien’s amnesty hearing [109-117].)

Implicit in both the religious and legal use of confession is a notion of the individual self as autonomous and responsible for both the sins and crimes that it has committed, and for its own spiritual and moral salvation. Confession requires an individual’s “acknowledgment of his [/her] own actions and thoughts” (Foucault 58). This entails

¹ Despite the 1998 South African Police Services’ Policy on the Prevention of Torture, torture during police interrogations still occurs. See Amanda Dissel, Steffen Jensen and Sandra Roberts’ “Torture in South Africa”, especially pages 19-23 which discuss confession-aimed torture in such widely-publicised 2000s cases as the airport heist and the baby Jordan murder.

not only an awareness of self, but, for Foucault, as Deborah Posel explains, it has also “played a central role in the *production* of a modern sense of self and its practices of individuation” (“Post-Apartheid” 8, own emphasis). An individual “was *authenticated* by the discourse of truth he was able or obliged to pronounce concerning himself” (Foucault 58, own emphasis). Through confession, an individual’s existence was verified; s/he was made real. Focusing on the “relations of power” in which the confessional “ritual of discourse” occurs (Foucault 60; 61), Foucault’s argument, as presented by Gill, is therefore that confession “is not the free expression of the self but an effect of an ordered regime by which the self begins to conceive of itself as individual, responsible, culpable and thereby confessional” (“Introduction” 4). The “obligation to confess” is an “effect of a power that constrains us” (Foucault 60). Foucault thus attests that “[t]he truthful confession was inscribed at the heart of the procedures of individualization by power” (58-9).

In the mid-twentieth century, with the popularization of Freudian psychoanalysis and its “talking cure”, another confession-based technology of the self was created. As in the religious and legal use of confession, articulation of one’s sins, secrets and shames was crucial for the healing of the soul, psyche and self. While participation in psychoanalysis is waning,² its emphasis on verbalization has spawned a tell-all culture, visible not only in the ubiquitous television and radio talk shows, but also in the more recent proliferation of blogs, social networking sites that often function as sites of self-exposure (for example, Facebook, Twitter), online confessional projects like “PostSecret” (www.postsecret.com), and, on a state rather than an individual level, in WikiLeaks (wikileaks.org). What these virulent modern technologies reveal is, despite concerns over the “death of privacy” (which grew fevered during the cold war period and have persisted as big brother tracking and surveillance systems – security cameras, telephone tapping, tracking through cellphones and through GPS devices in cars, data profiling, data mining, cloud data storage systems – have increased in number and sophistication with the advance of technology [Holtzman]), many societies believe that secrets damage the soul as well as the body, not only in terms of psychosomatic disorders, but also in the more common belief that bottling up

² In a 1999 paper, Joseph Masling attests: “The number of psychoanalytic patients apparently has been declining by 10% each year since 1979 (Jeffrey, 1998). Psychoanalysis is becoming marginalized in both academic life and clinical work, and the rate is accelerating.”

stress, tension or fear leads to medical conditions, such as high blood pressure, that cause heart attacks, which can be fatal. Containment kills. And, as tell-all talk shows routinely assert, secrets also kill relationships.

What all three key confessional institutions mentioned thus far have in common is the dialogic nature of the confessional act: priest and penitent (or God and sinner), police detective and criminal suspect/political antagonist (or judge and judged), analyst and analysand. Even in confessional texts that do not obviously arise in such dialogic contexts, such as an anonymous blog or Jean Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions*, the author is in dialogue with the reader. Thus, as Peter Brooks argues: "Confession implies a listener, however impersonal – an interlocutor to whom the confession is proffered" (95). Additionally, the relationship between the participants in the dialogue is not equal: clearly the priest has power over the penitent, the judge over the judged. Even when confession is not blatantly an effect of coercion, it nevertheless retains, within this very dialogic structure, evidence of the Foucauldian power relations that infuse it.

Confession can thus be read as a technique for the production of an individual, autonomous self which is brought into being through a dialogue with an (implied) unequivocal other. By extension, confession is not only emphasized as good for the self (or the soul or the psyche); it is also good for the self-in-society, and for society itself. Confession is not only about bringing one into a right relationship with God, or law-enforcement, or one's own psyche, but, through this, to bring about the societal rehabilitation of the self *and* of the society.

Nowhere is this clearer than in South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) use of confession in its nation-wide public (and broadcast on both radio³ and television) amnesty and human rights violations hearings, where confessions from both the perpetrators and victims of apartheid violence and violations were solicited. Susan VanZanten Gallagher asserts that "the ultimate goal

³ Krog not only witnessed the TRC proceedings, but, as a radio-journalist for the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), she also mediated the public's understanding of and engagement with the hearings. This role was greatly reinforced through the publication of *Country of My Skull*, which recounts Krog's experience of the hearings, and includes segments from the TRC transcripts. Through this text, Krog is positioned as a pivotal TRC archivist, scholar and interlocutor.

of [the TRC was] achieving national reconciliation through the public airing of truth” and that the “narrative that is produced through the TRC hearings is intended to produce a new national climate in which human rights will flourish, oppression is outlawed, and the democratic processes will encourage both diversity and unity” (132; 125). It thus advocated for the theory, succinctly expressed in its slogan, that “revealing is healing”. The TRC based its “project of ethical reconciliation” and, through this, the constitution of “the community of the nation” on the presupposition “of a shared humanity predicated on mutual recognition [in oral testimony] of damaging past, linked to the propensity for the transcendence of that damage” (Posel, “Post-Apartheid” 8). Just as confession constitutes the unified self, so too, the TRC proposed, can it constitute a unified society.

The TRC’s concept of confession, like that developed by Foucault, functions within, and as, a system of power. Although “the perpetrators’ confessions were not coerced”, only if they made a “full disclosure” would they be eligible to receive amnesty, and their testimony could not be used for a later prosecution (Gallagher 128). Similarly, not only the desire to have one’s mistreatment and suffering acknowledged, but also the hopes of receiving reparations, could be seen as an incentive to victims testifying at the human rights violations hearings. Additionally, the Christian symbolism and language of the TRC exerted socio-religious power over the proceedings, with the result that “[s]ome victims felt strong social pressure to practice Christian forgiveness” (Gallagher 118).⁴

There are, however, also differences between Foucault’s understanding of confession and that operating within the TRC. Foucault’s concept, though relational and dialogic, focuses on the production of autonomous individual identity, and, as a result of this, the production of an obedient (confessionally-constrained) society. The TRC’s concept of confession focuses on emphasizing and expanding the notion of relational, interdependent identity and through this the production of liberated, communal society.⁵ The TRC sacrificed individual justice for reparative, communal justice

⁴ This was certainly also exerted through the appointment of ‘men of the cloth’ to the position of chairperson (Archbishop Desmond Tutu) and deputy chairperson (Dr Alex Boraine) of the commission.

⁵ In *Begging to Be Black*, Krog refers to AC Jordan’s insistence that “the idea of community should include strangers. He said that interconnectedness is what occurs between the community and the stranger” (185-6). We are not only relationally-dependent on others who mirror ourselves, but on

(Gallagher 117-8). Although victims and perpetrators were clearly designated and divided, participating in two different types of hearings, the TRC nevertheless “incorporat[ed] both victims and perpetrators into the larger narrative in order to form a community” (Gallagher 125). The confessions of both victims and perpetrators were equally necessary in order to construct the narrative of apartheid evils, and to build a new community in which such evils could never recur. The TRC thus asserted that we *are* an interdependent community, and also worked to *emphasize* our interdependence.

The emphasis on interdependence, relational identity and community in the TRC’s concept of confession was grounded “in a syncretic blend of traditional African social values (*ubuntu*) and more traditional Christian teaching” (Gallagher 120). *Ubuntu* is the ancient southern African philosophy that “a person is a person through other persons” (Krog, *Country* 399). In *Country of My Skull*, Krog quotes Archbishop Desmond Tutu, chairperson of the TRC, saying: ““In the African *Weltanschauung* a person is not basically an independent, solitary entity. A person is a human precisely in being enveloped in the community of other human beings”” (165). The TRC did therefore not use confession to produce “independent, solitary” individuals (the autonomous ‘Self’ of Western philosophy), but, relying on the notion of communal, relational, interdependent identity, used confession to re-emphasize and extend notions of communal identity, across race- and class-lines, across the Apartheid borders of hate and fear.

Furthermore, while the TRC- and Foucauldian-notions of confession both rely on relations of power, one could argue that the TRC worked to invert the power hierarchy. As previously discussed, in the act of confession as described by Foucault, the listener has power over the speaker: the priest over the penitent, the judge over the judged. The TRC worked to reverse this. Gallagher relates that, in the human rights

Others, strangers. Apartheid South Africa was adept at creating strangers; for the new nation which the TRC aimed to construct, each separate community needed to embrace their strangers, include them into their community. Strangeness should not be eradicated. As Albie Sachs argued in 1989, “[i]t is important to distinguish between unity and uniformity”, the striving for national unity is “not a call for a homogenised South Africa with identikit citizens” (24). While the TRC aimed to produce a unified society, predicated on a shared memory that is created through shared testimony, the barriers of strangeness between different communities were not, and have not subsequently been, erased. We are a unity, a community, of strangers.

violations hearings, spectators were requested to stand “out of respect for the victims as they filed into the front of the room” and notes: “In most court settings, spectators rise for the judge; here the most honoured people present were the victims” (119). While many perpetrators appeared shamed and powerless (in Metelerkamp’s description: “reeking / of craven / cowardice, crouched / before the commission –” [Into 81]), the very fact that their confessions were relied upon to rewrite history, and so build a new nation, confers power on their confessions.

Confession is thus a historically and geographically situated activity. It is dialogic, ritualized and imbued with power differentials. However, while in the history of the Renaissance and the development of a modern Western subjectivity, it is understood as a mechanism which produces the autonomous self, in the recent South African context of the TRC, it is understood as a means of re-emphasizing and extending relational and communal subjectivity, which is underscored in the philosophy of *ubuntu*, in order to reconcile a nation, thereby constructing a new community. The TRC also provided the opportunity to invert the power-hierarchy of confession, empowering the conventionally disempowered speaker. Confessional poetry calls on similarly situated notions of confession. This chapter will argue that, in accordance with its historical and geographical context, the confessional poetry of Antjie Krog and Joan Metelerkamp – both of whom were, in different ways, watching and invested in the TRC process, as can be seen in their poetic (and prose) responses to it⁶ – engages more with the TRC’s understanding of confession, while also drawing on and responding to the confessional poetry of the 1950s and 1960s in the US.

The Confessional School of Poets: US in 1950s and 1960s

When speaking of confessional poetry, most critics refer to a specific *school* of confessional poets, living and working in the US in the 1950s and 1960s. The central members of this school are WD Snodgrass, Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath; though John Berryman, Theodore Roethke, Allen Ginsburg and Adrienne Rich

⁶ As previously noted, Krog was actively involved in the TRC process, working as a journalist for the SABC’s radio-coverage of the TRC, and has become its premier archivist and interlocutor with her renowned *Country of My Skull*. Her TRC-focused poetic cycle “country of grief and grace”, along with Metelerkamp’s poetic engagement with the “Truth Commission”, will be discussed at the close of this chapter.

are often linked to it as well. These poets are not only defined as a school based on the content and style of their work, but also, among the central members, on their close personal interaction. Lowell was Snodgrass's Iowa University teacher (as was Berryman) and also taught Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath at a writing seminar at Boston University, Sexton met Snodgrass at the Antioch Writer's conference and he became a friend and mentor. The work these poets were producing in the late 1950s and early 1960s was certainly read by, and influential for, the other members of this group. Though Lowell was Snodgrass's teacher, Snodgrass's first collection, *Heart's Needle*, can be seen to have direct bearing on the new style and content of Lowell's new poetry, evident in *Life Studies*. Sexton's "The Double Image" mirrors Snodgrass's long, titular poem "Heart's Needle", and Heather Cam has argued that Plath's famed "Daddy" "draws ... extensively upon [Sexton's poem] 'My Friend, My Friend'" which was published in the *Antioch Review* in 1959 (224).

That confessional poetry was considered innovative and exciting can be seen in the wealth of literary prizes awarded to its canonical texts. Snodgrass's *Heart's Needle*, arguably the first collection of confessional poetry, though it was his first book, won Snodgrass the prestigious Pulitzer Prize in 1959. In the same year Lowell published *Life Studies*, his first collection in eight years, which demonstrated a clear break from his previous work, and in 1960 it won the National Book Award for poetry. Sexton and Plath also both received Pulitzers: Sexton for *Live or Die* (1966), and Plath for her posthumous *The Collected Poems* (1981).

In order to define confessional poetry as a genre, certain distinguishing characteristics have been highlighted. Lawrence Lerner, in his 1987 article "What is Confessional Poetry", usefully describes three ways in which confessional poetry can be classified as such. Firstly, it is confessional as it has an autobiographical speaker. The almost-obligatory first person speaker "provides plenty of biographical detail, identifies the members of her family, states the time and place of many of the episodes, not attempting to disguise the fact that all these things happened to the poet-outside-the-poems" (Lerner 54). This feature is also emphasized by ML Rosenthal in his, arguably genre-defining⁷ review of *Life Studies*, "Poetry as Confession", where he

⁷ In this review, "confession" is first used as a description for a specific type of poetry (154-155).

states: “Lowell removes the mask [of ‘indirection’ in TS Eliot’s and Ezra Pound’s symbolist poetry that ‘masks the poet’s actual face and psyche from greedy eyes’]. His speaker is unequivocally himself” (154). Similarly, Robert Phillips’s groundbreaking monograph,⁸ stresses that a “true confessional poet places few barriers, if any, between his self and direct expression of that self” (8). AR Jones thus describes the speaker or persona of the confessional poem as “naked ego” (14).

But, beyond this repetition of established principles, Jones makes the important contribution of focusing specifically on “the impact [that] a *volume* of poems [has] ... as it is the complete volume which creates a distinct and homogenous world” (15; emphasis in original). Therefore, rather than the critic needing to attend to each factual detail given, and in light of biographical evidence, ascertain its autobiographical veracity, the critic can instead attend to the world created within the poetic volume, and if this world is discernibly homogenous, presented from a distinctive, consistently recognizable autobiographical speaker (in terms of more generally available biographical information), s/he can classify it as confessional. Consequently, while it would be difficult to label an individual poem as confessional, a confessional volume of poetry classifies itself.

The second of Lerner’s classificatory characteristics of confessional poetry depends on the type of subject matter, and thus the experiences to which the speaker confesses in her/his poem. Lerner describes these as of a “sordid, often degrading nature” (54). Although he asserts that the speaker “confesses to pain as well as joy”, there is an emphasis on experiences that “deprive [the speaker] of dignity” and cause her to be “ashamed” (54). This is a rather narrow definition that, while focusing on what is groundbreaking in confessional poetry (particularly of the work of the confessional school of poets⁹), would fail to recognize much of published confessional poetry. Robert Phillips’s more moderate yet expansive comment on subject matter can here serve as a healthy corrective. He argues that there are “no restrictions of subject matter. One writes as freely about one’s hernia as about one’s ‘hyacinth girl’. The

⁸ Phillips’s *The Confessional Poets* (1973) was “the first book-length attempt at examining ... confessional poetry” (xi).

⁹ Lowell, Snodgrass, Sexton and Plath wrote about such issues as mental illness and suicide attempts, the breakdown of marriages and families.

themes are more often than not domestic or intimate ones dealing with hitherto ‘unpoetic’ material” (Phillips 9).

Lerner’s third characteristic of confessional poetry is the “peculiar and disturbing intensity in the language [used], [its] attempt to render raw and disturbing experiences through ugly and disturbing images that do not always seem to be under control” (54). Phillips thus describes “the confessional [as] an antielegant mode whose candor extends even to the language in which the poems are cast ... [which] is that of ordinary speech” (9).

From this definition, some commentators have argued that, rather than crediting a specific school of poets with the development of the confessional poetic genre, the confessional mode has always been contained within lyric poetry. Lerner thus states that the confessional mode “was never wholly detached from [lyric poetry]” (66) and Phillips similarly asserts that the “confessional mode ... has always been with us [;] [i]t merely has not until recently been officially ‘named’” (4). In demonstrating the longevity of the confessional mode within lyric poetry, Lerner notes that “Sappho and Catallus certainly look like confessional poets” (48). Phillips concurs, demarcating a confessional tradition that extends through the work of “Sappho, Catallus, Augustine, Rousseau, Rilke, Baudelaire, Whitman ... Wyatt ... Pope ... Wordsworth ... Byron” (4). As more than half of these poets are firmly associated with romanticism, there are likely to be areas of overlap between confessional and romantic poetry.¹⁰ Certainly in all three of the characteristics Lerner ascribes to confessional poetry one is able to see a clear influence of romanticism.

William Wordsworth’s preface to his *Lyrical Ballads* is the foundational text when attempting to build a theory of English romantic poetry. In it, Wordsworth describes poetry as “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotions recollected in tranquility” (1392). The type of speaker, subject matter and language advocated for is strongly reminiscent of that of confessional poetry. He asserts that “the [romantic] poet speaks to us in his own person and character” and

¹⁰ Perhaps more specifically French, US and especially English romanticism, rather than German romanticism and idealism, though the philosophy and literature coming out of Germany in this period undoubtedly influenced the growth of romanticism in France, England and the US.

describes suitable poetic material as “incidents and situations from common life” which should then be “relate[d] or describe[d] ... in a selection of language really used by men” (Wordsworth 1392; 1383). Romantic poetry, like confessional poetry, thus emphasizes the humanity of real people, living their ordinary, everyday lives. In a quote which foreshadows the corporeal focus of much confessional poetry, in its attempts to foreground the truly human, Wordsworth declares that, in the writing of his poetry, “I have wished to keep my reader in the company of flesh and blood” (1386). (The poetic importance of “flesh and blood” will be thoroughly examined in the following chapter.) Alvarez therefore describes confessional poetry as “an extension of Romanticism in new terms” (12); Charles Molesworth more cynically labels it “a degraded branch of romanticism” (61). Wordsworth is repeatedly referred to as a founding father (Lerner 48, Phillips 3), as is Walt Whitman (Gray 223, Phillips 3, Kaplan 5).

Although Phillips and Lerner are in the minority in seeing the confessional poetry of the 1950s and 1960s as a seamless continuation of an already fully fleshed-out lyric mode,¹¹ their emphasis on the romantic poets, especially Wordsworth and Whitman, as important precursors to this mode is shared by most critics. These critics focus on the specific literary context of the 1950s and 1960s in the US, which is seen as a catalyst for this poetic mode. They see confessional poetry as a return to, and extension of, the principles and style of Romantic poetry, in order to revolt against New Criticism and the exemplary impersonal poetry of TS Eliot. (AR Jones seems to be fairly unique in regarding confessional poetry as an extension of the Eliotic mode [13-16], though Rosenthal also asserts that there is a shared “Romantic and modern[ist] tendency to place the literal Self more and more at the centre of the poem”, and thus sees confessional poetry as the “culmination” of the joint trajectory of two similar modes¹²).

¹¹ And despite this argument, Phillips only discusses poets from within the confessional school in his monograph about *The Confessional Poets* (his chapters explore the work of Lowell, Snodgrass, Sexton, Berryman, Roethke and Plath).

¹² This could be seen not only in their centralization of “the literal Self”, but also in terms of content, if one recalls Eliot’s assertion that “the business of the poet [is] to make poetry out of the unexplored resources of the unpoetical” (“Talk” 180).

In this argument, confessional poetry is seen as reacting to Eliot's "Impersonal theory of poetry" in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (53), in which Eliot rejects Wordsworth's principle of poetry as "emotion recollected in tranquility" [as] an inexact formula" and instead proposes that: "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality" (58). David Yezzi thus argues that "[m]ore than any other school, confessional poetry directly and vociferously opposed the 'impersonality' argued for by T.S. Eliot in his essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent'". Similarly, Phillips proposes that confessional poetry is "written in opposition to, or reaction from, the Eliotic aesthetic" and "confessional poetry is an expression of personality rather than an escape from it" (3; 9). While modernism tried to escape personality, emotion, and thus humanity itself, romanticism and confessional poetry focus on emotion and full humanity. The "'modernist' techniques ... produce[d] a dehumanized art" but "[t]he confessional poets, at the risk of all else, return that which is uniquely human to poetry" (Phillips 10).

Although this literary-critical context is essential to the development and understanding of the confessional school of poetry, most critics argue that what is of pivotal importance is the socio-economic and political context of the 1950s and 1960s in the US. Deborah Nelson, Richard Gray, Alvarez and Phillips, among others, have examined the ways in which confessional poetry was formed by its historical context and as a response to this context. They all focus on the conclusion of the Second World War (WWII) and its impact on US economy and politics. This importance is signaled by both the title of Rosenthal's book examining confessional poetry, *The New Poets: American and British Poetry Since World War II*, and Gray's chapter on confessional poetry in his *American Poetry of the Twentieth Century*, entitled "Formalists and Confessionals: American Poetry Since the Second World War". What these titles indicate is not just the temporal location of the confessional movement, but rather the contextual catalyst for this movement. The United States's rapid armament production, late entry into the conflict, geographical remove from the war-zones and dramatic resolution of the hostilities had significant consequences. Despite the ravages of the Great Depression in the preceding decades, the US now became "[t]he only nation to emerge from WWII with its manufacturing plant intact and economy strengthened" and with a "per capita income ... [of] twice that of Britain, three times

that of France, six times that of Germany, and seven times that of Russia” (Gray 214-215). It was “the society of abundance” (Gray 215). Driving this economy was rampant consumerism, especially of newly-affordable (for middle class buyers), mass produced household appliances like vacuum cleaners, automatic washing machines, refrigerators and television sets. The 1950s also saw a rapid growth of the automobile industry (Avner Offer calls it “The American Automobile Frenzy of the 1950s” [315]) and the concomitant rise of suburban living.

The confessional poets’ responses to consumerism are easily identifiable. Sexton’s “Self in 1958” explores the life of a housewife in a consumer culture. Focusing on the appliances in her “all electric-kitchen” and her “plaster doll” appearance, with its “nylon legs” in “some advertised clothes”, Sexton discusses the lack of “reality” in this lifestyle, where a housewife is a “synthetic doll”, a “counterfeit”, an “approximat[ion] [of] an I”, and is reduced to a purchasable object of consumer culture (155). Lowell’s *Life Studies*, especially, with its references to such items as “an L.L Bean / catalogue” and a “Tudor Ford” can be viewed as a poetry of things (*Selected* 61-2).¹³

Alongside this economic strengthening, the end of WWII also left the US in a position of political power. Prior to the war, the US was dominated by domestic concerns, but through its production and supply of armaments, entry into the war and its development and devastating use of atomic bombs, it became “a global superpower, committed to the international arena” (Gray 214). As a result, the US spent decades engaged in a cold war¹⁴ with the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and her communist allies and satellite states. Through the incredible post-depression economic growth demonstrated by the US, “it had come to stand for the ‘American’ way of capitalism, individualism, and the open-market: opposed in every respect to the ‘Russian’ or ‘Communist’ way of collectivism and the organized economy” (Gray

¹³ Bill Brown’s “Thing Theory” is suggestive here in its discussion of how “[t]he story of objects asserting themselves as things ... [is] the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation” (4): the questions of thing theory “ask less about the material effects of ideas and ideology than about the ideological and ideational effects of the material world and of transformations of it. They are questions that ask not whether things are but what work they perform – questions, in fact, not about things themselves but about the subject-object relation in particular temporal and spatial contexts” (7).

¹⁴ This lower case method of referring to the ‘Cold War’ is borrowed from Nelson’s *Pursuing Privacy in Cold War America*, which has been foundational in the construction of this section of my argument.

214). But beyond these ideological differences, the threat of nuclear extermination, as the USSR had now developed atomic weapons of its own, kept these superpowers locked in tension (as was most aptly-demonstrated by the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962).

However, much of this political activity (the development and deployment of atomic bombs, the unpopular participation in wars in Korea and Vietnam, as well as the cold war itself and the McCarthy ‘witch-hunts’) served to alienate citizens. As a result of a distrust of politics and the threat of nuclear war, some poetry became more inward looking. Alvarez argues that due to a

total revulsion from ideology ... the average citizen tends to maintain a strictly agnostic attitude towards his government; he may believe in the parliamentary processes but not in political ideals. Correspondingly when writers turn to political themes ... the politics they promote are those of privacy and protest. Against the bland and impervious clichés of the professional politicians, they set the personal gesture, though a personal gesture made in as public a manner as possible. (8)

An example of this can be seen in Anne Sexton’s reading of “Little girl, my stringbean, my lovely woman”, her tender celebration of her daughter’s adolescence, at an anti-Vietnam read-in, in contrast to male poets reading their ‘big’ political condemnations (Middlebrook, *Anne* 296). Adrienne Rich noted that although this reading seemed “‘out of kilter with the occasion’”, Sexton’s poem is “‘about life and surviving’”, and thus it was neither politically apathetic nor complicit in the state’s violence, but instead demonstrated, through the personal, what was politically at stake, and therefore was “‘completely the right thing’” to interject at this moment (in Middlebrook, *Anne* 296).

As Nelson argues, during the cold war, along with ‘American’ capitalism, individualism and the open-market, “the sanctity of the private sphere was generally perceived to be the most significant point of contrast between the two regimes” (xviii). Though privacy could also be found in “the automobile, the phone booth, even on the street”, it was the “single family home” that was seen as the bastion of privacy in the ‘American’ way of life, and thus “the cold war [had an] intense focus on the home as a symbol of democratic liberty” (Nelson xiv). However, in order to protect and defend this democratic liberty and retain the sanctity of privacy, this privacy

needed to be vigilantly monitored for infiltration and abuse by communist forces. Therefore, “the cold war’s governing paradox [was that] in the interests of preserving the space of privacy, privacy would have to be penetrated” (Nelson xiii). This “ambivalence of privacy”, that privacy needed to be protected at all costs, but that this could only be done by destroying it, seeped through US cold war society, providing a fertile soil for the growth of confessional poetry, as will be discussed shortly.

Underpinning much of this ambivalence was McCarthyism, named after Joseph McCarthy. McCarthy, “a young senator from Wisconsin [with] a self-appointed mission to wage war on anything he saw as communist subversion” who “play[ed] on popular anxieties about the growing power of Russia and the possible presence of an ‘enemy within’”, launched “a modern-day witch hunt” in which “many people were sacked from their jobs and blacklisted on the mere suspicion of belonging to the Communist Party” (Gray 216). These ‘suspects’ were then pressured to confess to their communist crimes. In order to protect US privacy, individualism and capitalism, US citizens were co-opted to ferret out the ‘enemy within’ by infiltrating the privacy of their neighbours, colleagues, family members. And many did so, driven by anxiety, fear and paranoia (Gray 216).

Although the US was, post-WWII, the most powerful nation, economically and politically a “society of abundance”, “[a]bundance breeds its own anxieties, not least the fear of losing the comforts one enjoys” (Gray 215-6). This anxiety¹⁵ was exploited by McCarthyism. With the knowledge that the USSR had developed nuclear weapons of its own, McCarthyism was not just a marginal mania – paranoia about the ‘Red Scare’ was expressed by both President Eisenhower and his vice-president, Richard Nixon (Gray 217). According to Gray, the Red Scare “was a clear symptom of the uneasiness, the nightmarish fears that haunted Americans at the time, despite their apparent satisfaction with themselves. There was abundance and some complacency, certainly, but there was also a scarcely repressed imagination of disaster, fueled by the threat of nuclear war” (217). With the dropping of the atomic bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the US not only dramatically concluded WWII, but also “released strange and terrible forces”, which, in the fear-ridden fifties, became a “potent symbol

¹⁵ Expressed, for example, “in a series of ‘invaders from space’ movies that uncovered a dark vein of public paranoia about the possible arrival of hostile forces” (Gray 216).

for the destructive potential of the new society; the dark side of those forces that had created apparently limitless wealth” (Gray 216-7). If one party of the cold war stand-off slipped, global destruction seemed all too possible.

In *Pursuing Privacy in Cold War America*, Nelson focuses specifically on the relation between confessional poetry and the cold war in their constructions of, and challenges to, notions of privacy. Nelson argues that the significance of the confessional poets is “their exposure of limitations of lyric autonomy and constitutional sovereignty”, which were valued and protected as limitless ideals by cold war principles of containment (xviii). While American lawmakers of the cold war period attempted to reify and govern privacy as an essential democratic liberty, confessional “poetry offer[ed] the space for contradiction and ambiguity, of improvisation and paradox that privacy depends on” (Nelson xx). Confessional poetry’s abiding interest in, and exposure of, that which is most private can thus be read as a direct response to the crisis of privacy in America sparked by the cold war. By surfacing one’s own secrets, controlling the manner in which they are brought to light, one prevents a McCarthyist ferreting them out. Due to the growing interest in “surface reading”, as opposed to earlier Marxist or psychoanalytic “symptomatic reading”, in contemporary literary criticism (see Sarah Nuttall, “The Rise of the Surface” and Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, “Surface Reading: An Introduction”), confessional poetry, with its superficial exposure of that which is most private, that which has to be artfully mined by labouring literary critics in other modes, could become an exemplary genre.

Furthermore, while cold war rhetoric idealized the home as a safe haven in a world under threat of nuclear war and communist infiltration, confessional poetry, particularly by its female representatives like “Sexton, Plath, and Rich undermined the assumptions about the privacy of the home, its sanctuary from surveillance, and its nourishment of individual autonomy” by “provid[ing] evidence that the threat was no longer just ‘out there’, it was also ‘in here’, and its very containment was making the home unfit for its political purpose” (Nelson 77). Plath’s “Lesbos”, for example, from its opening line – “Viciousness in the kitchen!” – explores the threat and theatricality claustrophobically contained in the domestic space (227). The kitchen is “all Hollywood” with “[s]tage curtains”, but it is permeated with the “stink of fat and baby crap” and “the smog of cooking [that is] the smog of hell”, from which the housewife,

“peer[ing] from the door” cannot escape; rather her “cute décor / Close[s] on [her] like the fist of a baby” (Plath 227-9). Sexton also explores the confining commitment many cold war wives made to their homes (in “Housewife” she states: “Some women marry houses” [77]), as well as the lack of agency and autonomy experienced by these wives. In “Self in 1958” this is described as “liv[ing] in a doll’s house” where “[s]omeone plays with [one]” (155).¹⁶

There is thus a specific gendered dimension to many of these contextual factors. While, during WWII, many women entered the work place to bolster the economy, post-war they were cajoled back into their homes in order both to create employment for the returning war veterans, and to shore up the ideal of the family home “as a symbol of democratic liberty” and a “symbolic bunker” promising a safe refuge from the “fears of communist infiltration” and nuclear war (Nelson xiv; 76). As Nelson has argued: “the privacy crisis of the cold war was a metaphor for the crisis of masculine self-sovereignty” as the

cold war containment metaphor was not simply an expression of foreign policy, or domestic ideology, but a figure for the impossible coherence of masculine autonomy. The power and mobility of this metaphor of containment were equal only to the power and elasticity of the metaphor of intrusion – the enemy within – which conveyed the uncanny experience of finding one’s borders already violated. The impossible purity of the internal space meant the perpetual breakdown and failure of the containment project. (xvii; xviii)

Cold war rhetoric associated women with the home, due to their provision of maternal and domestic safety, and thus used women and the home as symbols of containment and privacy. But, as many women’s corporeal borders are frequently violated (through penetrative sex or pregnancy) and as containment is clearly a myth women cannot believe in (with their leaky, secreting, menstruating, lactating bodies), Nelson argues that “masculinity is to privacy as femininity is to exposure” (vxiii). The discourse of the cold war, with its emphasis on autonomy, privacy and containment, is thus gendered, and confessional poetry can be seen as presenting other forms of gendered discourse capable of revealing the tension and ambiguities within it.

¹⁶ The feminist critique in the depiction of woman as doll is prevalent not only in Sexton’s “Self in 1958” – the speaker is “a plaster doll”, a “synthetic doll” – but also in Plath’s satirical “The Applicant”, where a woman is described as “a hand / To fill [a man’s ‘[e]mpty’ hand] and willing / To bring teacups and roll away headaches / And do whatever you tell it”, who is “Naked as paper to start / But in twenty-five years she’ll be silver, / In fifty, gold. / A living doll, everywhere you look. / It can sew, it can cook, / It can talk, talk, talk” (221-2).

Despite the fact that the first two published practitioners of confessional poetry were men (Lowell and Snodgrass), some commentators have therefore defined this mode as distinctly feminine (Gammel in Gill, "Introduction" 6). Certainly for Nelson, in so far as femininity is aligned with exposure that disrupts the masculine fantasy of containment, confessional poetry, which "imagines ways in which privacy can be obtained or conserved in disclosure", is thus also aligned with "the feminizing of citizenship [that] does not eradicate the possibility of privacy but instead offers an escape from the anxious spaces that must continually be shored up, be they homes, nations, or bodies" (xviii).

What had enabled the international threat of nuclear extermination was the shift from Newtonian to Einsteinian physics, a development which in itself could be seen as causing anxiety. This shift was from "the neat, logical, rather formal world of Newtonian science", with its clear laws that even the layperson can understand and which produce an orderly and predictable view of the physical world, to the "complex and variable" Einsteinian model, unintelligible to the layperson, which produces a view of the physical world as "relative, unpredictable, provisional" (Alvarez 10). As Alvarez argues, "[s]cience and reason, in short, no longer offer a tidy, impersonal world as a consoling alternative to chaos. Instead, they seem merely like the private world writ large – shifting and confusing" (11).

During the 1950s in the US, this confusing, private world was increasingly explored through the popularization of Freudian psychoanalysis, as well as the more general increase in participation in psychotherapy. Just as Einsteinian physics had exposed the chaos of the physical world, Freudian psychoanalysis exposed the chaos of the psyche, thus expanding still further the scope for fear and anxiety in this era. Like the cold war itself, psychoanalysis is concerned with the ambivalence of privacy. In order for the private individual to be both successful in society and safe from the 'enemy within',¹⁷ s/he needs to allow the analyst to infringe on her/his privacy by exposing her/his most private memories, impulses, humiliations and dreams. And all this is revealed in the privacy of the analyst's office, the analysand prone on the

¹⁷ If one extends the analogy with McCarthyism, the 'enemy within' could, perhaps contentiously, be viewed as the unconscious, which psychoanalysis attempted to spy on through the dreams, impulses, linguistic slips and psychosomatic symptoms it created, if not interrogating it more overtly through hypnosis.

stereotypical couch, which can be seen as a potent symbol of that most intimate space, the marital bed, within the revered privacy of the family home. Lastly, psychoanalysis became yet another consumer product for the (aspirant) successful individual of the society of abundance. Just as the middle (and upper) classes could purchase electric appliances to clean their homes, so too could they buy therapy to clean their psyches.

While the pervasive use of the speaking 'I' could be seen as appropriate to the cold war era's emphasis on individualism and autonomy, the way in which confessional poetry used the 'I' more often revealed its limits, complexities and ambiguities. In this, it can easily be associated with popularization of psychoanalysis. It shares psychoanalysis's focus on the individual self and similarly demonstrates how this self is fractured and vulnerable. Much of confessional poetry draws on the principles of Freudian dream analysis, and uses a similar language of condensation, displacement and substitution. With its intimate revelations and exposure of privacy, it mimics the psychotherapeutic encounter in style, content and form. The poems often read as if they are addressed to an analyst (and, of course, some of them, like Sexton's "You, Doctor Martin" or "Said the poet to the Analyst", literally are [3-4; 12-13]). Confessional poetry, just like psychoanalysis, uses a symbolic, "associative logic" to reveal problematic, repressed material (Yezzi). Sexton first wrote poetry as a therapeutic exercise at the behest of her doctor and Rosenthal has described confessional poetry as "soul's therapy" ("Poetry as Confession" 154).¹⁸ Plath's description of "Daddy" as poem about "a girl with an Electra complex" [in Rosenthal, *New* 82] and her titling another poem "Electra on Azalea Path" [116-7]) also shows clear familiarity with and reliance on psychoanalytic terminology. This relationship between confessional poetry and psychoanalytic therapy is commonly accepted by many critics in their references to the "reader as ... therapist" (Gray 223), the poem's speaker as "adopt[ing] the attitudes of a patient on the analyst's couch" (Jones 14), and the poem's "subject-matter ... [as] the kind of material that is dug up in psychoanalysis" (Alvarez 14).

¹⁸ Sexton does, however, also problematise the notion of poetry as psychoanalysis and (poetic) language as a cure. In a 1970 interview she asserts: "I haven't forgiven my father. I just wrote that I did" (in Gill, "Anne Sexton and Confessional Poetics" 427). Confessional poetry is thus rather a search for understanding, explanation, not a successful "cure".

Along with an increased participation in psychoanalysis, the 1950s saw a rapid growth in the field of psychiatry, particularly in the development and refinement of chemical tranquilisers. As Lowell noted, “[t]hese are the tranquilised fifties” (*Selected Poems* 50) and many Americans paid for that privilege – and still do.¹⁹ With drugs like Miltown and later Valium, to name two of the most famous examples, anxiety became just another market opportunity for manufacturers. Mental health could be bought, with drugs as well as therapy. Moreover, these drugs were squarely marketed in the popular press to middle class housewives (as “mother’s little helpers”), just like the new, “all-electric” consumer appliances (Metzl 243). This marketing exposed the cracked façade of the safe family home and its happy housewives.

The popularization of tranquilisers and other psychotherapeutic drugs during this context is overtly referred to in the subject matter of much confessional poetry. Plath’s oeuvre contains a poem about “Thalidomide”²⁰ (252), as well as, in “The Jailer”, a reference to “[m]y sleeping capsule, my red and blue zeppelin” (226). In Sexton’s “Lullaby” she writes: “my sleeping pill is white. / It is a splendid pearl; it floats me out of myself” (29), and in “The Addict” she describes herself as a “[s]leepmonger, / deathmonger, / with eight capsules in my palms each night, / eight at a time from sweet pharmaceutical bottles / I make arrangements for the pint-sized journey”. Similarly, Lowell’s “Man and Wife” opens with the line: “Tamed by Miltown, we lie on Mother’s bed” (52). In addition to these overt references, critics have also suggested that the tone of confessional poetry is a response to “the tranquilized fifties”. Molesworth, for example, argues that “a somnambulistic strain drifts through the tones of the confessional poet. This finds its fullest expression in Sylvia Plath ... where the voice of narcotic numbness mixes with a state of slow-motion hallucination in poems like ‘Tulips’ and ‘Yew Trees’” (62).

The emergence of a confessional school of poets can thus be seen as a response to the specific socio-economic and political context of 1950s and 1960s in the US: post-WWII consumerism-driven economic growth; international political involvement in

¹⁹ “By 1957 ‘the number of prescriptions written for [tranquillisers like Miltown] totaled 35 million” (Metzl 241) and by 2004 global sales of antidepressants equaled 20,3 billion US dollars, and antipsychotics equaled 14,1 billion US dollars (Salaman).

²⁰ Thalidomide was first used as a sedative or tranquiliser, in addition to its more famously harmful use as an antiemetic for pregnant women suffering from morning sickness.

the nuclear-fueled cold war and the domestic repercussions of this, such as McCarthyism, policies of containment and the (gendered-dimensions of the) paradox of privacy, particularly in the private family home; and the increased participation in psychoanalysis and use of psychiatric chemical tranquilizers. This school's work responded to this context by drawing on principles and techniques of romanticism, in rejection of the contemporary New Critical approach, to develop a particular subgenre of lyrical poetry that can be defined as confessional by reference to its speaker (and the speaker's presentation and positioning in coherent world created within a volume of poetry), subject matter and language usage.

Krog and Metelerkamp as Confessional Poets: South Africa in 1990s and 2000s

Using this definition of confessional poetry, which draws heavily on Lerner's three criteria for this mode, this section will argue that Krog and Metelerkamp are confessional poets. Firstly, their poetry can be classified as confessional due to the presence of an autobiographical speaker who provides biographical information that enables one to connect the speaker to the author outside of the poem. As an obvious starting point, both Krog and Metelerkamp have poems where the speaker shares the poet's name. In Metelerkamp's long poetic cycle, *carrying the fire*, the speaker is named "Joan" ("and you are crying / joanie joanie like I am the tenderest" [87], "why is the moon, / asks my niece, where, Joan? She sits on my lap / ... / where is the moon going Joan?" [93]). In *Stone No More*, Metelerkamp writes about her grandmother "Joan" (2), "Joan Rose-Innes Findlay" (31), the relative "for [whom she was] named" (1). Similarly, Krog uses her own name in the poems "nightmare of A Samuel born Krog" and "Demonstration lecture" ("Mrs A. Samuel") (*Down* 49; 90). One could argue that, as Metelerkamp is only giving her first name in these poems, the speaker, "Joan", is not completely identical with the poet, "Joan Metelerkamp". However, by only providing her personal name, Metelerkamp asserts an intimate relationship with the reader, a hallmark of confessional poetry. Similarly, the fact that Krog uses not only the name under which her literary work is published (her maiden name, Krog), but also her married name, Samuel, which is used outside of her life as a published author, strongly connects the speaker to the author *and* her personal and non-literary life beyond the confines of the poem.

Other than the usage of their own names, Metelerkamp's and Krog's poems also contain copious autobiographical references. In my MA I discussed some of these references in Metelerkamp's oeuvre, highlighting the connections in her poetic dedications and prefacing acknowledgments, in *Stone No More* and *carrying the fire*, between the experiences described in the poems and her life outside of the poems.²¹ I also explore the autobiographical references in her poems to her academic and poetic careers, including the critical reception of her poetry, through which Metelerkamp overtly connects her poems with her experiential world beyond them.²²

While the MA noted the autobiographical references in individual poems, this study extends this first point²³ by arguing, using Jones' insights as previously noted, that Metelerkamp writes confessional *volumes* of poetry. While this is self-evident in her long cycle collections (*requiem*, focusing on her mother's suicide; *carrying the fire*, focusing on an extra-marital affair in the wake of – or possibly as an attempt to wake from – her mother's suicide and the practical and symbolic repercussions of this affair), it is no less evident in her earlier, more traditional volumes consisting of discrete poems (*Towing the Line* and *Stone No More*). For example, in *Stone No More* there are repeated references to her grandmother's suicide ("At the centre you sit" and

²¹ More specifically, I note: "[I]n *carrying the fire*, underneath the copyright details, the author, Joan Metelerkamp, thanks 'the Swiss Arts Council, and the Ledig-Rowohl Foundation committee, for their generous gift of a writer's residency at the Chateau de Lavigny in June 2002 where this work began'. In the first nine pages of the collection, Metelerkamp describes herself living in a Swiss village close to Lac Lemman ([or Lake Geneva, on the banks of which] the Chateau de Lavigny is situated) in June, writing poetry and attending readings (*carrying* 11-19). Concluding this first section, the speaker ... thanks the 'Chateau de Lavigny', saying that it 'ha[s] brought [her] a dream' (*carrying* 19). The reader is therefore encouraged to read the author and narrator-protagonist as identical. Similarly, in *Stone No More*, the author dedicates the first poem in the collection to '[her] grandmother who committed suicide in 1951' (3), while the protagonist-narrator speaks 'In memory of Joan / Rose-Innes Findlay' (24) who 'shot herself' 'a month after [the South African Communist Party's] listing' (28). Again, the connection between poet and speaker is ... asserted." (Weyer 9-10)

²² I trace the "references to her MA thesis on Ruth Miller (*Towing* 93, 120), her work as an academic (*Towing* 97-100, *Stone* 6-8), and as a poet [which] occur in almost every poem. Particularly interesting amongst these is the speaker's self-effacing comment, in *carrying the fire*, that only 'eight people in the whole of Pretoria / come to the reading' (85). The speaker-poet is thus commenting on the *reception* of her poetry, on her activity as a poet beyond the confines of her written collections. Similarly, in her interview with McGrane, Metelerkamp confesses that 'there was a lot of opposition from all sorts of people [to her publication of *carrying the fire*]' and that her 'friends' felt that she 'should never have written it, let alone published it' (7, emphasis in original). Her voice and the sentiment it expresses is here identical to that of the speaker in the final, prose section of *carrying the fire*, who confesses that her 'friends' were 'shocked' by her recent work and wanted her to 'leave [this work] for posthumous [publication]' (105). (Weyer 10)

²³ As noted in the introduction, this was the only point about Metelerkamp's confessional poetic practice that was presented in my MA (identifiably confessional subject matter and language are ignored); the rest of this section thus presents a significantly developed understanding of Metelerkamp's poetry as confessional to that presented in the MA.

“Joan”) and to her particular, contextualised poetic practices (“Self/Critic”, “After the interview”, “Joan”, “Portrait”, “Letter”, “Kissing the rod”, “Sitting at home”).

Similarly, while Krog’s *Body Bereft* is self-evidently a confessional *volume* (with its consistent autobiographical speaker, its coherent focus on ageing, menopause and mortality, its use of journal-form dated entries in “Four seasonal observations of Table Mountain”), so too is *Down to My Last Skin*. Although the latter is a selection of English translations drawn from Krog’s entire oeuvre of published Afrikaans volumes until *Kleur Kom Nooit Alleen Nie* [Colour Never Comes Alone] (2000), it nevertheless has a strong autobiographical impact. Starting with the section of dated “First Poems” (1969-1971) we see the teenage Krog coming of age and in “Love is All I Know”, “Dear Child of the Lean Flank” and “To Breathe” we see Krog as wife, mother and poet, respectively. In these sections the reader is presented with a coherent world with clearly identifiable characters (Jones’ definition). This can be clearly seen, for example, in “Love is All I Know”, where there is a consistently recognisable speaker as wife-stay-at-home-mother-poet and the addressee as blue-eyed-husband-father-architect. On the “Monday morning” described in “ode to a perfect match”, the speaker decides to

abandon the housekeeping
to write you an ode

where you sit behind your drawing board
eyes narrowed in a dunhill spiral
with the isometric projection of St Paul’s Cathedral
and a nursery school drawing on the wall

which strongly recalls the description of the husband in the previous poem as sitting “with art book cigarette and wine” (*Down* 22; 21). His eyes are variously described in these poems as “a mean / messy blue” (“sonnet (I will always remember)”, “napkin blue eyes” (“salad”), eyes that are “after all these years still acrimoniously blue” (“ode to a perfect match”) (*Down* 26; 23; 22). Through the consistency of these repeated references a confessional context is created.

While the sections “The House of Sweets” and “Living the Landscape” serve to collect Krog’s political and landscape poems, these poems remain confessional: they

examine Krog's relationship with particular South African landscapes and her interrogation of and participation in particular South African political situations. While in the section "Lady Anne", which contains poems from Krog's Afrikaans volume of the same name, Lady Anne Barnard²⁴ is frequently the speaker, Lady Anne's voice combines with, and is ultimately overpowered by, Krog's. This is evident in Krog's stated aim in these poems:

I wanted to live a second life through you
 Lady Anne Barnard – show it is possible
 to hone the truth by pen
 to live an honourable life in an era of horror (*Down* 73).

Lady Anne is therefore merely "a metaphor" for a woman writer, Krog herself,²⁵ being truthful and honourable in "an era of horror" – and clearly this era is as much South Africa in its 1980s State of Emergency when Krog's Afrikaans volume was written as it is the colonial Cape of Good Hope at the close of the eighteenth century (*Down* 73). Certainly, in the final poem of the section "Lady Anne", Krog's speech, its rhythms, diction and reflection of her sense of the body, eclipse that of Lady Anne (*Down* 80). It is Krog who declares: "I am down / to my last skin", and then uses this declaration as the title of her collected poetic works for English readers.

As well as being confessional in terms of having an autobiographical speaker and presenting verifiable biographical details, Metelerkamp's and Krog's poetry can also be judged confessional due to its subject matter. In Krog's "God, Death, Love" she asserts her preference for subjects like "menstruation, childbirth, menopause, puberty / marriage" as opposed to those traditionally sanctioned "Important Themes in Literature" like "God, Death, Love, Loneliness, Man" (*Body* 20). Similarly in "toilet poem" she demonstrates an awareness of the borders of conventional poetic subject matter, yet this does not preclude her poetic explorations of the unpoetic: "things of course about which one would never write a poem / force their way into the territory of poetic themes / such as changing tampon and pad to pee in toilets / of townships"

²⁴ Lady Anne Barnard, a Scottish artist and writer, was married to the secretary of the Cape of Good Hope and spent five years, from 1797-1802 in Cape Town, living in the Castle for much of that time, where she frequently served as hostess at various social gatherings. See Barnard (*Cape Diaries; South Africa a Century Ago*) for collections of her journals and letters from her time in the Cape.

²⁵ While Krog uses Lady Anne as a substitute or metaphor, in *Floating Islands*, Metelerkamp uses an alternative Freudian dream-language technique of splitting or dispersal. All three characters in the collection (Amanda, Karen and Maggie) can be seen as representing different aspects of Metelerkamp herself (see Weyer 12).

(*Down* 54). Krog's oeuvre is notable for expanding, or possibly exploding, the conventionally corralled territory of "poetic themes". *Body Bereft*, particularly, with its detailed exploration of menopause and ageing, can be seen as trampling down the territorial (and defensive) fences.²⁶

Metelerkamp's *carrying the fire* performs similar work in aid of the sexualized ageing body. This transgressive body and subject is poetically engaged with, transgressing the borders of poetic propriety:

and how I come :
 your cock down my throat like a snake
 could not have been dreamt

by any adolescent :
 old snake of a woman's
 wide open throat

past childbirth past propriety (*carrying* 86).

Additionally, Metelerkamp's poetry about her mother's and grandmother's suicides, especially in *requiem*, but also explored in *carrying the fire*, *Into the day breaking* and *Stone No More*, can be seen as linking to the typical subject matter of the confessional school of poetry, particularly in the work of Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath.

While the subjects of Metelerkamp's and Krog's poetry are independently confessional, there are very notable correlations in their chosen topics. There is a clear mirroring in the following sets of titles: "birth" (Krog, *Down*) and "Birth Poem" (Metelerkamp, *Towing*); "ma" (Krog, *Down*) and "Poem for my mother" (Metelerkamp, *Stone No More*); "Marital song 1" (and "-2" and "-3") (Krog, *Body*) and "Song of marriage" (Metelerkamp, *Into*). The titles and topics of these poems, which are typical of their oeuvres, show a marked preference for the "domestic or intimate" subjects which Phillips views as predominant in the confessional genre (9).

Lastly, to continue with the previously developed definition of confessional poetry, Metelerkamp's and Krog's poetry can be judged confessional for the type of language

²⁶ See especially the forthright "seven [or eight, if one includes 'God, Death, Love', which seems apt] menopausal sonnets" – such as "sonnet of the hot flushes" – and the poems "when tight is loose" and "it is true" (*Body* 13-20; 23-24; 12).

it uses. Metelerkamp's poetic project in *Into the day breaking* is to build poetry from words "like *make, / do*, in place of / epiphany –" (15; emphasis in original), reminding one of the "ordinary speech" which is characteristic of confessional poetry (Phillips 9). The timbre of this "antielegant mode" is exemplified in Krog's "how and with what": "I dig rennets from the sink sieve / oats and rinds burp into the drain outside the window / the nappy liners are being stunk out into the toilet" (*Down* 36). Krog's work also evidences a reliance on "ugly and disturbing images" (Lerner 54), seen for example in "In transit – a cycle of the early nineties":

the generals and brigadiers and ministers
and headmen-generals sit cuddling their cocks
plaiting their penises
trashing a whole country with the alternating faeces
of politics and violence (*Down* 107).²⁷

The language of confessional poetry, like its subject matter, is transgressive. Just as barriers must be broken down in terms of thematic propriety, so too must they be broken down in terms of linguistic propriety. Metelerkamp's *carrying the fire* can be seen as giving the rallying cry of confessional linguistic practices:

take back those words

banished, punished :

open them : undefiled them :

old words, old as the earth, for growth,

fuck cock cunt (17; emphasis in original).

The frequent usage of vulgarities is an attempt to open the boundaries of poetic language, to enable poetry to grow, unconstrained by the hegemony of High Art. And just as the confessional broadening of appropriate subjects allows poetry to reclaim its full humanity, by engaging with a wider range of human experiences, so too does the expansion of appropriate language. Confessional poetry responds to the "dehumanized art" produced by "modernist techniques" by rehumanizing poetry, by reinhabiting poetry with people: their language, their experiences, their real (autobiographical) identities (Phillips 10).

²⁷ This kind of political grotesque imagery is not, however, unique to confessional poetry.

In terms of language, subject matter and speaker, Krog's and Metelerkamp's poetry can thus be classified as confessional. But are they part of a new confessional movement, emerging in response to a particular historical context? And if so, what contextually enabled this trend? South Africa in the 1990s corresponds only in vague, generalised ways to the US of the 1950s,²⁸ so an argument that attempts to draw strong parallels between these contexts is unconvincing. Instead, a closer examination of the particular context of South Africa in the 1990s is required.

Many key commentators of the transition to democracy have noted the concurrent emergence of a confessional culture. Posel contends, in "The Post-Apartheid Confessional", that South Africa has become a "confessing society" and that "confession has become one of the icons of post-apartheid" (8). Similarly, Sarah Nuttall and Cheryl-Ann Michael begin their examination of South African "Autobiographical Acts" by arguing that confession has "pervaded the culture of the 1990s and ha[s] spread into the new century", giving rise to the "flourishing of the autobiographical voice" (298). As Nuttall and Michael note, although in the 1980s "literary autobiographies ... emerged strongly", these frequently banned texts focused on the "representivity of the autobiographical voice" because "individual experience" was "repressed in the 1980s as the discourse of community was inflated" (299).²⁹ They thus stand in clear contrast the autobiographies of the 1990s "in which the need to separate the individual from the collective voice assumes an unprecedented urgency" (Nuttall and Michael 299). In response to this unprecedented individuated and intimate autobiographical outpouring in literature (as well as other culture media, such as visual art and television and radio talk shows), many local literary critics have turned their attention to the new South African confessional writing in

²⁸ In terms of these vague correlations, both recently emerged from wars (WWII and the anti-apartheid liberation struggle or civil war) – wars which can be seen as bookends of the cold war era; with the South African shift from RDP to GEAR, both economies were driven by strongly capitalist systems combined with rampant consumerism; both witnessed a distrust of politics and an aversion to ideology; in both contexts the private, middle class family home is a charged, and gendered, symbol and focus of almost paranoid attention (especially with South Africa's intense growth of gated communities, the high incidence of abuse and rape within the home, and of family murders).

²⁹ More recently, Nuttall and Bystrom have argued that autobiographies that revealed "inner lives" and represented "interiority and intimacy", such as stories in *Drum* magazine and Blake Modisane's *Blame Me on History*, did exist prior to the 1990s, but that these autobiographies were "blocked out by critical frameworks foregrounding the collective struggle" (n.p.).

autobiographies and memoirs.³⁰ This critical responsiveness is not only focused on what these confessions reveal about South African identity and history – particularly with regards to race, ethnicity, culture, gender and class – but also on what contextually gave rise to this outpouring. In mapping out a context that can be seen to encourage the proliferation of confessional voices, Nuttall’s work, with co-authors Michael and Kerry Bystrom, has been most instructive and influential.

Nuttall and Michael’s essay, “Autobiographical Acts”, which “trie[s] to outline some of the major shifts in public and political discourse in the 1990s and to begin to elucidate their effects on an emergent ‘autobiographical culture’” is the perfect starting point for this discussion (310). In “Autobiographical Acts”, they argue that the proliferation of confessional writing is “a product of a very specific moment of national historical change”, as well as “reflect[ing] wider currents in a global age of textual transmission” (Nuttall and Michael 299). In terms of the specific context of historical change, they immediately centre their attention on the TRC, asserting that the “flourishing of the autobiographical voice has emerged alongside the powerful informing context of South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission” (Nuttall and Michael 299). The interlinking of confession and the TRC is incontestable, given the confessional mode and methodologies that operated within this system, as has been discussed earlier in this chapter, and is further explored by Posel and Gallagher. What Nuttall and Michael do that is particularly useful for this argument is to examine how the TRC acts as an instigator or enabler of confessional literature produced during the 1990s and 2000s.

They contend that the TRC’s ethos of individual and communal healing through the expression of grief and past traumas encouraged writers to invest in their individual, traumatic memories for the purposes of personal and societal rehabilitation (Nuttall and Michael 307-8). Furthermore, as “[t]he TRC as a form demanded that the subject speak as victim” and granted agency and authority to the voice of the victim, while autobiographies which in the 1980s “had a better chance of being heard by speaking in the heroic voice, in the 1990s ‘being heard’ frequently involved speaking in the

³⁰ Among many other possible examples, see Gallagher and Nuttall for general accounts, Samuelson and Nuttall and Michael for examinations of women’s autobiographies, and Heyns for a discussion of confession in white writing. There is also, as noted in the introduction, a dense body of work that engages with confession in Krog’s prose narratives, especially *Country of My Skull*.

register of the victim”, a register more typical of the confessional mode (Nuttall and Michael 307). The TRC thus grants power to, and creates a public audience for, the confessing subject.

More recently Nuttall and Bystrom have reconceptualised and extended this argument by working to “forge a critical language to discuss an emerging constellation of cultural production in South Africa” that is “focused on publicly interrogating the so-called ‘private’ domain of bodies, sexuality, friendship, home spaces, and other forms and sites of intimacy” (n.p.). They also primarily direct their attention to the TRC that served as a key “entrance point ushering inner lives into public culture” by “inaugurat[ing] a ‘public private sphere’” (Nuttall and Bystrom n.p.). Njabulo Ndebele, in his article “A Home for Intimacy”, similarly comments that the TRC “is about reconstituting the public domain through social insight”, produced by personal testimony and its discourse of intimacy, and that the decision for “negotiation” instead of “revolutionary violence” that is exemplified in the TRC meant that, as an emerging nation, “we opted for intimacy”.

While the TRC was instrumental in creating a social context where cultural and literary confession flourished, other factors were influential, too. Nuttall and Michael argue that the “post-apartheid television talk show” is another “new public phenomenon” of the transition that was influential (308). They argue these that talk shows “ostensibly offer a space where people speak for themselves and tell their own stories – a therapeutic discourse in the confessional mode focusing on the realm of the personal and on intimacy” (Nuttall and Michael 308). Posel sees the profusion of post-apartheid radio talk shows as presenting a more dramatic media example of how the private or intimate enters the public sphere through the confessional talk show (“Post-Apartheid” 8). The proliferation and popularity of talk shows is, of course, not a uniquely South African phenomenon, but is part of the “wider currents in a global age of textual transmission” (Nuttall and Michael 299). Nuttall and Bystrom list other such influential “global trends”, such as “the explosion of tabloid media cultures and the foregrounding of personal testimony associated with broadcast giants like Oprah Winfrey, the phenomenon of reality television, and the appearance of new genres of digital life writing seen in blogs, Facebook profiles and YouTube” (n.p.). Drawing from the work of Arjun Appadurai, they argue that while “such global genres circulate

everywhere” they “gain currency and luminosity” in contemporary South Africa, in which they are harnessed to address “the challenges of the unfinished democratic project” (Nuttall and Bystrom n.p.). They create a context where such public speaking out about private matters is encouraged and valued for its social, as well as personal, implications, a context in which, as Ndebele writes, “[p]ublic intimacies” that are necessary for building and sustaining a democratic, rehabilitated nation “need private intimacies” (“Home”).

Another contextual factor influencing the growth of a confessional culture in South Africa in the 1990s and 2000s has to do with the way bodies are heavily invested with social significance. Bodies, specifically black bodies and female bodies, were potent sites of oppression, (sexual) repression and contestation in the colonial and apartheid eras.³¹ Moving into democracy, “race, gender and sexuality” are unsurprisingly “topics of great public interest”, but beyond this, as Nuttall and Bystrom argue, “the body itself, as intimate sign and fleshy creature, and particularly as vulnerable or wounded flesh, has become a master trope of art and popular culture” (n.p.). This can clearly be seen in the TRC in the recounting of victim and perpetrator testimonies, as well as in the representations of the journalists, translators and other media personnel covering these hearings, as is explored in Krog’s *Country of My Skull*, her poetic cycle, “country of grief and grace” (*Down* 95-100) as well as de Kok’s evocative TRC-poems from *Terrestrial Things*.

The public interest in the private body was also intensified due to the HIV/AIDS pandemic, which exploded into public awareness in South Africa in the 1990s, and in which “the vulnerable body has surfaced as a key figure” (Nuttall and Bystrom n.p.). Posel argues that public discussion about HIV/AIDS was performed largely in the form of the “civic confessional”:

AIDS prevention and treatment campaigns, intent on diminishing the stigma attached to the illness, urge people with AIDS to disclose their condition. Their rebuttal of the norms of silence and non-disclosure reiterates a faith in the redemptive powers of confession, on the basis that colluding with the cultures of silence and secrecy, rather than finding the courage to disclose being HIV positive, is to lock oneself into a space of psychological stress and pain. So people with AIDS are urged to open up, speak out, reach out to others for support – as an act of healing and self-transformation (“Post-Apartheid” 8).

³¹ The next chapter will discuss this more thoroughly.

Posel thus finds that, in the public discourse about AIDS, there is “a suggestive articulation between the idea of liberation from apartheid, and the opportunities to bring previously hidden – and supposedly ‘private’ – transgressions, violations, burdens and sufferings into the open” (“Post-Apartheid” 9).

The public discourses of the TRC, talk shows and AIDS can be seen as converging on the idea that “personal and political liberation ... is quintessentially about the space for confession” (Posel, “Post-Apartheid” 9). These contextual factors thus fostered a public-private sphere through “intimate exposure”, to use Bystrom’s term, a sphere in which, like that of the US in the 1950s and 1960s, a confessional culture flourishes. Within this culture, though remaining largely overlooked in favour of the examinations of confessional prose, a strong flourishing of confessional poetry can be seen, among which Krog’s and Metelerkamp’s work can be situated.³² The ways in which confessional poetry specifically is supported by this context can clearly be seen by returning to Jones’ definition of confessional poetry, as all three defining factors are fervently encouraged in the South African milieu discussed above: speaking autobiographically, focusing on intimate (and often bodily) subjects and using ordinary speech in transgressive or disturbing ways.

Truth and Ethics in Confessional Poetry

While I have argued that South African confessional poetry in the 1990s and 2000s draws on and responds to the work of US confessional poets of the 1950s and 1960s, and that both these historical contexts created grounds in which confessional poetry is able to root itself, one could question whether the theoretical shifts of the past half-century don’t interfere with this recurrence, if not disrupt our very definition of confessional poetry. Gill mentions three challenges that poststructuralist theory metes out to (the typical, and previously defined view of) confessional poetry. She states that poststructuralist theory “challenges ...our sense of the reliability of language, the coherence and authority of the subject, and the accessibility of authentic truth” (Gill, “Introduction” 3). These three challenges can be seen to correspond to and address the

³² Other poets whose work contributes to this localized growth are Lisa Combrinck, Finuala Dowling, Colleen Higgs, Helen Moffett and Malika Ndlovu.

three parts of the definition of confessional poetry developed earlier in this chapter (with assistance from Lerner).

Confessional poetry relies on an autobiographical speaker; is this possible if one cannot maintain the “coherence and authority of the subject”? Rather than seeing the poststructuralist insight as nullifying the category of confessional poetry, I would argue that confessional poetry in fact performs this fragmentation and incoherence of subjectivity. In what is often seen as an important precursor to 1950s confessional poetry, Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself”, he writes: “Do I contradict myself? Very well then I contradict myself. (I am large, I contain multitudes)” (126). The idea of an ‘I’ being contradictory and “contain[ing] multitudes” is, thus, rooted in much confessional poetry.

So is the notion of textual performance and self-construction. In *carrying the fire*, Metelerkamp describes herself as “I, bodies, rising from the ink” (13). Krog’s “Paternoster” is arguably as dramatic and theatrical as Plath’s iconic “Lady Lazarus”. “Lady Lazarus” with its “big strip tease” in front of the “peanut-crunching crowd” can be seen as an exemplary performative, self-dramatising confessional poem (245). In “Paternoster” Krog performs, and theatrically stages, a “fearless” and liberated feminist stance: “I stand on a massive rock in the sea at Paternoster” where “the sea beats strips of light green foam / into the air” (*Down* 117). Similar to Plath’s exposure of “[her] hands / [her] knees” to the “[g]entlemen [and] ladies” of her audience (245), Krog displays her body: “my upper leg muscles bulge / my pelvis casts out its acquired resigned tilt” (*Down* 117). These dramatic poems confound the traditional definition of confessional (and more broadly, lyric) poetry, as the self overheard in conversation with itself. Through this they demonstrate a clear artistic construction of the lyrical moment. In Krog’s poem, the frequent assertions of authorial identity (“I am” is repeated five times in the final eight lines of this short poem) are simultaneously statements of the excessive, incoherent nature of identity: “I am rock I am stone I am dune” (*Down* 117). It is important that in both these poems, the ‘I’ is not dismissed because of its multiplicity and fragmentation. In response to this poststructuralist challenge, the idea of the stable and completely authoritative autobiographical subject, which was seen as the basis of a traditional definition of confessional poetry, is disrupted, but not the genre of confessional poetry itself.

Sexton's famously asserts: "I use the persona 'I' when I am applying a mask to my face", which is referred to by Krog in "I, me, me, mine: Autobiographical Fiction and the 'I'" (in Gill, "Anne" 443; Krog 104). This is a helpful corrective to the notion that there is any unmediated, essential identity, and a reminder that writers inevitably mediate and construct their textual representations, but not a refutation of the masked and multiple, but yet autobiographical self. Because of its "self-dramatising" quality, confessional poetry could be called, and now frequently is called, 'confessional' to question and undermine the self-evidency of its "naked ego" (Lerner 54). The idea of confessional poetry is perhaps altered, but unscathed: the speaking 'I' of the confessional poet can still confess.

Combining the second and third poststructuralist insights: if authentic truth is inaccessible and language is unreliable, how can poets write the truth about their personal experiences? These poststructuralist insights thus challenge the subject matter and language of confessional poetry. In an interview with Michelle McGrane, Metelerkamp explains that, in writing her poetry, she "want[s] the hidden, the solid, the truth, to reveal itself". Metelerkamp's confessional poetry is an attempt at revelation, a desire to access the truth. There is thus, for her, "such a thing as the truth" that poetry works to reveal, and through this revelation reader and writer can learn to "deal with the overwhelming truths, with the impossible hard truths" (Edwards 61). In her interview with McGrane, Krog states: "I deeply believe that poetry can say everything", though this comment is preceded by an acknowledgement of "the impossibility of truth". What these comments reveal is that, for Krog, there is no return to a pre-poststructuralist understanding of "truth", but, at the same time, poetry is a privileged form of language that "can say everything". In the acknowledgments of *A Change of Tongue*, Krog voices an awareness of how one "can lie the truth" (369). Similarly, in the "Envoi" to *Country of My Skull*, she declares: "I have told many lies in this book about the truth" (425). This formulation suggests that it is only by means of telling these lies that Krog is able to arrive at and write about "the truth". *Country of My Skull* frequently expresses Krog's discomfort with the word "Truth", and troubles its supposedly oppositional relationship to "Lie", for example: "I hesitate at the word [truth], 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” (54; emphasis in original). In her interview with Ross Edwards, when discussing truth and literature, Metelerkamp accuses Krog of “manufactur[ing] the truth about [her]self for the sake of a more ‘interesting’, or is it ‘consumable’ narrative” in *Country of My Skull* (61). While Krog envisions lies as enabling one to gain access to the truth, Metelerkamp avers that, through her artful fabrications, Krog “misses an opportunity to confront herself” (Edwards 61). Although confessional poetry, like all forms of language, might be a lie in its inability to accurately represent the truth, it is a lie that *aims* at the truth, despite its inevitable failure; it attempts to say something true about the poet-speaker through a confession that is, perhaps, a lie. The desire to “say everything” remains the goal of confessional poetry, even if this everything is a more complicated version of truth than initially theorised.

Within even the earliest and most traditional of the approaches toward confessional poetry, there is an awareness that “the facts displayed [in a confessional poem]” should not “be taken for literal truth” (Phillips 8). Cognisance is taken of the many “disclaimer[s] to veracity” that confessional poets have made by “tak[ing] pains to disavow the literal truth of [their] poems”, though these are often dismissed too perfunctorily (“Methinks the poet protests too much”) without leaving room to engage with these disclaimers and disavowals (Phillips 11-12). Metelerkamp and Krog have also issued their own “disavowals”, rejecting a narrow, confining traditional definition of confessional poetry. Metelerkamp tells McGrane:

Poetry works with, is completely at home with, an attitude of paradox. A real poem is not a statement or a position or a dogma or a fact or even a confession. That’s its attractiveness – that’s how it comes at the truth... a poem is something *made*, a work, art, the figures are never simple, never directly correspondent to actuality, just as the construct holds paradoxical meanings simultaneously....

Krog also insists that “however personal [a poem] *sounds*, it is carefully selected, not by the intellect, but by the poetic sensibility, to resonate” (McGrane). In these comments Metelerkamp and Krog show that, when using the traditional definition of the genre, confessional poetry is vulnerable to critique on the basis of its aesthetics – and also ethics (McGrane questions both Krog and Metelerkamp how their “families accommodate the intensely personal nature of some of [their] poems”) – as will be explored shortly.

In “Points on poems”, Metelerkamp’s quasi-poetry lecture, she notes:

17. You could ask who speaks when the speaker is I.
18. The point is whose voice, out of the blue into thin air, uses the “I”, like a child shrieking “me me me”, or otherwise playing quietly outside the pines whispering “you” “he” “she”?
19. Yours. Mine.
20. The point is: a poem is not a confession, it’s not a profession (*Burnt* 13).

It is also “not a record – / a resonance” and has “[n]othing to do with what those who know better call / ‘your personal life’” (*Burnt* 13; 16). In making these points, this poem vociferously resists the traditional view of confessional poetry, questioning “who speaks when the speaker is I” and juxtaposing the stereotyped confessional shriek of “me, me, me” with playful whispers that summon others into the poetic space. As for Krog, the poems need “to resonate” with the reader, so that the voice of the ‘I’ is dialogically, empathetically, both “[y]ours” and “[m]ine”. While presenting a new understanding of confessional poetry, this poem can nevertheless be seen as traditionally confessional within Metelerkamp’s oeuvre, with its use of an autobiographical speaker who provides biographical details,³³ its consistency with her other volumes³⁴ and its everyday language and subject matter.

This discussion has attempted to find middle ground between a traditional understanding of confessional poetry and the erasure of this poetry under a stringent adoption of poststructuralist principles regarding the subject, truth and language. Although this designation has come under frequent attack (even Rosenthal remarks that “[confessional] was a term both helpful and too limited, and very possibly the conception of a confessional school has by now done a certain amount of damage” [*New* 25]), I argue that there is much to gain through its retention. Firstly, it

³³ For example: living in Pretoria, being a financially unsuccessful South African poet, references to family members (brothers, son, mother), driving her son to school “up Keyter’s neck”. The lines “St Joan believed even when she couldn’t hear the voices any longer / to the point of burning alive” references the crises of faith suffered by two Joans: Joan of Arc (crisis of religious faith) and Joan Metelerkamp (crisis of faith in her poetic work). Joan of Arc’s hearing of “voices” and her literal burning intersects here with the metaphorical burning referenced in Metelerkamp’s volumes: *carrying the fire* and *Burnt Offering*, and the “voices” can be seen as Metelerkamp’s poetic muse.

³⁴ Note, for example, its references to Arachne and spiders’ webs (17), and “the baby’s heart on the monitor” (19).

emphasizes its literary and political legacy from the 1950s confessional school, and specifically the work of Plath and Sexton. With this, the historical context in which this genre first emerged is remembered, and so culturally-significant resonances between different confessional contexts are easier to spot. The traditional definition of confessional poetry, in terms of speaker, subject matter and language remains useful, though in a moderated form. Confessional poetry attempts to widen the boundaries of acceptable subject matter, inserting more personal, private issues (for literary, political as well as ethical purposes). Although the speaker cannot be uncritically accepted as autobiographical in a traditional sense, confessional poetry still strives towards this, through the use of a tone of intimacy and openness. Yezzi's description of confessional poetry as the "artifice of honesty" is useful here: whether or not the poems and their speakers are honest, confessional poems work hard to create an *appearance* of honesty,³⁵ or alternatively, that it is through their artifice (rather than bare revelations) that they are able to arrive at the truth (they manufacture a lie that speaks the truth). There is also a specific type of confessional language at work in these poems that is associative, bodily, colloquial and sometimes crude, as well as raw and urgent, and that uses 'unpoetic', often ugly, imagery. But beyond these traditional definitions, the dialogic nature of confession is a key factor in the classification of confessional poetry. Confessional poetry is that which uses a certain type of 'I' in order to evoke a certain type of response in 'you', the reader, and thus can be defined in terms of the *relationship* established between speaker and reader in the poem. Therefore, something is lost in seeing confessional poetry as locked in a particular historical context. This loss can be seen, for example, in the title of Kate Sontag and David Graham's collection, *After Confession: Poetry as Autobiography*. Confessional poetry is being written today that is both influenced by the historical school of the 1950s and 1960s, but also influences our reading of that school, and can thus breathe into and energise this, supposedly dead field of study (as implied by Sontag and Graham's "After").

Confessional poetry has routinely been critiqued on the basis on its aesthetics and ethics. Unfortunately, grounds for an artistic critique are contained within early definitions of the genre, for example, Phillips's conjecture that "what a [confessional]

³⁵ This is done through the mentioning of biographically verifiable facts, consistency, tone, the manner of addressing the reader and the relationship established with him/her.

poet has to say is more important than how he says it” (Phillips xiv).³⁶ He does, however, soon moderate this: “But to stand unclothed, to confess all, is not necessarily to create art. The most boring old drunk on the barstool can strip and confess” (xiv). The critiquing of confessional poetry for being “not hewn, but spewn” is common (Phillips xv). Molesworth opines that the designation ‘confessional’ “mean[s] a commitment to recording as directly as possible the shape of a private pain and an intimate sickness, without regard to artifice³⁷ or aesthetic transcendence” (73). Yezzi, who writes that “[o]ccasionally, Sexton happens on a lovely turn of phrase” and that “Plath’s poems, like Sexton’s, poach on already charged icons for emotional effect”, also considers a lack of artistry, or “bad aesthetics”, to be typical of the genre.

Yezzi also considers confessional poetry to have “bad morals” and notes its “shamelessness”. Molesworth writes that confessional “poetry is read more out of a duty to at least listen to the maimed than out of a sense of discovery or of artistic energy” and thus seems to view it as an ethical imposition upon the reader (73).³⁸ The confessional poets’ “gigantic[c] egos”, to the point of “solipsism”, are also remarked upon (Molesworth 65, Yezzi).

Despite this supposed solipsism, one of the greatest ethical quandaries of confessional poetry is to do with the representations of others. With its intimate, biographical subject matter and (artfully) honest tone, confessional poetry has huge potential to harm loved ones (see the chapters by Sontag, Kooser and Dunn in Sontag and Graham’s *After Confession*). Krog demonstrates her awareness of this potential in her article, “‘I, me, me, mine!’: Autobiographical Fiction and the ‘I’”, writing:

³⁶ As a corrective, note Rosenthal’s comment that “despite the manifestly intimate importance to [Lowell/the confessional poet] of his subject matter the objective artistry present at every point is at least equally vital. It is, in fact, implicit from the beginning as the shaping motivation that drives the work towards self-transcendence – that is, toward an aesthetic realization that goes beyond the literal subject matter in its resolution” (*New* 67).

³⁷ The use of the word artifice is interesting here. This term, also used by Yezzi in his title, “The artifice of honesty”, exposes the ambiguous response to much confessional poetry. Its Latin root (art [*ars*] + make [*facere*]) seems at odds with its currently-accepted meaning (OED): “clever devices or expedients, especially to trick or deceive others”. While the art is in the etymology, the common usage today emphasizes its moral and ethical questionability (deception, deceit, expedience) and downgrades art to a level of a mechanical “device”. However, an attempt to aesthetically reclaim the term as evocative of self-conscious textually crafting can be seen, for example, in the title of the new literary journal, *Artifice Magazine*.

³⁸ In this criticism, Molesworth inverts the typical confessional power hierarchy: asserting that the confessing author-speaker has, in fact, power over the reader-listener.

Every book of mine is like a deserted battlefield. Just before I send it off to the publishers, I turn around and see the friendships killed, the rapes allowed, the trusts betrayed, the manipulations committed. I see the bloodied face of my husband for the millionth time, the fist-sore bodies of my family, the quiet rage of those I've hit upon for this latest book. When I was young, I simply turned my back and continued, confident that what I had to say was more important than any of these writhings. But the older I get, the more impossible it becomes to live with what I have written. (101)

The poem "family figures as poetry material" examines the ethical dilemmas inherent in writing about one's family. In the second, third, fourth and sixth stanzas of the poem, Krog describes her children and husband as she observes them "from behind [her] desk through the burglar bars" (*Down* 38). This positioning suggests that her familial writing is a form of burglary, which trespasses on, violates and destroys the privacy and security of the family home. The final stanza emphasizes Krog's resultant struggle to use of her family as material for her poetry:

the pen clatters from my hand
displays verses two, three, four and six
through my own illegible handwriting
into a public mix (*Down* 38).

Not only is this confessional writing ethically fraught, which forces her to drop her pen and stop writing, but it is particularly "the public mix" that the published work will enter into that threatens: in her handwritten, homemade poem, her familial descriptions are guarded by both their illegibility and the privacy of the home.

The two-pronged, aesthetic and ethical, attack persists in critiques of more recent confessional poetry. Almost a quarter of the essays in *After Confession: Poetry as Autobiography* examine the "Ethical & Aesthetic Considerations" at stake in the writing and publication of confessional poetry. In one of these, Judith Harris asserts that confessional poetry is fundamentally ethical. She describes this poetic mode as "a poetry of ideas, or acute political consciousness, that demonstrates, through testimony, an individual's relationship to a community" (254). Rather than egoistic solipsism, confessional poetry is founded on the principles of community, connection, relation. As Sexton, often regarded as the most exemplary confessional poet,³⁹

³⁹ See Gill's explanation in "Anne Sexton and Confessional Poetics" (425).

explains in her apologia for her poetic practice, “For John, who begs me not to enquire further”:

At first [my writing] was private.
Then it was more than myself;
it was you, or your house
or your kitchen

because “sometimes in private, / my kitchen, your kitchen / my face, your face” (34-5). Sexton’s poem invokes what Paul John Eakin’s describes as a relational model of identity. Even “in private”, “my kitchen” *is* “your kitchen”, “my face” *is* “your face”: we exist only in our connection with others, our most personal selves remain inseparable from the selves of others. As Eakin argues, and Sexton demonstrates, “*all* identity is relational” (Eakin 43, emphasis in original). Or, as Alicia Ostriker formulates: “Self *is* self-in-relation: no other kind exists” (Ostriker 46, emphasis in original).

For this reason, perhaps, autobiographical writers like Krog who agonize over their representations of others can console themselves with the knowledge that writing about others is inevitable, unless one wants to succumb to what Eakin describes as “the myth of autonomy” (43). As Louise Viljoen points out, using “a relational model of identity ... inevitably poses ethical problems when confronted with the standards of privacy and property based on an autonomy-based conception of identity”, a conception that still predominates in Western thinking today (“Mother” 204). Since the 1950s confessional poetry worked to disrupt the masculine myth of autonomy (expressed in the cold war’s image of containment). Unless, or until, this model of identity is altered in both legal and everyday discourse, these problems are inescapable, and can only be addressed as they arise, by weighing up the aesthetics and the ethics of each case.⁴⁰ But, perhaps confessional poetry has other benefits, which counterbalance these ethical quandaries?

Firstly, confessional poetry can be ethical in its overt demonstration of the relational model of identity, in its insistence on how deeply we are implicated in each other’s lives. Confessional poetry shows us how to live together by demonstrating that we

⁴⁰ Sontag thus proposes that “[u]ltimately, each of us [writers] has to make a decision we think we can live with, both personally and aesthetically” (“Mother” 156).

can't *but* live together. Its performance of interconnectedness is especially profound. While lyrical poetry is the poetry of the self, confessional poetry has been described as the poetry of the "private, exhibitionistic, self-indulgent, narcissistic", egotistic, solipsistic self (Harris 254). But if this most self-obsessed type of poetry is simultaneously so communal, relational and interconnected, then it demonstrates just how deeply we are implicated in each other's lives, just how dependant our identity, and according to the southern Africa philosophy of *ubuntu*, our very humanity, is on that of others; that even when one is overtly trying, like Whitman, to sing the song of oneself, one inevitably sings the songs of others.

Secondly, confessional poetry is ethical in facilitating what Simone de Beauvoir calls the "miracle of literature" (in Moi 193). Toril Moi translates De Beauvoir's description of this miracle in her article "What Can Literature Do? Simone De Beauvoir as a Literary Theorist": The "miracle of literature" is

"that an other truth becomes mine without ceasing to be other. I renounce my own 'I' in favour of the speaker, yet I remain myself. It is an intermingling ceaselessly begun and ceaselessly undone, and it is the only kind of communication capable of giving me that which cannot be communicated, capable of giving me the taste of another life." (193)

This means that, despite traditional Western philosophical assertions and existentialist fears that we are autonomous, isolated and alone, "[l]iterature overcomes existential separation and connects us to others. It does so by making me "taste ... another life" (Moi 193). This can only happen through a reader identifying with the character, or author. De Beauvoir thus asserts that "[f]or a reading to "take" I have to identify with someone: with the author; I have to enter into his world, and his world must become mine" (in Moi 193). As Moi explains: "To identify with the author ... is, for a moment, to occupy the same position (the same spatial coordinates, as it were) in relation to the world. To see the world as another human being sees it while still at the same time remaining oneself: this is the "miracle" of literature" (Moi 193-4). Therefore, when one reads confessional poetry, one takes the 'I' of the poet-speaker into one's mouth, and through this, one tastes the life of an other 'I' and enters into that life.

The importance, for Krog, of her readers being able to enter into this whole-hearted identification with the authorial/autobiographical 'I' in her texts is emphasized in her reflective article "I, me, me, mine!': Autobiographical Fiction and the 'I'". Krog explains that she uses the 'I' "to facilitate reading.... To allow the reader to piggyback on the 'I' into the text – safe in the knowledge that the I would never abandon the 'I'" ("I" 103). 'You' therefore read from a position of empathy, of trust, you connect and identify with the 'I', the author, the other. Furthermore, as "the young Tswana interpreter" quoted in *Country of My Skull* notes on the usage of the first person when translating: "I have no distance when I say "I" ... it runs through me with I" (195). In confessional poetry, where the 'I' recalls the author, speaking from her own lived experiences, in texts largely stripped of plot and narrative devices and encountered rather as naked outpourings from a fragile throat, this identification can therefore be intimate and complete, underscored by a stronger layer of the connective tissue of empathy.

In Moi's article, she specifies that, for De Beauvoir, the "miracle of literature can only happen when the reader feels in the presence of a human voice" (Moi 194). She thus translates De Beauvoir's dictum: "There is no literature if there is no voice, that is to say language that bears the mark of somebody" (in Moi 194). For De Beauvoir, then, it is the fully human voice that speaks in a marked text that enables the reader to identify and connect with the author and empathetically enter into the author's world. Clearly, of all the literary genres, poetry is the one where "voice" is most central. Furthermore, it is the subgenre of confessional poetry where the voice is most "human", in all its idiosyncratic yet communal frailties, vulnerabilities, passions, rages, regrets, recriminations, revelations. It deals with the most fully human subject matters, from the messiness of childbirth (see Metelerkamp's "Birth Poem", *Towing* 117-9, and Krog's "birth", *Down* 36) to that of ageing and dying (Krog's *Body Bereft*) and everything sacred (Metelerkamp's *requiem* and Krog's "daughter of Jephthah", *Down* 13) and profane (Krog's "toilet poem", *Down* 54) in between. Confessional poetry, more than any other type of writing, "bears the mark of somebody" – somebody's life, somebody's pain, somebody's struggle with how to live (in this body, in this place, at this time, with these people, these roles, these responsibilities, these yearnings to connect and make meaning, truth, beauty, to make it all matter).

Krog makes a similar point to de Beauvoir when she explains that she writes autobiographically using the 'I' because

if I say the word 'I', I call forth the word 'you'. You have to respond. And you will allow me to access you under your own conditions, within your own ambiguities and fractious facts. But if the 'you' who is not 'I', responds, then you and I can at last start trying to find 'us' as well as 'he' or 'she' or 'they.' ('I' 103)

Only an 'I', voiced with honesty and vulnerability, calls a reader into a dialogue, a relationship, a community. Or, as John Vernon argues: "The strength of sound and meaning in a poem comes from this sense of the Other, because speech is pulled taut by reciprocity. The poet speaks and listens at the same time. To listen means to allow: one allows language to accumulate the possibility of a presence" (147). Confessional poetry thus has ethical valence because of the interconnectedness asserted within its dialogic structure: even when we imagine ourselves isolated and incomprehensible in our unique situations, the call of the fully human 'I' cannot be ignored – a voice must be answered – and it allows us not only to connect, but to be aware of our implicit interconnection, of our shared humanity in our shared world.

But confessional poetry is not only profoundly ethical, it is also (despite its derided navel-gazing status) political. However, as this is a political movement that relies on personal gesture and disruption of the private/public divide, it frequently goes unnoticed. Obscured within the mass of literary engagement with the TRC, Metelerkamp's "Truth Commission" is an exemplary political confessional poem. It focuses on the TRC hearings as public events which, by being broadcast on the "radio" and "TV", enter into the domestic ("kitchen") space and then, through maternal identification and empathetic imagination, into the private space of the self (*Into* 79-82). As expressed in my MA, "[r]ather than being experienced as a remote socio-political event, 'the slump, slump of the bodies' of the men whom the 'Vlakplaas men / drugged ... the more easily to shoot' is intensely personal, viscerally felt as an obsessive, repetitive turning 'of a worry bead'. The bodies are felt in one's hands, as one lies in one's bed" (Weyer 111). Metelerkamp thus troubles and collapses the boundaries between the public and the private, the political and the personal. She suggests that it is only within the personal realm that "the truth" of the TRC, and its national narratives of grief and guilt, can be fully "fe[lt]" (*Into* 81-82).

Krog's poetic response to the TRC, "Country of grief and grace", also emphasizes the connection between the public and the private. The pain of South Africa's apartheid past uncovered through the TRC hearings is expressed as "desperately ... ach[ing] between you and me" and as such is felt in the interpersonal relationship between two people (*Down* 95). Although the TRC hearings worked to create a new national narrative, Krog focuses on their embodied intimacy and indicates that it is through a personal accumulation of knowledge, understanding and empathy that the political project of social transformation and the construction of a new, interdependent society is created:

we know each other well
each other's scalp and smell each other's blood
we know the deepest sound of each other's kidneys in the night
we are slowly each other
anew (*Down* 100).

Harris argues: "In strong poets ... confession is a personal outcry that seeks to address a community's consciousness by conflating the inner domestic realm with broader historical realities" (259). Plath's and Sexton's poems that interrogate gender politics and consumerism through examinations of the domestic space can be seen as wonderful examples here.⁴¹ Krog's "sonnet (I will always remember)" also demonstrates this conflation superbly. In the quatrains, Krog describes her husband's arrival home, presumably from work, while she has stayed at home with their children, emphasizing his power and authority:

then you held me as always

so that I had to raise my eyes up to your secure mouth
your face determined your hands your neck your shoulders
cut under the impeccable shirt I smelled
on you the perfume of power as your dark head

bent down to greet every child something
authoritarian stayed with your body as of one
who always lies on top your hands moved
with the orders of a boss (*Down* 26)

⁴¹ See earlier discussion of Sexton's "Self in 1958" and "Housewife", and Plath's "Lesbos" and "The Applicant".

However, in the concluding couplet the focus shifts from the personal domestic realm and her husband's power in the family, to the wider societal structures underlying that power:

 this morning I bring

 breakfast – on the bedside table you put my monthly allowance –
 and I see how the word finance also breathes the word violence (*Down 26*).

The confessional poem is personal, but it also speaks to the broader social sphere. As a reader, 'you' might be in the same subject position as the 'I'; if not, empathetically you understand 'my' position, and despite only occupying it in the moment of reading, we still live in the same world and we have started a conversation that will inform, if not reform, our world.

CHAPTER TWO

Poetry of Embodiment

Over the past few decades academic interest in the body has intensified. This has led to the creation of a new field of embodiment studies, and a subfield focused on the “Ethics of Embodiment” (to use the title of a 2011 Special Issue of *Hypatia*) that examines “the implications of situating bodies at the centre of ethical theory” (Bergoffen and Weiss 453). On a smaller scale, there have also been recent attempts to theorise the bodiliness of poetry – poetry’s existence as an embodied form (see Vernon and Aviram). This chapter will draw new connections between these theoretical fields by arguing that, if poems are bodies in similar ways to which humans are bodies, then the ethical potential of human bodies is also present in poetic bodies.

This argument will be initiated by a discussion of the historical relationship between poetry and the body, and of the specific nature of this relationship in Antjie Krog’s and Joan Metelerkamp’s poetry, focusing particularly on their poetic engagement with the white body. Next, Krog’s and Metelerkamp’s poetic evocations of embodiment will be used to examine what human embodiment means, both in theory and in their poetic practice, ontologically, epistemologically and ethically. Recourse will be made here to the development of this field in Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception*, Simone de Beauvoir’s feminist articulation and extension of this theory, Emmanuel Levinas’s ethics of embodiment, and more recent expansions and innovations in this field. This will be followed by a discussion of how poems generally, but also Krog’s and Metelerkamp’s poems exemplarily, can, and should, be understood as bodies, by drawing on the insights of John Vernon and Amittai Aviram. Finally, the ethical implications of understanding poems as bodies will be examined within an engagement with Krog’s and Metelerkamp’s poetic responses to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) hearings.

Poetry and the Body

Due to the stereotypical binary classificatory system in which women have been aligned with the body, and therefore viewed as passive objects, and men with the mind or spirit, and thus as active subjects, much poetry has been written by men about women's bodies.¹ In her 1971 essay, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Revision", Adrienne Rich comments that "it seemed to be a given that men wrote poems and women frequently inhabited them. These women were almost always beautiful, but threatened with the loss of beauty, the loss of youth" (*On Lies* 39). What is present "in books written by men" is thus "the image of Woman", her form, her body, represented as a passive object (Rich, *On Lies* 39).

This poetry of the female form can easily be arranged into two traditions. In the first, the female form is romanticized and idealized: ironically, it is the beauty of the adored woman's body that enables the poet to reconfigure her as an unearthly goddess, and therefore worthy of his devotion. The surfeit of Petrarchan sonnets in the late sixteenth century mark a clear apex of this tradition,² though the trajectory certainly extends historically on either side of this pinnacle. In the second tradition, women's fleshy bodies are reviled as monstrous and presented as objects of satire, and therefore explicitly unworthy of love or devotion. As exemplary, we could note Jonathan Swift's renowned, or notorious, "The Lady's Dressing Room" ("Celia, Celia, Celia shits!" [398]), though again, this misogynistic tradition has a wide historical reach. Certain poets, and poems, have attempted to breach the disjunction between these two modes. The most obvious example is William Shakespeare's "Sonnet 130": "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun", although John Donne's "Elegy 29": "To His Mistress Going To Bed" does so more obliquely and, perhaps, more successfully.³ TS Eliot's monument to high modernism, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", keenly exposes the tension between these two modes: "Arms that are braceleted and white

¹ See Sandra M Gilbert and Susan Gubar's chapter "The Queen's Looking Glass: Female Creativity, Male Images of Women, and the Metaphor of Literary Paternity" in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (3-44).

² The final decade of this century saw the publication of Sir Philip Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella*, Edmund Spenser's *Amoretti* and Michael Drayton's *Idea's Mirror* (revised, in the early seventeenth century as *Idea*).

³ Although Donne does compare his mistress in her "white robes" to an "Angel" who "bring'st with thee / Heaven like Mahomet's Paradise", he ultimately entreats her to "cast all ... this white linen hence" and thus come to come to him as a naked woman, not an angel (217).

and bare / (But in the lamplight down with light brown hair!)” (2506). While the first line praises women for their beauty, this beauty is that of a lavishly decorated (“braceleted”) sculpture (“white and bare”) of a goddess; when the reality of the woman’s body (“light brown hair”) interrupts the image, the horror of the revelation needs to be contained and bracketed, lest it destroy the beautiful artistic image.

This binary in poetic representation of women and their bodies is symptomatic of the traditional binary roles women have culturally been assigned: Madonna and whore or, to use Sandra M Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s phrase, “the extreme images of ‘angel’ and ‘whore’ which male authors have generated” (17). Either women are idealized as desexualized, and almost disembodied (save womb, breasts, arms and face filled with maternal devotion, all dedicated to the service of her son/saviour) representations of the stereotypical feminine virtues of altruistic love and self-sacrificing devotion,⁴ or vilified as immoral meat motivated only by its insatiable bodily urges. (Although many poets built successful careers from focusing on one of these binary poles, the trouble is that real women aren’t so polarized.) In both cases literary styles developed to catalogue the appropriate female body parts: the idealized form utilizes the blason to ethereally praise lips, skin, breasts,⁵ while the misogynistic, satiric form focuses on the abject emissions of the grotesque body.⁶ In both forms, poets writing about the female form were caught in a quandary: either praise a woman’s body by idealizing and thus disembodimenting her, or expose the beautiful body as undeserving of love or praise.

Due to the construction of literary creation as a male, and overtly phallic, activity, women have been excluded from it, and confined to the culturally inferior role of biological procreation (Gilbert and Gubar 3-16; Friedman 73-76). Therefore male poets were writing about women, and women’s bodies, without women being able to

⁴ Note Virginia Woolf’s description of the “Angel in the House”: “She was utterly unselfish.... She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draft she sat in it – in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds of others. Above all – I need not say it – she was pure. Her purity was supposed to be her chief beauty – her blushes, her great grace” (“Professions” 1385).

⁵ The octave of Shakespeare’s “Sonnet 130” parodies this (“My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun; / Coral is far more red than her lips’ red; / If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun...” (501-2) as does Chaucer’s description of the earthy Alison in “The Miller’s Tale” (103-4; see especially lines 125-162).

⁶ Swift’s “The Lady’s Dressing Room”, with its voluble discussion of Celia’s “sweat, dandruff”, the “scrapings of her teeth and gums”, “earwax”, “snot” and “dung” is, again, exemplary here (396-8).

question, correct, or complicate their representations. An “anxiety of authorship” prevented most women from writing, and when women did dare to defy social expectations and “attempt the pen”, which was read as “a metaphorical penis”, they were seen to be doing so in direct opposition to their female (penis-less, womb-entrusted) bodies (Gilbert and Gubar 49; 15; 7). As women were writing *in spite of* their sex, in terms of the social encoding of writing and womanhood, it is only quite recently that women began to write their own bodies and revise this poetic record of the female form⁷.

Coinciding with the rise of confessional poetry in the 1960s was the emergence of Anglo-American second wave feminism. Unlike the ‘wave’ that preceded and succeeded it, this feminist movement was heavily preoccupied with, and invested in, the female body.⁸ Because it focused on communalities shared by women on the basis of their bodily experiences, Anglo-American feminism of the 1960s and 1970s was strongly critiqued by the emerging third wave feminism for its essentialising and universalising tendencies: seeing women’s bodies as their universally shared essence, and overlooking the differences (in class, race, culture, sexual orientation) between women.⁹ However, it is only by virtue of these simplifications that a women’s *movement* was able to be born, capable of attaining real political, economic, social and cultural goals that so many women benefit from today. This corporeal form of feminism swept not only into the Anglo-American political arena, but also into literature, and particularly, largely due to its intersection within the ethos of confessional poetry, into poetry. Anne Sexton, who penned such poems as “The

⁷ While the “childbirth metaphor” (which will be discussed in greater detail in the following chapter) has existed alongside the “equally common phallic analogy” and seems, in contrast to the latter, to “validate women’s artistic effort by unifying their mental and physical labour into (pro)creativity”, when used by *male* writers, and thus, for most of literary history by the greatest majority of writers, it “reinforces the separation of creation and procreation ... [and] of mind and body” (Friedman 73; 80).

⁸ While this interest can be seen in the many feminist texts that explore women’s bodily experiences, especially motherhood and sexuality (Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, Rich’s *Of Woman Born*, Nancy Chodorow’s *The Reproduction of Mothering*, Kate Millet’s *Sexual Politics*, Shulamith Firestone’s *The Dialectic of Sex*, Susan Rubin Suleiman’s (ed.) *The Female Body in Western Culture*), this feminist preoccupation is exemplified in the 1970 booklet *Women and Their Bodies* that, after selling 250 000 copies, was reworked into the feminist classic *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, which, due to its due to its incredible sales figures (“four times as many copies as ... *The Second Sex*”), longevity (in 2011 the 9th edition was published) and global appeal (translated into more than twenty-five languages) has made this book into “U.S. feminism’s most popular ‘export’ to date” (Davis, *Making* 4-5).

⁹ Cressida Heyes, for example, uses the term ‘third wave’ “to capture all critical work, whatever its theoretical orientation, that points ... to the homogenizing or exclusive tendencies of earlier dominant feminisms” (161). Elizabeth V. Spelman’s *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* (1988) can be seen as one of the key texts in this critique of second wave feminism.

Abortion”, “Menstruation at Forty”, “The Ballad of the Lonely Masturbator”, “The Breast” and “In Celebration of My Uterus” is clearly a pivotal figure in this new poetry of women’s bodies written by women.¹⁰ Many other Anglo-American poets of the 1960s and 1970s contributed towards the phenomenal growth of this new corporeal poetry, including Denise Levertov, Adrienne Rich, Fleur Adcock, Audre Lorde and Erica Jong. In more recent years, this focus has intensified still further in the work of poets like Sharon Olds, Grace Nichols and Kate Clanchy.

Krog and Metelerkamp can both be seen as contributing to this body of corporeal poetry, not only in the western world, but more specifically in the context of contemporary South Africa.¹¹ This focus on the body is visible in the earliest of Krog’s poetry (such as “daughter of Jephthah”¹²). *Down to My Last Skin* reveals an extended interest in the body (as indicated in the title of the collection); this interest is especially heightened in “Love is All I Know” and “Dear Child of the Lean Flank”, which is perhaps to be expected in a contemporary woman’s poems about the experiences of love, marriage and motherhood. However, beyond an interest in the body at home, both of Krog’s poetic cycles that examine politics on a national scale, “Country of grief and grace” and “In transit – a cycle of the early nineties”, demonstrate the corporeal manner in which she experiences, and attempts to understand, the national politics of South Africa in the 1990s. *Body Bereft*, as highlighted by its title, cover art and poetic contents, is a lengthy meditation on the ageing body. The corporeal consciousness which extends throughout *Down to My Last Skin* is here intensified and foregrounded, in poem after poem about living in/with/as an ageing body.

¹⁰ Sylvia Plath’s poetry, with its drive towards whiteness, flatness, nothingness, though often expressing interest in the body (especially in her poems about motherhood and illness), ultimately rejects it in favour of disembodied purity or self-erasure. This occasionally is evinced in Sexton’s poetry too; see, for example, “The Starry Night”.

¹¹ Other South African women notably contributing towards this body are Lisa Combrinck (*An Infinite Longing for Love*), Ingrid de Kok (*Seasonal Fires: New and Selected Poems*), Helen Moffett (*Strange Fruit*), Malika Ndlovu (*Invisible Earthquake: A Woman’s Journey through Still Birth*) and Wendy Woodward (*Séance for the Body*). Colleen Higgs’s independent, women’s poetry press, Modjaji Books, started in 2008, has especially been credited with enabling more of this poetry to be published in recent years (Schutte 50).

¹² In this poem Krog meditates on “her body”, and particularly her erotic and maternal body (“hymen”, “abdomen”, “breasts”), and its spiritual and political potential, to be “impregnated with spirit” and “midwife to a nation” (*Down* 13).

Metelerkamp's poetic engagement with the body is no less extended or intense. All seven of her collections reveal the expanse and depth of her corporeal concerns. As with Krog, this is apparent not only in the many poems about love, marriage, motherhood and ageing, but also in less obvious subject matter, such as the creation of poetry. This chapter will conclude by discussing examples of such poems.

The White Body

As this thesis is written from within a feminist framework, it focuses primarily on the femaleness of the bodies represented and explored in Krog's and Metelerkamp's poetry. However, the *whiteness* of these bodies also should not be ignored. In *White*, Richard Dyer states that "whiteness aspires to *dis-embodiment*" (39, emphasis in original) and that "white people are not racially seen and named" but "function as a human norm" (1). In response to this normative whiteness, "whiteness needs to be made strange" (Dyer 10). Leon de Kock, examining "whiteness in South Africa from a post-apartheid point of view" suggests that whiteness has "often been rendered 'blank', a taken-for-granted negative essence" and so needs not only to be made visible, but also "de-essentialise[d]" (176). Third wave and postcolonial critiques of Anglo-American, second wave feminism also emphasise the danger of universalising, and making hegemonic, the white body. Krog and Metelerkamp are writing in and from South Africa which, since 1948, was "the society most overtly organized around a legalized axis of 'race'" (Steyn 23), and which in the past two decades has overturned these laws but remains fissured along race lines both ideologically and socio-economically. As Nuttall and Bystrom contend, "[r]ace remains the most salient marked in a society composed on the ruins of a regime built on racial discrimination, where the body was perceived through a grid of politics and aesthetics" (n.p.). Therefore, the whiteness of the bodies Krog and Metelerkamp depict is critically relevant.

Apartheid developed a codification of the "master narrative of whiteness" that had underscored centuries of European colonialism and had just, at the moment of its post-WWII inception, started to unravel with the rise of independence movements and the consequent decolonization of much of Africa and Asia (Steyn 3-22). While apartheid can be seen as the ultimate legal encoding of this narrative, white

superiority had become ideologically entrenched amongst the white settlers of South Africa long before the National Party's rise to power (Steyn 23-43). This narrative was underscored by a Christian missionary manichaeism, where "‘clean’, ‘white’, ‘fair’, ‘light’ and ‘good’ were clustered together as the foundations of both aesthetics and civilization ... [in contrast and conflict with] what is ‘dark’, ‘black’, ‘dirty’, ‘sinful’, and ‘evil’" (Steyn 13).

In order to justify the ruthlessness of much colonial religious, cultural and economic domination, the colonized needed to be perceived as a threat, a dangerous foe who must, for the good of all civilization, be subdued. And the primary location of this danger has long been culturally-encoded as a rapacious black male sexuality, which threatens whiteness at the site of the, culturally-encoded, vulnerable and pure white female body. As Lucy Graham notes, by the eighteenth century "the white woman's body had become a cherished frontier, the guarantor of collective health and purity" (8). In contrast, the sexuality of black men was "exaggerated", with "[m]yths abound[ing] about the large penises of African men" and their "‘uncontrollable sexual drive’" (Young in Steyn 15). By "the mid-nineteenth century, stories about the violation of colonizing women by colonized men were seizing the European imagination across the breadth of the colonial world" (Graham 8-9). White South Africans, who through the eras of colonialism and apartheid were politically dominant despite their numerical minority, "have always been reminded of [the] tenuousness [of their dominant position]. The fear of being overrun, the fear of domination, the fear of losing the purity that was supposed to guarantee their superior position, the fear of cultural genocide through intermingling – these anxieties were always present" (Steyn 25). In naming these fears, Melissa E Steyn implies that they are located at the symbolic battle lines between the purity of white women's bodies and the aggressive sexuality of black men's bodies. The fear of miscegenation due to interracial rape has been expressed and constructed as "black peril", and has been used, into the twenty-first century, as a defensive rallying cry to either entrench, or recently attempt to regain, white minority political power (Graham 4).

White women have therefore "necessarily occupied an uneasy space, falling somewhere between the phallogocentricity of Cartesian subjectivity and the iconographic other of western imperialism" (West 4). As part of the "master race" and

white ruling minority, white women have long enjoyed symbolic and economic power. However, much of this white settler power has been gained and retained on the basis of white women's powerlessness: their need to be protected from "black peril".¹³ This powerlessness is located in the white woman's body, specifically the erotic and maternal body – it is her sexuality and procreativity which needs to be controlled and policed.¹⁴

The poetry of Krog and Metelerkamp engages South African whiteness in different ways and across different periods, from early colonialism, through apartheid to the current post-apartheid state. Of the two oeuvres, Metelerkamp's is less engaged with race. As a confessional poet her whiteness is implied, but remains mostly uninterrogated.¹⁵ Her clearest racial acknowledgement: "I'm white aren't I – showing my true colour?" is voiced by the *Floating Islands* character, Amanda (71). Despite her function as a concentration of Metelerkamp's academic and poetic self (see Weyer 12), the distancing of this acknowledgment through the persona of Amanda is notable, evidencing Metelerkamp's discomfort with an open engagement with her whiteness.¹⁶

In contrast to her silence about her white body, a black male body is quite frequently mentioned. In *Floating Islands*, Amanda's colleague, lover and ultimately husband, Nadeem, is described as a "small dark man" and much is (initially) made of their seemingly illicit ("they touch openly" but with a "faint trace of defiance")¹⁷ interracial relationship (22).¹⁸ In "Psyche's Fancy", for example, the shift from four regular tercets to a concluding couplet emphasizes the interracial sexual activity occurring:

¹³ For a further discussion of this topic, from a North American perspective, see Sabine Sielke's *Reading Rape: The Rhetoric of Sexual Violence in American Literature and Culture, 1790-1990*.

¹⁴ It is worth remembering that two of the first laws passed by the apartheid government were the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act (1949) and the Immorality Act (1950).

¹⁵ While this could be seen as complicit with a hegemonic, universalising whiteness, the autobiographical nature of her work moderates this critique.

¹⁶ The fact that 'Amanda', a "tall red head" in *Floating Islands* is, in her presentation at the end of "Changing Line" of *carrying the fire*, presented as black – see her remembered encounter with a policeman in the 1980s while lying on a 'white's only' bench (122) – strengthens this sense of racial discomfort, but could also be read as Metelerkamp's "begging to be black" (to use the title, and plea, of Krog's most recent prose work).

¹⁷ The volume is set in "August-December 1993" and thus the laws against interracial sexual and marital relationships had been repealed (5), but the descriptions of the "defiance" with which they touch each other shows that, *socially* though not legally, their relationship is regarded as controversial, if not taboo.

¹⁸ This soon shifts to an awareness of religious and cultural differences, with a focus on his Muslim mother's response to their marriage (*Floating* 64; 76; 77-79).

the white Amanda is “taking / the dark shaft between [her] fingers” (*Floating* 27). This poem demonstrates how raced corporeality inheres in the visible black body rather than in the invisible (normative) white body. In these lines, she overturns the ideological underpinning of “black peril” thinking, by showing the white woman actively seeking and sexually dominating the black man. However, the social implications are significantly undercut by the fact that the “dark man”, is already entrenched as a symbol in her previous collection, *Stone No More*. In the central poem “Joan”, “the dark man” is “my free spirit / the lover in the dark / is my own spirit come / to embrace me” and is thus understood to be Metelerkamp’s own psyche (*Stone* 32-33). The dark man is her soul, her unconscious, her Jungian shadow – not an actual person.¹⁹ But, playing on the Greek myth of Psyche and Cupid, he is also her “dream lover”, Cupid to her Psyche who, in “Portrait”, is “stroking her, stroking her leg” and who she can only “meet ... / at night”: “the dream man in whose presence / desire is pleasure and even waking, / [she is] longing to prolong the bruise of [his] absence” (*Stone* 47; 57; 53). This intertextuality is also heightened by the fact that, in “Portrait”, the “subject of [the speaker’s] critical attention” is a “painting” featuring “two cupids” (*Stone* 48). The symbolism, rather than realism, of the “dark man” in *Floating Islands*, is also asserted through its echoes of *Stone No More*’s “Kissing the rod”. Here, as in “Psyche’s fancy”, the lover is a poet²⁰ being seduced and undressed: “I am undoing your shirt”, “I am kissing your / buttons”, “I kiss the soft shaft’s rise” in “Kissing the rod” (*Stone* 67) and “I’ll be ... loosening a button, a zip”, “taking the dark shaft between my fingers” in “Psyche’s fancy” (*Floating* 27).²¹ In “Kissing the rod”, the lover is Metelerkamp’s poetic muse, as indicated by the Shakespearean epigraph: “Rise, resty muse” (67), and the poem shows the poet kissing the muse into rising. But the poem also bemoans the fact that her muse is, Cupid-like, “always deserting [her]”, before it demonstrates Metelerkamp’s poetic determination to “lick / [her muse] into shape” (*Stone* 68). In presenting her poetic muse as male, Metelerkamp is inverting the traditional gender order that posits women as passive objects of inspiration and men as active creators of art, but she is

¹⁹ In this sense, it perhaps elicits a similar critique to Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, for example Chinua Achebe’s comments about Conrad’s use of “Africa as a setting and backdrop which eliminates the African as human factor” and subsequent “dehumanization of Africa and Africans” (257). It does also demonstrate, though, the fault lines in writing about desire and bodies in the socially-scarred terrain of (post)apartheid South Africa.

²⁰ “A poet, Nadeem” (*Floating* 22); “I read your poems” (*Stone* 67).

²¹ The use of “shaft” in both poems recalls the symbol of Cupid, the archer.

doing so by inserting the black male body into the feminine passive position, and thereby seems to be trapped within this binary structure. Her muse, her shadow, the dark man, is also who she wants, more fully, to be: “a poet, not by proxy / nor apology nor in the margins” for whom poetry is “his desire, his discipline, his drive” (*Floating* 22).²² This poem thus evidences a shift: the desire *for* the dark man becomes a desire *to become* the dark man herself.

While Metelerkamp’s poetry moves swiftly from the social realities of race to a self-reflexive order of symbols, Krog’s work deals more concretely with race. Although this prominent preoccupation in her prose texts²³ has been productively examined,²⁴ it is also a notable subject of her poetry, from her earliest work until the present, where it has received less attention. In one of her “First Poems”, titled “outside nineveh”, Krog describes South Africa as “a tree with separate white thorns / with a small europe / in its africa”, and acknowledges her own racial identity and its problematic and dangerous existence in apartheid South Africa: “I stay your thorn / I stay white” (*Down* 14). In “demonstration lecture” she examines the predicament of being a white liberal in South Africa in the 1980s. Despite her palpable horror at the violence of white government forces, as a result of which “a child’s body / is loaded onto a jeep to bleed or die between boots”, and her anticipation of the “revolution [that] is being built”, she recognizes that she is nonetheless “white and hated” (*Down* 80-2). In her most recent collection, *Body Bereft*, rather than ignoring or downplaying her whiteness, she describes herself as: “I who am all-that-is-white who am lightningwhite and indissolubly always myself” (60). Along with recognizing her whiteness, Krog also interrogates and critiques it. She satirises the economically-privileged white farming families who glut themselves with their “plump white

²² The dark man can thus also be linked to “the angel” of *carrying the fire*: the angel of the annunciation is her muse, her illicit lover, eros itself, which inspires so much of her work (74-6; 99).

²³ The title of her most recent prose book, *Begging to Be Black*, aptly reflects the racial preoccupation of this text, and both *Country of My Skull* and *A Change of Tongue* engage closely with white Afrikaner identity, and its interactions with black African identities, in the first decade of South Africa’s democracy.

²⁴ See Carli Coetzee “‘They Never Wept, the Men of My Race’: Antjie Krog’s *Country of My Skull* and the White South African Signature”, Sarah Nuttall “Subjectivities of Whiteness”, Helene Strauss “From Afrikaner to African: Whiteness and the Politics of Translation in Antjie Krog’s *A Change of Tongue*”, Mary West “The Metamorphosis of the Sole/Soul: Shades of Whiteness in Antjie Krog’s *A Change of Tongue*” in *White Woman Writing White: Identity and Representation in Post-Apartheid Literatures of South Africa*, West and Helize van Vuuren “The Universal Sanctity of Whiteness: Antjie Krog’s Negotiation of Black Responses to White Transformation in *A Change of Tongue*” and Zoë Wicomb “Five Afrikaner Texts and the Rehabilitation of Whiteness”.

fingers” in their private, apartheid-protected “house of sweets” (*Down* 89). In *Body Bereft’s* post-apartheid South Africa, she warns against hegemonic whiteness, its “tyranny of one”, which arrogantly asserts its universality, its uncontested knowledge of truth: “I get a fright from the omnipresent / white who sits like this: / stipulating truth-ness” (65).

This critique of whiteness is not just related to the poet’s experience of apartheid conditions and its ongoing ramifications, but also to the centuries of colonization preceding it. In “land”, Krog shows her genealogical complicity in this history: “under orders from my ancestors you [South Africa] were occupied” (*Down* 114). Despite this occupation, there has been a curious lack of commitment to and rootedness in Africa itself. In “how long”, Krog explores the socio-cultural bypassing of Africa by its white settlers, who are thus, despite “three centuries [of occupation still] nothing more / than pieces of western curiosa” (*Down* 83). Discussing white South Africans’ preference for European styles of, among other categories, architecture, landscaping, interior decorating, music, literature, cuisine and fashion, she shows how, despite their occupation, white South Africans have “[n]ever indisputably land[ed] in Africa” (*Down* 83). This apparent contradiction of white life in Africa can also be seen in JM Coetzee’s description of white writing as that which is “white only insofar as it is generated by the concerns of people no longer European, not yet African” (11). As we grow into our democracy, the hope, or fear, is that “what was white writing will atrophy” (Metelerkamp, *Floating* 71). In terms of Coetzee’s description of “white writing”, this process of atrophy is socially desirable, as it demonstrates that white South Africans are identifying and aligning themselves more with Africa than Europe. But if the idea of ‘whiteness’ is essentialised and ahistoricised and “white writing” is understood to be any writing produced by a writer with a ‘white’ skin, then this process of degeneration is perceived as threatening and demoralizing to ‘white writers’. In “hands full of poems”, Metelerkamp thus bitterly tells herself to “throw [her poems] to the wind / take them, throw them / your country does not want them / your people have no need” (*Into* 87). The reasons for this bitterness are, however, not only self-constructed, part of an individual failure to redefine whiteness, but also a response to ongoing antagonistic essentialisations of race in post-apartheid South African society in attempts to inspire speedier socio-economic change. Metelerkamp’s quotation of the lines “kill the poet / kill the white woman”, which are acknowledged

as being from a “poem circulated by email” by “Mphutlane wa Bofelo” is a telling example of this (*Burnt* 46).

As a result of the colonial legacy of still-European whiteness in South Africa, both Krog and Metelerkamp attest to a difficulty in truly belonging to, and being accepted by, this country. Metelerkamp, through the persona of Amanda, describes South Africa as “this place / where I dare not seek / reflection for my face” (*Floating* 57). Krog, deeply affected by the TRC hearings, declares: “I belong to that binding black African heart”, but this declaration is moderated in her next statement that only “for one brief shimmering moment this country / ... is also truly [her’s]” (*Down* 97). The moment of acceptance and belonging is tenuous and fragile, “brief” and “shimmering”, a dream or a mirage. As a result of this tenuous sense of belonging, identity itself is challenged. In “land” Krog thus recounts that, due to her perceived rejection by South Africa (“land that would not have me / land that never belonged to me / land that I loved more fruitlessly than before”), “slowly I became nameless in my mouth” (*Down* 114).

Krog and Metelerkamp are both white women poets of the body, whose work engages not only with women’s bodies, as the following chapters of this thesis will thoroughly examine, but also with the whiteness of bodies. In different ways and to different degrees their poetry explores particular constructions of whiteness, and white womanhood, in apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa and the private and public effects of these constructions. In these explorations and meditations on whiteness they can be seen as contributing to a writing about whiteness in South Africa that is “still embedded in an epistemology of truth, lies and confession ” (Nuttall, *Entanglement* 82).

Embodiment Theory

In their work, Krog and Metelerkamp do not merely use the body for poetry material, but describe and define the body as the essence or root of their identity and humanity. Both poets thus present a fully embodied view of the self, as opposed to the insidiously powerful Cartesian view, in which mind and spirit are separate from, and raised above, the base body within which they are imprisoned. In *Body Bereft*, Krog

overtly subverts Descartes's foundational ontological dictum: I think, therefore I am.

She declaims:

... I am not
I, without my body
only through my body can I in-
habit this earth. my soul
is my body entire. my body
embodies what I am.
do not turn against me, oh do not
ever leave me. do not
cave in around me, do not plummet
away from me, do not
die off on me, do not leave me with-
out testimony. I
have a body, therefore I am. step
into the breach for me –
yes, you are my only mandate to
engage the earth in love. (*Body Bereft* 93-94; ellipsis added)

In this poem, Krog makes explicit statements about the essentialness of the body. These statements are also made by the poem's structure: by using hypens to break lines mid sentence, -phrase and -word, this poem undermines the Cartesian practice of drawing neat, clear delineations between its dual components and thus emphasises that the world is in flux and cannot be neatly contained and separated. Furthermore, the created phrase: "only through my body can I in- / habit this earth" indicates not only that one needs a body to inhabit the earth, but also that one's existence and very identity are formed by one's habits, which are the repetitive actions of one's body. Therefore both the words and the form of this poem are anti-Cartesian. However, even as Krog proclaims her adherence to principles of embodiment, her expression "I / have a body, therefore I am", which treats the body as the possession of the 'I', shows the difficulty of truly escaping Cartesian binary logic in the available language.

The difficult struggle, to write through a body that has so long been constructed in and through language as inert and passive due to the saturation of Cartesian logic, can be seen in Metelerkamp sometimes framing her escape in an essentialising discourse. Diana Fuss defines essentialism as "a belief in true essence – that which is most irreducible, unchanging, and therefore constitutive of a given person or thing" and writes that, typically viewed in contrast to constructionist (and deconstructionist) thought, essentialism has been "persistently maligned" (2; xi). In *carrying the fire*,

Metelerkamp refers to various parts of the body as her “essence”: “my skin, my breasts, my hair / ... shoulders, my skin, my scent / ... my essence” (37). This essentialisation could be seen as a mere inversion of the Cartesian hierarchy, with body replacing mind as the essential and dominant term, leaving the fundamental binary nature of this logic unchanged. However, rather than judging Metelerkamp as weakly “‘falling into’ or ‘lapsing into’ essentialism”, I contend that that Metelerkamp actively “deploys” essentialism here to intervene in, and strategically reject, the insidious Cartesian reduction of the ontological, epistemological and ethical value of the body²⁵ (Fuss xii). Beyond strategic essentialisation, Metelerkamp’s work also asserts a radical unity of body and mind. In *Stone No More*, for example, she emphasizes that “spirit and freedom ... [are] lodged in the marrow of the self”. As I’ve argued elsewhere, this quote specifies that “[t]he self is material, it has ‘marrow’, and those ‘profound abstracts’ like ‘spirit and freedom’, envisaged as human subjectivity’s defining features are, in fact ‘lodged in’ and indivisible from, our base materiality” (Weyer 20).

Metelerkamp and Krog thus attest to an ontological embodiment in a struggle against Cartesian duality. In doing so, they can be seen as building on the work of Merleau-Ponty in his magnum opus, *Phenomenology of Perception*. In this work, Merleau-Ponty, influenced by the insights of his phenomenological forerunner, Edmund Husserl, produced what can be seen as the first fully developed theory of embodiment.²⁶ In this theory, the “body is not an object” (Merleau-Ponty 198). While Cartesian thinking focuses on the disparity between the two types of beings – “one exists as a thing or else one exists as a consciousness” – Merleau-Ponty asserts: “The experience of our own body, on the other hand, reveals to us an ambiguous mode of existing” an entwining of object and subject (198). Furthermore, as a phenomenologist working from perception and lived experience, Merleau-Ponty argues that the “union of body and soul is not an amalgamation between two mutually

²⁵ As Fuss argues, not only is “constructionism [merely] ... a more sophisticated form of essentialism”, but there is also “an important distinction to be made ... between ‘deploying’ or ‘activating’ essentialism”, which Fuss defines as “impl[ying] that essentialism may have some strategic or interventionary value”, and weakly “‘falling into’ or ‘lapsing into’ essentialism”(xii).

²⁶ While Husserl’s thinking, particularly as set out in the manuscript *Ideas II*, which was only published in 1952 and thus postdates the publication of Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), is a definite foundation upon which Merleau-Ponty built, his work has often been read as focusing on “a disembodied and desituated consciousness” and a “fuller appreciation of the range and richness of Husserl’s work in phenomenology of the body” has only emerged fairly recently (Behnke 235-6).

external terms, subject and object, brought about by arbitrary decree. It is enacted at every instant in the movement of existence” (88-9). The body, “the vehicle of being in the world”, thus embodies and illuminates the very nature of being as ambiguous (82). Existence is not only ambiguous; it is also intersubjective. Additionally, as Roslyn Diprose, drawing on Merleau-Ponty, argues, “it is because the body is constituted in relation to others that it is ambiguous, opened to the world and to others, and so can act at all” (*Corporeal* 68-9). This focus on intersubjectivity clearly resonates with the relational subjectivity that was explored and highlighted in the previous chapter.

Merleau-Ponty’s theories “have been subject to extensive critique for their masculinist bias” (Olkowski 6); nevertheless there is a long tradition of productive feminist engagement with his work.²⁷ The originator of this tradition is Simone de Beauvoir (Olkowski 3). De Beauvoir’s review of *Phenomenology of Perception* praises it as “a book which interests the whole man and every man: the human condition is at stake there” (in Langer 88). Although not acknowledging her debt to Merleau-Ponty (see Langer 88-9), de Beauvoir’s *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, published a year after this review, clearly examines the ethics of, or what is “at stake” in, the radical ambiguity of existence (Langer 88). Her next work, *The Second Sex*, continues this project, but with a specific focus on the lived experiences of women. De Beauvoir asserts that “in order to explain her limitations it is women’s situation that must be invoked and not a mysterious essence” and then argues that woman’s primary situation is her body (*Second* 723). She writes: “the body is not a *thing*, it is a situation, as viewed in the perspective I am adopting – that of Heidegger, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty:²⁸ it is the instrument of our grasp upon the world, a limiting factor for our projects”, but it does not determine one’s life (*Second* 66, emphasis in original).²⁹ De Beauvoir uses, and develops for feminist purposes, Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of “the strange ambiguity of existence made body” through which “[t]o be present in the world

²⁷ This would include Simone de Beauvoir, Luce Irigaray, Iris Marion Young, Judith Butler, Sonia Kruks, Vicki Kirby, Gail Weiss and Roslyn Diprose.

²⁸ Despite this moderation of her allegiance to the thought of Merleau-Ponty by mentioning him alongside Heidegger and Sartre, Sara Heinämaa has demonstrated that her “discussion of embodiment is more akin to Merleau-Ponty’s” than either Heidegger’s or Sartre’s (72-3).

²⁹ De Beauvoir has been heavily criticised for the supposed biological determinism in *The Second Sex*, however these critiques are unfounded. She repeatedly and clearly states: “Certainly [physiological] facts cannot be denied – but in themselves they have no meaning” or value, and therefore there is “no physiological destiny” (*Second* 66; 725).

implies strictly that there exists a body which is at once a material thing in the world and a point of view towards this world” (*Second* 39).

Influenced by Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, and/or De Beauvoir’s feminist extension of that philosophy, much work has recently been done to develop a theory of embodiment, particularly within feminism. Londa Schiebinger identifies “the 1970s” as the decade in which “feminists reinserted the body into history” (1); Elizabeth Grosz recalls how “1980s culture exploded around a celebration of the body” (*Space* 1); and Kathy Davis “mark[s] an enormous upsurge of interdisciplinary interest in the body, both in academia and in popular culture” since the mid-1980s, creating a veritable “body craze” (“Em-bodying” 1).³⁰ Accounting for this proliferation, Grosz notes that, although “bodies have always been the objects of theoretical and pragmatic concern [...] ... it is only very recently that philosophical and feminist theory has developed terms complicated enough to do justice to the rich ... complexity of bodies”, and, from a feminist perspective, “it is even more recently that feminists have come to regard women’s bodies as objects of intense wonder and productivity, pleasure and desire, rather than of regulation and control” as “impediment[s] to our humanity” (*Space* 2). Certainly the work of Merleau-Ponty and De Beauvoir has been instrumental in developing the appropriate conceptual and analytical tools and terms, thereby enabling the reshaping of women’s relationships with their bodies. These tools and terms have been utilized by the many feminist philosophies of embodiment produced in recent years, including Jane Gallop’s *Thinking Through the Body* (1988), Judith Butler’s *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex’* (1993), Rosalyn Diprose’s *The Bodies of Women: Ethics, Embodiment and Sexual Difference* (1994), Elizabeth’s Grosz’s *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism* (1994) and *Space, Time, and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies* (1995) and Vicki Kirby’s *Telling Flesh: The Substance of the Corporeal* (1997). In these texts, embodiment theories have been developed that work to undermine Cartesian ontology and reconstitute and resituate the female body as a valuable subject of feminist study.

To return to the quote from Krog that initiated this discussion, what she is expressing is not a mere ontological embodiment – “I am not / I, without my body/ ... / my soul

³⁰ The academic interest in the body can be gauged by the numerous titles published on this subject. See Davis for a list of mid-1980s to mid 1990s titles (“Em-bodying” 1).

“/ is my body entire” – but rather an epistemological embodiment. Krog asserts that without her body she would be “with-/out testimony”. Testimony refers to one’s *knowledge* about a certain matter that is formally, and thus corporeally, expressed (orally or in writing).³¹ As the very root of the word testimony is from the Latin *testis* meaning “a witness”, in other words someone who has sensory experience and knowledge of an event and is able to corporeally express this, Krog’s use of this term indicates a radical epistemological embodiment. Similarly, in *carrying the fire*, Metelerkamp avers that “the only way to know” is “embodied, in your body” (81). This is a refutation of Cartesian epistemology, which draws on the foundational Platonic theory that the mind is the primary, if not only, means of knowledge acquisition (as expressed, for example, in his oft-cited allegory, the myth of the cave). Following Cartesian, and Platonic, principles, “[t]rue knowledge comes from the proper use of reason, or logic; sensual input, where not misleading, is still only useful after it has been organized by the mind” (Weyer 22). The body is then largely irrelevant to epistemology. Krog’s poetry, like Metelerkamp’s, which asserts that “truth is ... / ... known in the body” (*carrying* 81), is concordant with recent embodiment thought that argues that “[w]e conceptualise and reason the ways we do because of the kind of bodies we have, the kind of environment we inhabit, and the symbolic systems we inherit, which are themselves grounded in our embodiment” (Johnson 99). Michael O’Donovan, in particular, has focused on “bring[ing] the body more fully into the epistemic picture” by arguing that “[t]he knowing self is not just the sensing mind, but the moving, intruding, fully embodied interactive self, a self which can access the world by means other than the epistemic text of interpreted sensation” (6).

Furthermore, Krog’s text also suggests another, less thoroughly researched aspect of embodiment, its ethics. Testimony, as Shoshana Felman has argued, is fundamentally ethical: in testimony “[m]emory is conjured ... in order to *address* another, to impress upon a listener, to *appeal* to a community” (39; emphasis in original). Therefore, “[t]o testify is not merely to narrate but to commit oneself, and the narrative, to others: to *take responsibility*” (Felman 39-40; emphasis in original). Krog’s statement that the

³¹ Beyond this rather basic definition, testimony also has an important ethical component, as will shortly be discussed.

body enables testimony thus demonstrates how the body enables ethical commitment and responsiveness in our interactions with others.

When Krog asserts that her body is her “only mandate to / engage the earth in love” she attests to a Levinasian form of ethics that is founded upon human embodiment. Levinas argues that “the incarnation of human subjectivity guarantees its spirituality” (*Ethics* 97). “[E]mbodiment is the very condition of ethics”, or spirituality, or love (Diehm 55). For Levinas, ethics is “the responsiveness of an embodied being to the needs of another embodied being”, and is thus focused on the openness and responsiveness of the subject to the Other (Diehm 51). Levinas locates this openness and responsiveness to the Other at the site of the face-to-face encounter. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas grounds this in the expressive face’s “refusal” or inability to be “contained” or “encompassed” – it remains Other (194). In the “infinitely transcendent, infinitely foreign” face of the other is the “primordial *expression*, is the first word: ‘you shall not commit murder’” (*Totality* 194; 199, emphasis in original). Writing of the face’s expressive nature that is the pre-condition of its ethical function due to the “bond between expression and responsibility”, Levinas declares:

The being that expresses itself imposes itself, but does so precisely by appealing to me with its destitution and nudity – its hunger – without my being able to be deaf to that appeal. Thus in expression the being that imposes itself does not limit but promote my freedom, by arousing my goodness. (*Totality* 200)

Levinas thus asserts that the face-to-face or “facing position, opposition par excellence, can be only as a moral summons” (*Totality* 196).

In this discussion, “face” can be read synecdochically as referring to the body entire, for as Levinas later attests: “the whole body – a hand or curve of the shoulder – can express as the face” (*Totality* 262) and thus “the whole human is in this sense more or less face” (*Ethics* 97). Simon Lumsden consequently asserts that the “body is the condition for the ‘susceptibility’ to the Other” (237), a susceptibility to the suffering expressed in the body of the other which “solicits me and calls me”, thereby establishing an ethical relationship (Levinas in Diehm 55). In Krog’s poem, she extends Levinas’s ethics of intersubjectivity, by describing the body as mandating her to engage the entire “earth” in love, not just its human inhabitants. While other people

are surely the foremost beneficiaries of an ethical engagement with “the earth” and are thus clearly implied in this mandate, it simultaneously insists on a broader, more encompassing ethics, which can be linked to the growing field of ecofeminism.

Underscoring the embodied ontology, epistemology and ethics in Krog’s and Metelerkamp’s poetry is a sustained engagement with the grotesque body, and exploration of the notion of abjection. Current understanding and usage of the term “grotesque” has been principally shaped by Mikhail Bakhtin. In *Rabelais and his World*, Bakhtin asserts that the grotesque “is looking for that which protrudes from the body, all that seeks to go beyond the body’s confines ... and links it to other bodies or the world outside” (316-7). The grotesque “is a body in the act of becoming” that is “never finished, never completed” (Bakhtin 317). It “ignores the impenetrable surface that closes and limits the body as a separate and completed phenomenon” (Bakhtin 318). Instead, it is penetrable, open, unlimited, collective, incomplete. The grotesque body “transgress[es] its own body” by connecting to, absorbing and excreting, other bodies, other worldly phenomena (Bakhtin 317). This is why Bakhtin focuses his attention on bodily acts such as “[e]ating, drinking, defecation and other elimination (sweating, blowing of the nose, sneezing) as well as copulation, pregnancy, dismemberment, swallowing up by another body” and why, other than “the gaping mouth”, his attention is trained on the “material bodily lower stratum” (368-436).

The description which comes to dominate Bakhtin’s investigation of the “material bodily lower stratum” is “ambivalence”: the “unofficial aspect of ... the grotesque body is ... ancient ambivalence” (420). The term “ambivalent” is used excessively (as befits a discussion of the excessive grotesque body) and thus becomes interwoven with the concept of the grotesque body (while the term is frequently used throughout the chapter, see particularly the abundant use on page 409 and 418-9). The grotesque body as open and penetrable ambivalently transgresses those boundaries that are traditionally seen to create and contain the autonomous, individual subject.

The notion of subjectivity as established and maintained by exclusionary boundaries has been variously formulated by different theorists. One of the most influential of these theories is developed by Julia Kristeva by means of her concept of abjection.

For Kristeva, abjection is the struggle “which fashions the human being” in its “earliest attempts to release the hold of *maternal* entity even before ex-isting outside of her” and this struggle “is a violent, clumsy breaking away, with the constant risk of falling back under the sway of a power as securing as it is stifling” (*Powers* 13, emphasis in original). Abjection is thus about the attempt to create a bounded space that a subject can homogeneously occupy. In order to exist, the ‘I’ needs to “*separate, reject, ab-ject*” (Kristeva, *Powers* 13, emphasis in original). The focus of abjection is the abject: that which is “opposed to *I*” and which must thus be “radically excluded” (*Powers* 1; 2). Examples of the abject that Kristeva provides in *Powers of Horror* include “filth, waste, or dung ... sewage, and muck” (2), a “corpse ... [a] wound with blood and pus ... the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay” (3), “[e]xcrement and ... [m]enstrual blood” (71). The abject induces a physical response of “repugnance” and repulsion that “safeguards” the borders of subjectivity: a response of abjection, visible in the “spasms and vomiting that protect me” (Kristeva, *Powers* 2).

Referring to the significance of the abject and the necessity of abjection for the maintenance of subjectivity, Kristeva argues:

refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These bodily fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border (*Powers* 231, emphasis in original).

This extrication of the self from the abject, this necessary process of life-affirming abjection, is demonstrated in Krog’s “toilet poem”:

I piss shuddering rigid half squatting
between my legs

into a toilet bowl heaped halfway up
with at least four different colours of shit

every nerve ending erect with revulsion, poised to go mad
if just one drop should splash against me (*Down* 54).

The physical symptoms of abjection are present: Krog is “shuddering” and “every nerve ending [is] erect with revulsion”. The repercussions of being unable to separate oneself from the abject are clear: Krog will “go mad / if just one drop [of urine, menstrual blood or excrement] should splash against [her]”. Her very identity, her

sane sense of selfhood, is threatened by the presence of the abject. But concurrently with its rejection, the abject “forces [its] way into the territory of poetic themes”. Although the abject is ejected from the poetically-depicted body, it enters into the poem, into the body of the poem. Within confessional poetry, the abject is invited in; it is included.

Kristeva, in fact, argues that, although abjection is necessary for subject formation, the abject should not be delegitimised. Gail Weiss summarises her argument, explaining that abject is important as it contains “creative ‘juices’ that flow from this abjected domain in the form of 1) the revolutionary possibilities of poetic language and 2) the maternal re-enactment of ... the ‘original narcissistic crisis’ through pregnancy and childbirth” (Weiss 46). Therefore, Kristeva is trapped in a dilemma: abjection is necessary, but it is harmful, particularly for poets and mothers. However, rather than seeing this as a dilemma, Kristeva appears to view abjection itself as evidence of the “paternally sanctioned culture” that asserts “the mastery of the univocal signifier ... and ... the autonomy of the subject”, and thus poetry and maternity are “subversive strateg[ies]” that undermine this patriarchal culture (Butler, “Body Politics” 170).

Kristeva’s answer to the question: “How can I be without a border?” is that I, as an independent subject within a patriarchal culture, cannot. Without borders, the I is “engulf[ed]” by the abject (*Powers* 4). Significantly then, “[i]t is not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (Kristeva, *Powers* 4). In short, it is the *grotesque*.

While abjection forms and protects individual subjectivity through an exclusionary (and masculinist) logic of either/or,³² the grotesque emphasises collective intersubjectivity through its ambiguous inclusionary logic of both/and. Therefore, although for Kristeva the presence of the abject necessarily causes abjection, the inclusion and detailed descriptions of grotesque bodies in literature – as Bakhtin has argued Rabelais does, and I, building on this, will argue Krog and Metelerkamp do in

³² In her interview with McGrane Krog speaks of rejecting this “very male either/or notion”.

their portrayals of maternal, erotic and ageing bodies – is a challenge to the inevitability of abjection, and through this, the authority of patriarchal culture and its assertion of autonomous Cartesian subjects.

Poem as a Body

While differentiating poetry from prose is not an exact science, and many conflicting hypotheses have been formulated, two obvious axes of defining difference are the way a poem looks and sounds. Amittai F. Aviram (who draws on and adapts the work of Robert Scholes et al) proposes the useful notion that poetry and prose should be viewed not as definable entities in their own right, but rather seen as “hypothetical directions defining the line” or axis of literary work; one could then “place a number of literary texts (or rather groups of texts) at points along the line relative to each other” (46). To refine Aviram’s proposition, one could divide his hypothetical line into two axes: the axis of the sight, or visual form, and the sound, or auditory form, of a literary text. The most poetic of literary texts would thus tend to cluster in one quadrant, and discrepancies in visual and auditory form would be easily noted.

Poetic texts, divided into lines and stanzas, which aren’t always uniformly aligned to the left margin of the page and sometimes utilize unequal spacing within, as well as between lines, or even between words, can typically be differentiated on sight from their neatly blocked and paragraphed prose cousins. (Of course, prose poems or more poetic prose texts edge towards each other on the axis of visual form, and thus pure poetry and pure prose should be seen not as fixed end points on the axis, but rather as hypothetical directions.) On this distinguishing axis, while the visual form of prose is mechanically, or now electronically, blocked to most efficiently fill the set numbers of pages or quires allocated to that text, poetic visual form is more unique and idiosyncratic, resisting the principles of uniformity and efficiency. In this resistance, poetic texts attract attention to their visual form, which is not subjugated by and subsumed into the content (as, one could argue, happens in a standard prose text). Poetic texts draw attention to their idiosyncratic visual *form*, or *body*. Poetic texts often have beguiling curves, sharp angles, bold protuberances, beckoning crevices. They have vulnerably extended limbs, fragile wrists, strong thighs, sturdy trunks.

Some bodies are tightly compact and contained, others have been violated and rent asunder.³³

Krog's "Parole" is visually structured to emphasise a struggle about the possible, or preferred, relationship between aesthetics and ethics, art and politics, in 1980s South Africa: that "aesthetics is the only ethic" or that "words should be AK47s" (*Down* 57; 55).³⁴ Presenting this binary argument, the body of the poem is dichotomized into clearly separated and indented sections, corporeally and conceptually arguing on the one hand and then on the other. Initially these dueling aesthetic-ethical positions are neatly presented as "two evils", with the separate blocks of text appearing to be strong, secure and self-contained. The tight typographical units of the first two pages, islands of texts surrounded and protected by empty space, can thus be compared to the third page, where the left-hand block of text ("if my senses" until "which always fight back to the truth") touches and joins with the right-hand block ("all the writers are dead aren't they" until "but the demands do not tolerate neutral ground") without a distancing stanzaic break (*Down* 55-57). This initial separation of standpoints seems to mimic the neat socio-political and ideological separation of races attempted by apartheid policies. More personally, the typographical separation also speaks to an alienation Krog attests to within her own racial and cultural identification, that despite being "born / from a guild / of greed and scorn" Krog states that she has "always felt [her]self apart / a hedge between myself and / them myself and the slaughter" (*Down* 57). However, as the poem develops these textual blocks start breaking down: the firmly-clenched fists start to relax and uncurl their fingers, becoming vulnerable as they start trying to reach each other, which could be seen as mocking the apartheid attempt at segregation. At this point in the poem the two hands of the argument "try to find a bridge" and create a connection, however, this is not entirely successfully

³³ See, for example, May Swenson's ragged, fissured "Bleeding", the opening lines of which read:

Stop bleeding said the knife.
 I would if I could said the cut.
 Stop bleeding you make me messy with this blood.
 I'm sorry said the cut.
 Stop or I will sink in further said the knife. (1910)

³⁴ In writing on this topic in the late 1980s (the Afrikaans original is included in her 1989 collection *Lady Anne*) Krog contributes to a crucial conversation in South African literary theory during the transition to democracy, a conversation initiated by Njabulo Ndebele's "Rediscovery of the Ordinary" and "Redefining Relevance" and then later galvanized by Albie Sachs's "Preparing ourselves for Freedom" and its many respondents (particularly Michael Chapman's "The Critic in a State of Emergency" and "Writing in a State of Emergency" and the essays collected by Ingrid de Kok and Karen Press in *Spring is Rebellious: Arguments about Cultural Freedom*).

achieved as “the feudal clash between lyddite and lie” continues in the corpus as well as the content on the final stanzas of poem (*Down* 58). The visual form of “Parole” thus demonstrates the divergent critical perspectives on the relationship between art and politics in late-apartheid South Africa, and the struggle to reconcile these views.

Metelerkamp’s “Intact”, from *Burnt Offering*, explores a tested but intact marriage through an image of the couple going to sleep. The opening quatrain, using enjambment, repetition, alliteration and a regular meter (constructed out of only monosyllabic words) consists of two mirrored pairs of lines:

we are back
to back
you sink in
to sleep (*Burnt* 51).

In contrast to this opening stanza, with its short, regular, repetitive lines that seem to gently fade away or drift into sleep, the next stanza’s long reaching lines interrupt the hypnotic “sink in / to sleep” and form a hard ledge of “sleeplessness” (*Burnt* 51). Despite this disjunction, the paired lines of the stanza show that the “breathing wall” of her husband supports the sleepless speaker – despite the conflict of “sleep” and “sleeplessness”, replicated in the short and long lines, the continuing presence of the paired form, the couplet, demonstrates the continuing unity of the couple. The third stanza returns initially to the structure of the first – short, neat lines – though the last line reaches vulnerably out into space. With the use of italics in the final stanza each individual letter leans forwards as the line-lengths build, slowly stretching into the future. The poem’s visual form thus evokes the bodies of the sleeper and sleepless, accentuates their different forms, yet simultaneously emphasizes their “completely / contradictory” unity and their anticipation of their intact future (*Burnt* 51). Like Krog’s “Parole”, Metelerkamp’s “Intact” uses the visual form of the poem in order to demonstrate and elaborate, but also to interrogate and test, its content.

Along the axis of sound, poetry can again be differentiated from prose by the manner in which the poem’s auditory form draws attention to itself. As occurs visually, the sound of the poem isn’t subjugated by and subsumed into its content (as happens in much prose writing), but is manifestly present, resisting a purely cognitive, denotative reading or interpretation of the poem. Through the use of alliteration, assonance,

onomatopoeia, puns, rhyme, rhythm, meter, repetition, enjambment and caesura the vitality and validity of the aural texture of a poem is asserted.³⁵ And even on the level of individual phonemes, as John Vernon (who cites Rousseau, Wellek and Warren and Edmond Jabés) notes: “sounds themselves are bodies; syllables can be sleepy, vulgar, prudish, withered, lazy, moist, heavy” (54). Through these features of the auditory form, a poem acquires not only a style, mood or tone, but a fully embodied voice.³⁶

While neither Krog’s nor Metelerkamp’s poetry makes use of traditional rhyme and metrical schemes, their work does sound as poetic as it looks. The final poem from the first part of Metelerkamp’s *carrying the fire*, in which she describes letting go of her love affair with the Russian writer whom she met in Switzerland, is a superb example of the rich, complex sound patterns of her poetry:

last night I was kissing you, last kiss, this dream
goodbye –
my dream unreeling filaments of menstrual bleeding
lines like frilling Cyrillic spilling strings of simple
signs bleeding
goodbye. (46)

This poem uses assonance: / əi / (night, I, goodbye, my, lines, like, signs); / ī / (dream, unreeling, bleeding); / i / (kissing, kiss, unreeling, bleeding, frilling, Cyrillic, spilling, strings); / i / (filaments, frilling, Cyrillic, spilling, simple); alliteration (s, l, r) and internal rhyme (goodbye – my, unreeling – bleeding, frilling – spilling) to emphasise the harmony, and obsessiveness, of this relationship. With the constant repetition of the four vowel sounds, the poem demonstrates that the partners echo each other and are bonded together in rhyming pairs. This unity is destroyed by the final “goodbye”, unpartnered and on its own line, which signals complete desolation, and whose mournful sound contains the echoes of “cry”, and “die”.³⁷

³⁵ Note also how many of these poetic “devices” function on the visual plane as well.

³⁶ Some theorists have suggested that a poem on the page should be understood as a musical score for a poetry performance or reading: “The words on the page are merely a score; the actual poem consists of words activated, at least in the imagination of the reader, by human speech” (Vernon 1). Poems thus arguably only become fully embodied in their reading or performance, but nevertheless, even when existing silently on the page, they reach towards bodiliness, in a way which prose texts do not.

³⁷ This analysis draws on that produced in my MA (see Weyer 40-41), however it does so for a different, and more far-reaching, purpose. The MA presented its analysis to support the contention that “Metelerkamp is aware of the physiognomic dimension of language and seeks to enhance the affective quality of her own language by intensifying its physiognomic aspects” (Weyer 40). What I am

Similarly, two lines from Krog's "writing ode" demonstrate her subtle manipulation of sound for poetic effect: "Sundays when late afternoon light slips into stone / he walks against the mountain slopes" (*Body* 33). These lines utilize alliteration (s, l, t, n) and assonance (Sundays, late, against; afternoon, into) to evoke the slow, repetitively hypnotic strolls, but even more aurally seductive is the effortless segue, from the first to second line, into a regular andante iambic tetrameter, in an echo of the weekly walk described.

The use of sound effects to accentuate, and more fully embody, poetry occurs in less obvious methods too, such as the use of Latinate or Germanic words. For example, in Metelerkamp's poem above, the disjunction between the Latinate "filaments", evoking an artful fragility and incandescence, and the common, corporeal Germanic "bleeding", aurally suggests the ambiguity of menstruation itself: a regular bodily process, a sign of fertility, an indicator of death (of the unfertilized ovum), a bringer of relief or despair, a symbol of female power or shame. Simultaneously it suggests the speaker's complex response to this experience of menstruation at the end of her affair: it is experienced as a loss, the "unreeling" of a "dream", the "spilling" of something precious, as providing a sense of closure with this final "goodbye"; but it is also subtly evocative of erotic and poetic power, enabling her to create the "lines like frilling Cyrillic" and "strings of simple / signs" of the volume, *carrying the fire*, that this affair has gifted her with.

In Krog's translation of her poetry into English, sound is used in order to emphasise and embody her linguistic, literary and cultural heritage as an Afrikaans-speaking South African. As discussed in the introduction to this thesis, Krog is aware that in the translation of poetry, "[w]hat is irretrievably lost is the sound of the poem, the resonance of specific words to others, the literary history of a word, the aura it brings into a poem. What is also lost is the specific place of a poem in its literary tradition, its literary 'line', the sound of it within its own language" (in Christiansë 16). Therefore where other, earlier translations of her poems were "too smooth, too English; that is, that any trace of the Afrikaans roots of the texts has been removed" (Marshall 81), she wanted her own translations to "sound Afrikaans, but in English"

attempting to do here in the PhD is to develop and support my central argument that a poem is a body, and is therefore invested with a specific ethical potential.

thereby reminding the reader or listener “to be aware all the time that he or she was busy with somebody that is *not* English, somebody coming from another sensibility, another loyalty, another culture (“In the name”). Through the choice of awkward and idiosyncratic translations,³⁸ Krog uses the sounds of her translated poems to retain the vibrations of her embodied experiences as an Afrikaans writer who was raised in, and is responding to, an Afrikaans literary-cultural heritage.

The differentiation between poetry and prose, on the basis of what it looks and sounds like, indicates that poetry is the more fully embodied genre. The form of poetry is more akin to human form. With Vernon, “by ‘form’ I don’t mean a skin detachable from a poem, or a mold into which the content is poured. Rather, I mean the body of the poem itself, which is at the intersection where what we normally call form and content meet” (3). The body of the poem exists at the intersection of form and content, but so too does the human body, which exists at the intersection of subject and object. A poem is therefore not a body in the same way that inanimate objects like tables and chairs are anthropomorphically described as bodies, with legs, feet, arms and backs. It is not merely a metaphor. While our embodied existence causes us to perceive and categorise the world according to our own bodies, the identification of poem and body goes beyond this. It is the very fact that bodies, human and animal, are not inanimate objects but “intersection[s] of subject and object” that defines a poem as a body (Vernon 1). As Vernon argues: “My body is the intersection, the fusion, of matter and energy. It is not an object in the sense of being inert, raw material, it is capable of gesturing and leaping out of itself. This is the connection between poetry and the body; the same thing is true of poems” (7-8; see also 53-61).

The body of the poem is thus not the Cartesian body, but that of a fully embodied self. When discussing the nature of human embodiment in *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty significantly asserts that the human “body is to be compared not to a physical object, but rather to a work of art” and, especially, to “poetry” (150-1). This is due to the fact that they are both “beings in which the expression is indistinguishable from the thing expressed, their meaning [is] accessible only through

³⁸ For examples, see Stephen Gray’s review of *Body Bereft* where he enumerates the multiple ‘failures’ of Krog’s “tone-dead” English translations and her use of “Afrikaansisms” – and thus ironically proves the *success* of Krog’s translation policy (4-5).

direct contact” and they thus act as “focal point[s] of living meanings” (Merleau-Ponty 151). Maxine Sheets-Johnson’s similar comments on human embodiment are equally relevant for poetic embodiment: “Thoughts and feelings are *manifestly* present in bodily compartments and behaviours. ‘The mental’ [or poetic content] is not hidden, but is palpably observable in the flesh [or form]” (17, emphasis in original).

A poem is therefore a body ontologically, existing at the intersection of ‘form’ and ‘content’, subject and object, matter and energy. In “points on poems”, Metelerkamp meditates on this poetic existence:

25. A poem isn’t a record nor is it a performance. But like
live drawing the essential figure moving,
how do you get it moving

26. across the page? (*Burnt* 14)

Rather than restricting poetic existence to an atemporal textual object, “a record”, or to a transient, ephemeral “performance”, Metelerkamp’s description focuses on the movement of matter, the poem as a body in motion. In “poet becoming” Krog uses the present continuous tense (“kneeling”, “searching”) and describes how “a poetic line expands in air” to similarly evoke this fusion of matter and energy and emphasise poetic motion (*Down* 59).

The intersection of subject and object is also identifiable in poetry’s use of speech, rather than mere language. Speech, like the body, is neither subject nor object but both. In Vernon’s terms, speech is gesture: it is muscular and expressive. While language is an overarching structure or organization, speech is “an act of the body, a marriage of flesh and air” (Vernon 2). When a poem speaks, its voice is both muscular and respiratory, and thus originates in the body, and simultaneously gestures outside itself, acting on a world beyond its control. The auditory form or voice of a poem is thus further evidence of the corporeality of the poem.³⁹

³⁹ The importance of poetic speech, and its respiratory potential, has been of interest to various scholars. Reginald Gibbons quotes Emily Dickinson’s phrase “A word that breathes distinctly” to “suggest this physical power of poetry” that Mandelstam saw as capable, in the words of Boris Pasternak, of “cur[ing] tuberculosis” if they were “recited repeatedly” (206). This “physical power of poetry” that “work[s] [the poet’s or reader’s] lungs ... shape[s] the way in which [s/]he breathes, and therefore in which, as a poet [or reader] [s/]he lives” (200). Denys Thompson extends this argument by focusing on the respiratory effect of listening to poetry: “It is worth noting that speech can alter not only the respiratory cycle of the speaker, but also that of his listener. It is a familiar fact that something

Although discussing prose, not poetry, Roland Barthes's *The Pleasure of the Text*, with its focus on "writing aloud" that "searches for ... the language lined with the flesh" is useful for its understanding of the corporeality of poetic texts:

Writing aloud ... is carried ... by the *grain* of the voice, which is an erotic mixture of timbre and language, and can therefore also be, along with diction, the substance of an art: the art of guiding one's body.... [The] aim [of *writing aloud*] is not the clarity of messages, the theater of emotion; what it searches for (in a perspective of bliss) are the pulsional incidents, the language lined with the flesh, a text where we can hear the grain of the throat, the patina of consonants, the voluptuousness of vowels, a whole carnal stereophony: the articulation of the body, of the tongue, not that of meaning, of language...⁴⁰ [*Writing aloud* can] capture the sound of speech *close up* ... and make us hear in their materiality, their sensuality, the breath, the gutturals, the fleshiness of the lips, a whole presence of the human muzzle ...: it granulates, it crackles, it caresses, it grates, it cuts, it comes: that is bliss. (66-67, emphases in original).

Barthes's emphasis on the corporeality of speech in "writing aloud" points unwaveringly to poetry.⁴¹ It is in poetry, in particular, that one is struck by "the grain of the voice", "the patina of consonants, the voluptuousness of vowels", "the breath, the gutturals, the fleshiness of the lips". In a poetry-centred reading of Barthes's extract, two key points develop: the notion of "bliss", poetry as bringing pleasure; and the importance of rhythm signaled by the "pulsional incidents".

Kristeva's theory of semiotics also "brings the speaking body back into [the] language" of literature through its focus on rhythm (Oliver, "Kristeva's Revolutions" xvii). Defining "literature as rhythm made intelligible by syntax", she draws attention to the *chora* which is "rupture and articulations (rhythm)" (Kristeva, "Revolution" 97; 94). In the "semiotic process ... the drives, which are 'energy' charges as well as 'physical' marks, articulate what we call a *chora*" (Kristeva, "Revolution" 93; emphasis in original). In "this rhythmic space" of the semiotic *chora*, the presence of the body through rhythm is thus accentuated. Furthermore, as the articulated drives "involve pre-Oedipal semiotic functions and energy discharges that connect and orient

in listeners causes them to impose a non-existent rhythmic structure on a random time pattern of stimuli" (6).

⁴⁰ However, in poetry, this should rather be "and" instead of "not": poetry eschews a binary either/or system, instead favouring one of both/and, thereby not merely reversing the body/mind dualism, but deconstructing it.

⁴¹ Despite Barthes's silence on the subject of poetry in this book, John Vernon describes the "language lined with the flesh" that "writing aloud" searches for as "simply: poetry" (7).

the body to the mother”, it is particularly the maternal body that is associated with the rhythms of the semiotic (Kristeva, “Revolution” 95).

Aviram defines rhythm as

the more or less regular repetition through time of a sensory experience, especially auditory or tactile. As such, the experience of rhythm involves both cognitive apprehension – the recognition, expectation, and completion of patterns – and physical involvement or participation. Rhythm is thus at once physical and mental, affirming a nonlinguistic continuum of body and mind. (43)

Rhythm thus calls on an anti-Cartesian unity of body and mind, a fully embodied being. Additionally, “repetition itself creates bliss” (Barthes 41) and rhythm as “an intense and original pleasure” (Easthope in Aviram 55). Because of the “rhythmic pleasures of the body” poetry has a power to use its “own rhythm to bring about a physical response – to engage the reader’s or listener’s body” (Aviram 4; 5). Rhythm thus “seduce[s] the listener into participation” and into bliss (Aviram 7). As “rhythm makes us feel the presence of a speaker behind the words” (Dennis 67), rhythm has a particular valence within confessional poetry, assisting identification and aiding an ethical, empathetic response. Furthermore, as the epigraph to Aviram’s book, from Mickey Hart and Frederick Lieberman with D.S. Sonneborn, attests: “One of the few fundamental things we know about our universe is that everything in it is vibrating, is in motion, has a rhythm.” Rhythm therefore connects poetry not only to the body, but also to the world itself.

Denys Thompson, who provides scientific evidence of the “innate sense of rhythm” and the “deep-rootedness of rhythmic speech” that is observable in “young children”, discusses how it is possible “to trace the origin of poetry to the making of concerted effort accompanied by the songs and chants of workers” (7; 9). Drawing a link between poetry and singing/chanting rhythmically because it allows work to be “perform[ed] ... with least expenditure of effort”, this theory of the earliest role of poetic rhythm breaks down the barrier between doing quotidian physical labour and making art, poetry. Metelkamp’s *Into the day breaking* also works to break down these barriers, as can clearly be seen in “Leaves to a tree”.

This poem explores Keats’s famous dictum about poetic creation – “*If poetry comes not as naturally as the leaves to a tree it had better not come at all*” – and grounds it

in practicalities of working the land (*Into* 15; emphasis in original). It draws analogies between the writing of poetry and the repetitive manual labour of sawmilling work and thereby seeks to “balance *God / with work, wrought*”, constructing a space a quotidian creation: “I have been thinking about the men and women working, / the rhythms, the lines” and wondering “what rhythms and lines / might bare for me, / what they might bear; / what they might teach me” (*Into* 16-17). The poem asserts a necessary rhythm of responsiveness in order to construct poetry: she needs to keep “my ear to my feet on the ground” to “[hear] / through the scratch of the nib on the page / the feet coming closer” (*Into* 17). This creative rhythm is most sought specifically through the repetitive bodily activity of “walking” (*Into* 15; 16; 18).⁴² Metelerkamp demonstrates how poetic revelation is dependent on quotidian repetition: “I have been thinking”, she writes,

of closed books and young legs walking, walking
through the long reeds,
minds at ease
multi-colours of muted clods of clay,
they take, break,
revealing striations of everyday; (18).

These lines use the rhythms of assonance (reeds, ease, revealing; clay, they, take, break, striations, day) and alliteration (multi-colours of muted clay; take, break) to show that “the willing mind” of “chattering consciousness” that longs for a poetic “*epiphany*” “cannot make the words / come”, but that “minds walked free” are able to gain revelatory insight into the “striations of everyday” (*Into* 15-19; 39; emphasis in original). Due to repetitive, and communal work, the arduous, preparatory “mulch of line after line of saw-dust” is poetically transformed at close of the poem, and these “piles of saw-dust” are re-envisioned “like mine-dumps / like gold heaps, / like

⁴² The importance of repetition for the creation of poetry is also examined in “The gift”: it is the rhythm of “driving and driving that repetitive road” that enables the “intuitive lilt” of the creation of poetry that is “ecstatic true” (*Into* 88). Thus while this poem could be classified as a “gift”, the gift is only given with practice, repetition.

Metelerkamp’s focus on repetitive bodily processes such as walking recalls John Vernon’s argument that “[r]epetition enables time to break, gather its energy, well up and break again... Naked poetry [a style of poetry that can be traced back to Whitman, similar to confessional poetry] is usually submerged in process, in the processes of the body (breathing, heartbeat, walking), and in the processes on the world. Repetition is a kind of net in which to catch and hold these processes, while at the same time allowing them to exist as processes, that is, as movement” (122).

Monet's hay-stacks lit / like the sun itself" (*Into* 18-19). This transformation of the quotidian into poetry can be seen as the ultimate goal of Metelerkamp's poetry.⁴³

To conclude and summarise this discussion of poems as bodies, Krog's embodied depiction of poetic creation, "poet becoming", will be examined. This poem emphasizes the pre-eminence of *sound* in poetry: "to awake one morning into sound / with the antennae of vowel and consonant and diphthong / to calibrate with delicate care the subtlest / movement of light and loss in sound" (*Down* 59). In her assertion that "the poet writes poetry with her tongue / yes, she breathes deeply with her ear", the ear is defined as the life-sustaining organ, the breathing apparatus, of a poet (*Down* 59). This not only defines the creation of poetry as an auditory act, but also indicates the importance of listening to the other and being open to the world.⁴⁴ As Vernon notes, "the representative of the Other on the poet's body is his ear. When poets talk about writing with the ear ... they are talking about this virtual presence of the Other, which demands that language be *heard*" (148). The specification of the "tongue" emphasises the way words sound, but also their taste,⁴⁵ and highlights the sensuality and muscularity of poetic creation: that it is not a purely cognitive capability.⁴⁶

The poem's assertions about the importance of sound in poetry are demonstrated in the sound of the poem. The use of internal rhyme and consecutive dactyls in "audible / palpable" echoes the anticipatory waltzing of the blood the poet experiences when "a poetic line expands in air" (*Down* 59). Similarly the segue into an iambic rhythm in the "movement of light and loss in sound" emphasizes the movement of poetry, its rhythmical bodily activity. The poem frequently uses alliteration, for example,

⁴³ This can be seen as Metelerkamp's alchemical aim, which is beautifully depicted in "Icarus" from *Floating Islands* (29-31) and intensely focused on in her latest collection, *Burnt Offering* (see especially 35; 53). It is also clearly visible in her definition of artistic praxis in *carrying the fire*: "The artist transforming herself as she transforms her material" (102; 118).

⁴⁴ This is also emphasised in Metelerkamp's "Tea with Janet Frame" ("I / too, would listen for my life, / my living, for the hush, hush / from the trees to the envoys / from the dark to the catch / of their voices to write", "listen and write – / and listen while you cook stir / the pots sifting sounds words shapes", "and she'll be listening, writing, / hearing others words, words / scratching the paper through the nib" [*Floating* 92-4]) and in "And listen" (*Floating* 24).

⁴⁵ This recalls De Beauvoir's assertion, discussed in the previous chapter, that literature enables me to "taste another life", which will be revisited in the next section of this chapter.

⁴⁶ That the "tongue" is employed not only for speech and tasting, but also for kissing, implies the physical intimacy of Krog's understanding of the creation of poetry: instead of describing poetry as being written by hand, which one could use to politely shake the hand of a complete stranger, the use of "tongue" insists on a more personal, and erotic, connection.

“calibrate with delicate care”, in which the “subtlest movements” of the ‘c’ are adjusted from the harsh, scientific “calibrate” then “delicate[ly]” softened into “care” (*Down 59*). Similarly, with the s-alliteration in “yields, slips / and then surrenders”, the poem yields to the ‘s’ sound, repeatedly making a space for it at the end of the verbs (*Down 59*).⁴⁷

These lines reveal the tension between sound and meaning or, in Kristeva’s terms, the semiotic and the symbolic. Describing how “the meaning of a word yields, slips / and then surrenders into tone”, Krog highlights the movement from the denotation of the symbolic into the semiotic calibration of the human voice, and thus how meaning surrenders into, but also becomes more manifest through, articulation in rhythm and tone (*Down 59*). Krog’s statement that “the only truth stands skinned in sound” also examines this tension (*Down 59*). She asserts that there is no truth that isn’t fully embodied: truth is not merely a body covered in “skin”, or one that exists as flesh that has been ‘skinned’, but it “stands” – it asserts a bodily posture and defined positioning in space. Therefore all truth is sensual, it is created, perceived and interpreted by the body. There are no abstract or absolute truths or disembodied truths of the mind or soul (Platonic). There is truth (perhaps not Truth, but rather many truths), but it is a human, bodily, sensual truth.

The way a poem *looks*, as well as sounds is highlighted in “poet becoming” in description of “find[ing] yourself / kneeling at the audible / palpable outline of a word” (*Down 59*).⁴⁸ The qualities of the look or form (“outline”), as well as the physical texture (“palpable”) of the poem are noted, as well as the poet’s physical response to the emergent poem: she is “kneeling” and, in the rhythmical pulsing of the blood in her arteries, she can feel how her “blood yearns for that infinite pitch of a word” (*Down 59*). By structuring this poem as Shakespearean sonnet – if an overtly dislocated one, with its three quatrains and concluding rhyming couplet each

⁴⁷ Further attention is drawn to this yielding to the ‘s’ with the comma serving as a caesura; “slips” is encapsulated in the ‘s’ sound, showing that the poem has slipped into ‘s’ containment and immersion in the ‘s’; then with the brief wait for “surrenders”: even though the ‘s’ is repeated, neither ‘s’ occurs in a stressed syllable, which implies a passive surrender to this sound.

⁴⁸ These lines recall Metelerkamp’s in from “For Adrienne Rich”: “loving palpably black on white I love / the feel of your words”, “your / words bit by reaching bit caressed me touched / me” (*Towing 90*). The emphasis on tactility gestures towards the pleasure and intimacy between reader/listener and poem (and poet, in confessional poetry) and thus demonstrates how poetic language is seductive.

presented as a separate stanza – Krog creates a reflection and refraction of this most recognizable poetic form. In doing so, she shows her indebtedness to western canonical poetry, through which she has developed her appreciation for the “audible / palpable outline of a word”, but also her need to diverge from some of its principles. Her embodied, responsive depiction of poetic creation, for example, stands in clear contrast to Keats’s solitary (“on the shore / Of the wide world I stand alone”) and purely intellectual (“Before my pen has gleaned my teeming brain”) practice in “When I have Fears”, a poem which is, not coincidentally, also a Shakespearean sonnet.

Ethics of Embodied Poetry

There is a long tradition of viewing the reading of literature as an ethical act. This can be seen as extending from Plato’s *The Republic* (despite his banishment of poets from his ideal city) through Percy Bysshe Shelley’s *A Defence of Poetry*, Matthew Arnold’s *Culture and Anarchy*⁴⁹ and J. Hillis Miller’s *The Ethics of Reading*, to, in 2011, Steven Pinker’s *The Better Angels of Our Nature: The Decline of Violence in History and its Causes*.⁵⁰ Most of these contributions have focused on the importance of truth and artistic merit in literature and/or its ability to awaken the imagination and evoke empathy. At the end of the previous chapter, I discussed De Beauvoir’s ethics of reading in “What Can Literature Do”, which is grounded in empathy: literature is “capable of giving me the taste of another life” (Moi 193). While I previously read this in terms of confession, the importance of identifying with the authorial ‘I’, this can also be read in terms of embodiment: to taste another life means to take words into one’s body, to digest them, which then alters one’s constitution and way of being in the world.⁵¹ Although De Beauvoir specifies that this tasting is a temporary effect of reading, that one only identifies in the moment of reading, an embodied interpretation of this seeming metaphor would attest to a more permanent ethical

⁴⁹ In *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, Terry Eagleton describes Arnold, due to his work on the ethics of reading, as the “key figure” in the Victorian “Rise of English [literary studies]” (22-30).

⁵⁰ Elaine Scarry’s review of this monograph, “Poetry Changed the World: Injury and the Ethics of Reading”, argues that despite Pinker’s particular focus on the novel and the “novel’s capacity to evoke reader’s empathy”, it is, in fact, to reiterate her title, the reading of *poetry* that changed the world.

⁵¹ This connects with Gibbons’s previously noted argument that a poet can alter readers’ lives through altering their breathing.

benefit: once I've taken someone else's words into my body they become inseparable from my body, they form part of the very cellular structures of my body.⁵²

But, from the discussion of embodiment in this chapter, there is also a more fundamental way in which the reading of poetry is an ethical act. Poems, as I've argued, are bodies, and bodies, according to Levinas, are at the core of ethics: "the incarnation of human subjectivity guarantees its spirituality" (*Ethics* 97). Therefore, when reading a poem, or when interacting with a poetic body, one enters into an ethical face-to-face relationship with the other. One responds to the body of the poem as one responds to a human body.⁵³

In the light of this ethical argument, let us return to and re-examine Metelerkamp's and Krog's responses to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission which were read at the conclusion of the previous chapter, for their political import. Metelerkamp's "Truth Commission", with its ragged lines that seek the security and solidarity of quatrains, but repeatedly dwindle into tercets, couplets and solitary lines, and halting rhythms and repetitions ("I look up: / I look up to the fall of the rain / half-halt, a hadda, lame-footed"), is a body "looking for something", "looking for some sign I can hold to", of "a woman feeling her way forward" and her attempt to "make your way, woman, yourself" (*Into* 79-82). Contempuously reeling with acerbic alliteration from "the killers" who are "reeking / of craven / cowardice, crouched / before the commission", this poem searches for "the truth" but simultaneously for "the cold /

⁵² For Metelerkamp, this occurs not only for the reader, but also for the writer. The artistic praxis she pursues in *carrying the fire* and *Burnt Offering* is "the artist transforming herself as she transforms her material" (*carrying* 102), where poetry becomes a true, achievable form of "alchemy" (*Burnt* 49, see also the epigraph for the section "Alchemical Incantations" from Edward Edinger's *Anatomy of the Psyche*, 29).

⁵³ This is very different to the rhythm based-argument that can be traced back to Freud. Aviram explains: "For Freud, as Easthope points out, rhythm would ... be an instance of the exercise of infantile and unconscious urges with the result of a pleasurable release of psychic energy ... the pleasure of rhythm has the power ... to cause participants to regress to state before the constitution of the social subject – the clearly demarcated individual who shares in social codes of value and judgement" (56). (See also Thompson's argument that "repetition ... may induce unusual states of mind and lull the superficial parts of consciousness" and therefore "rhythmical poetry ... enables [listeners] to [enter] a less individualized world where they have more in common with other people" [10-11]). While this does suggest a type of empathy, or rather a rhythmical circumventing of the need for empathy due to the breakdown of (superficial) barriers between individuals (because all existence is relational: it is a Western philosophical conceit to see ourselves as "clearly demarcated individual[s]"), the focus on regression to a pre-social state precludes an ethical argument.

comfort of a worry bead” (*Into* 81-82). It is a body, subject and object, moving matter – matter that is searching for some movement that matters.

As a body the poem speaks of a visceral, empathetic response to the TRC testimonies: “the slump slump of the bodies” of the victims are felt falling “against the weak wall of the will” (*Into* 82). But beyond this, the poem speaks to the listener, it “solicits me and calls me”, it addresses and engages me, asserting a connection, drawing me into community (Levinas in Diehm 55). Its body calls on me to feel the slumping of the bodies too. This poem is thus not only a reminder of the ethical response needed in the moment of the original TRC hearings, but furthermore it exists as a permanent call for communal understanding and collective identity.

Similarly, in Krog’s “Country of grief and grace” the body of the poem, “this body bereft / this blind tortured throat” that alternately “sezi[es] the surge of language by its soft bare skull” and quietly “breathes becalmed / after being wounded / in its wonderous throat”, speaks about the attempt to seek connection at the same moment in which it calls out to the reader, seeking connection (*Down* 95-100). The poem commences:

between you and me
how desperately
how it aches
how desperately it aches between you and me (*Down* 95).

Reflecting on Krog’s experiences as a journalist for the TRC, the poem describes the ache of a desperate nation, but concurrently it calls upon the reader to ache with it, to feel the pain that breaks, and aches through, the broken syntax, voice, body. Asking “how long does it take / for a voice / to reach another”, the poem asks to be heard, received and reciprocated, it solicits the reader to enter into a dialogue with it.

The reading of poems, therefore, as Metelerkamp’s and Krog’s poems demonstrate, is not merely an ethical practice on the basis of evoking empathy for a speaker or subject or addressee who is represented or described in the poem, but on the basis of entering into a Levinasian face-to-face ethical encounter as the body of the reader responds to that of the poem. While empathy is invoked (for example, by De Beauvoir in her existentialist rather than phenomenologist mode) as necessary to bridge the

alienating isolation surrounding individual bodies, giving us access to each others' experiences and feelings, my argument asserts that bodies are not alienating and isolating (we are not, to respond to Terry Eagleton's claim, "forever cut off from each other by the walls of our bodies" [*How* 23-4]), rather it is our bodies that connect us, that assert our intersubjectivity and vulnerability and therefore that enable ethical interaction: our incarnation guarantees our spirituality (Levinas, *Ethics* 97).

But although all poems can be seen as bodies, the bodiliness of poems is nevertheless relative, depending on how they look and move, sound and speak. Certain types of poetry, like Metelerkamp's and Krog's, as argued above, exist as fully-formed bodies, while with other forms (like prose poems) this existential potential may not be completely realised. Furthermore, to draw on the arguments of the previous chapter, confessional poetry, the most human of poetic genres, the most inhabited by human voices, by bodies that breathe air into speech, is unarguably the exemplary form of embodied poetry.

Explaining the embodied nature of poetry, Vernon asserts: "Poems are bodies. They are drops that break off from the mass of a poet's body, congeal, take shape, and become bodies themselves" (56). Although he does not state it explicitly, the type of poetic creation described here is that found in the creation of confessional verse. For example, describing the process of "how ... one start[s] a poem", Krog attests: "I split my ears inward / tap against the inner sides to intercept tremors / desperately I flog every wound (*Down* 52). The inwardness and corporeality of this process is undeniable here. When "the fabric [of a poem] is emerging" it is felt in "the pulse" that the poet hopes will become "a spurt" (*Down* 53). As with confessional forerunner, Sylvia Plath's, vision of the "blood jet" of poetic creation,⁵⁴ this description correlates with Vernon's as "drops that break off [or spurt out] from the mass of the poet's body".

Therefore, as the exemplary form of fully embodied poetry, confessional poetry is also an exemplary ethical form. While less thoroughly embodied poetry may present

⁵⁴ See Plath's haunting lines from "Kindness": "The blood jet is poetry. / There is no stopping it" (270) as well as Metelerkamp's maternal meditation on this poem in *Into the day breaking*: "(Kindness handed Plath her children, / kindness whose gift she / spat out like placebo – / kindness handed them no gauze, / no poultice for the blood-jet, / but a mesh of lines, threads soaked through –" (31).

weak, flickering signs of a body, and thus weaker, less captivating calls to the body of the reader, the body of confessional poetry addresses the reader as another body, desirous of entering into an equal dialogue and demanding ethical treatment.

CHAPTER THREE

The Maternal Body

Motherhood has long played a vexed role in feminist literary studies. Traditional cultural binaries have divided maternal reproduction from literary production, thereby positioning women outside of the creative (as opposed to procreative) sphere. Early feminist investigations have reiterated the assertion that maternity precludes, or at least impedes, mothers from writing (for example, Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, 75-86). The reasons for this have only started to be explored in the past four decades. During this time, with the rise of second wave, Anglo-American feminism, motherhood, and the bodily experiences of being a mother, became the focus of much theoretical and literary attention. Occasionally these discussions were in danger of essentialising women as (potential) mothers, thereby defining women primarily in relationship to motherhood – see, for example, Tillie Olsen's characterisation of women as childless or with children (16-39) – a danger which has been addressed, and largely circumvented, in the climate of third wave feminist thinking, where such hegemonic prioritisations and essentialisations are exposed to rigorous critique. From out of this feminist engagement, motherhood has acquired, and been subjected to, decidedly ambivalent treatment. While the attention accorded the maternal body and its experiences has demonstrated the cultural importance of motherhood, and sometimes raised motherhood as an unquestionable, almost ineffable good, a sacred calling, motherhood has also been seen as an impediment to feminist revision of the patriarchal social order. Anti-maternal feminism is typically encountered as criticism of the “institution” of motherhood (to use Adrienne Rich's phrase from *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* [1976], which will be picked up later in this chapter), a critique that is addressed to both “the traditional representation of motherhood” seen, for example, in paintings of the selfless Virgin Mary (Moi in Kristeva, “Stabat” 160), and the practices of “modern motherhood” (to refer to the title of Elisabeth Badinter's *The Conflict: How Modern Motherhood Undermines the Status of Women* [2012]). However, some theorists, like Simone de Beauvoir, see the danger of motherhood as located within the maternal body itself (it enables her to be imprisoned in “immanence” and thus prevents her from attaining “transcendence”

[*Second* 94-7; 189; 501-42]), while others, like Julia Kristeva, emphasise the creative and ethical potential of this gestating body (as explored in “Revolution in Poetic Language” [95] and “Stabat Mater” [182]). And, of course, these different perspectives on the socio-economic, cultural and ethical implications of motherhood also result in different perspectives on motherhood in literature and in the creation thereof.

This chapter will explore this theoretical terrain through an analysis and discussion of Antjie Krog’s and Joan Metelerkamp’s poetic engagements with the maternal body. It will first examine poems *about* the maternal body – poems of childbirth and the quotidian bodily demands of motherhood – before turning to the question of writing poetry *from* the maternal body.

Poetry of Birth

In “God, Death, Love”, Krog names “Death” as an “Important Theme in Literature” in contrast to the lower-case “birth”, which “[is] not” (*Body* 20). Similarly, in “Birth Poem”, Metelerkamp asserts that “there are too few / poems of birth (plenty of death)” (*Towing* 117). The “birth” referred to here by both poets is not merely the birth of a child, but, as happens concurrently with this event, the birth of a mother.¹ Moreover, this birth occurs most profoundly at a physical level, along with the obvious emotional, cognitive and spiritual reverberations and repercussions. As Karin Voth Harman attests: “In childbirth, women cannot avoid the literalness of the flesh” (187). Therefore that most poems about birth would engage with the bodies of women and infants, subjects long disdained as beneath the attention of the (white, male) poets, explains their historical scarcity. But although, since the confluence of confessional poetry and second wave feminism (both of which are associated largely with white, middle class Anglo-American women), women have increasingly started writing birth poetry (see Plath’s “Three Women: A Poem for Three Voices” as a notable example), there is still a relative poetic silence about birth (Voth Harman 178-

¹ As Adrienne Rich, in her groundbreaking work *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, has argued, “[t]o ‘father’ a child suggests above all to beget, to provide the sperm which fertilizes the ovum. To ‘mother’ a child implies a continuing presence, lasting at least nine months, more often for years” [xiv]; thus even though socio-cultural perceptions of fatherhood are changing, a father cannot be said to be born in the same moment and manner as a mother.

9). With Metelerkamp, one therefore cannot help but “keep / musing / why are there so few birth poems / so few women writing poems of their children” (*Towing* 117).

One answer, suggested in the previous chapter, could be that, as women have been ‘trapped’ for so long in their flesh, any poetry that returns them so viscerally to this prison should be left unwritten. If a woman’s body is what prevents her from entering the realm of writing (she is the poem, not poet), then poems about the experience of childbirth are the least available, or safe, topic for women writers to examine. Poetry about giving birth would then emphasise the most radical evidence of the treason perpetrated by women writers’ female flesh, and as such contain grounds for her exclusion, derision and shame.

Another answer, one suggested by Metelerkamp herself, is that these poems are “missing because / [mothers] are woven into the warp and weft / of the child’s constant metamorphosis” and are thus “too late to catch / the latest change, always too tired to / work on anything more” (*Towing* 117). This maternal exhaustion, a topic Metelerkamp returns to in her evocative poem “Dove”, which will be examined later in this chapter, is what

.... keeps the mothers
from writing, recording the real process
they tell snippets of to others, mothers
in the park, compare notes, sound off others,
but few, few consolidated poems
of children and child-care and birth. (*Towing* 117)

The difficulty that mothers experience in writing “consolidated poems” or other works of literature about anything, let alone mothering itself, is asserted in Olsen’s groundbreaking work *Silences* (especially the chapter “Silences in Literature”). Olsen argues that “motherhood means being instantly interruptible, responsive, responsible” and that “[w]ork interrupted, deferred, relinquished, makes blockage – at best, lesser accomplishment” (18-9). This results in a shallow pool of mothers who are writers, which leads to the erroneous assumption that reproduction replaces artistic production for women.² It also results in little enduring literature about the experience of motherhood, which gives ‘evidence’ for the patriarchal assumption that motherhood is

² Olsen refers to “the moldy theory that women have no need, some say no capacity, to create art, because they can ‘create’ babies” (16).

not an appropriate subject of literature. Consequently, mothers who wish to write about their maternal experiences feel constrained by the lack of precursors, of a recognizable tradition, and therefore feel outside of Literature with no literary foremothers to welcome them into its hallowed halls, or show them how to break down its walls to create spaces for themselves. They thus, to use Gilbert and Gubar's phrase again, experience an "anxiety of authorship". As a result of this, the published descriptions of childbirth are largely limited to medicalised depictions that are primarily related from the perspective of the observer/doctor; the mother's *experience* of childbirth is unrepresented, and therefore unavailable for other women, and men, to understand and empathise with. The ethics of reading literature and particularly embodied, confessional poetry, when one is able to "taste another life" and be transformed by an encounter with the body of the other, is not able to occur with regards to the subject of maternity, and thus the birthing mother remains an absolute Other. The (m)Other remains misunderstood, and her experience is medically and culturally misappropriated and used to maintain damaging reductions, essentialisations and idealisations of women's maternity. Krog's poem "two years this month" and Metelerkamp's "Dove" provide points of entry into this discussion through their explorations of the difficulty of writing poetry as a mother, and will be discussed in greater depth in the next section.

But there is a third factor: that poems about physical childbirth are difficult to write because childbirth has long been co-opted by poets, and other writers, as the dominant metaphor for their literary creation. The embodied experience of childbirth has become disembodied as a metaphor for creation. As Voth Harman attests, for a poet to be able to write about literal birth, she would have "to shake off the prevalent cultural ideas that childbirth in writing is only, or primarily, a metaphor for creativity" (182). Susan Stanford Friedman's "Creativity and the Childbirth Metaphor: Gender Differences in Literary Discourse" explores the different implications of male and female authors' use of the childbirth metaphor (77-93). The use of the metaphor by male writers "perpetuates the mind-body split it attempts to transcend through analogy", thereby emphasizing "the cultural separation of creation from procreation" (85; 78). However, women's use of the metaphor "enhances the metaphor's movement toward a reconciliation of contradictory parts":

Instead of contributing to the reification of Western culture, the female metaphor expresses a fundamental rebellion against it. It represents a defiance of historical realities and a symbolic reunion of mind and body, creation and procreation.... [Therefore] [r]ather than covertly excluding women from the community of artists as the male metaphor does, the women's birth metaphor suggests that her procreative powers make her specially suited to her creative labours. (Friedman 80)

Friedman thus notes that "women writers have often risked the metaphor's dangerous biologism in order to challenge fundamental binary oppositions of patriarchal ideology between word and flesh, creativity and procreativity, mind and body" (74). Examples of this can be seen in such historically disparate poems as Anne Bradstreet's seventeenth century poem "The Author to Her Book"³ and Sharon Olds late twentieth century "Language of the Brag".⁴ Despite the rebellion to patriarchy contained within the childbirth metaphor, there is a danger that, in writing about childbirth *primarily* as a metaphor for literary creation, the embodied experience of giving birth is eclipsed in a disembodied metaphor.

Perhaps because childbirth itself is so often used as a metaphor, or perhaps only because, as Margaret Homans argues, "[t]o take something literally is to get it wrong while to have a figurative understanding of something is the correct intellectual stance" (in Voth Harman 182), in attempting to write about childbirth, many poets have relied heavily on metaphors. In her survey of recent birth poetry, Voth Harman thus remarks that "[f]requently poets apply extended metaphors to the body which metamorphose it into something else: usually a great force of nature such as the fertile earth or the stormy sea" (180). However, as she continues, such "'earth mother' image[s] ... have lost their power to jar the imagination because they compare things which readers readily accept as having something in common" (181). The poets who are more successful in their metaphorical evocations thus develop a more unique,

³ Bradstreet's poem describes the unauthorized publication of her writing by "friends, less wise than true": "Thou ill-formed offspring of my feeble brain, / Who after birth didst by my side remain, / Till snatched from thence by friends, less wise than true, / Who thee abroad, exposed to public view...." (67). The poem uses images of maternal care (cleaning, clothing) to describe the editing and revising of literature and can thus be seen as providing "a definition of mothering children as well as books" (Friedman 82).

⁴ Olds's poem describes a fully embodied experience of pregnancy ("stool charcoal from the iron pills, / huge breasts leaking colostrum, / legs swelling, hands swelling") and childbirth ("I have lain down and sweated and shaken / and passed blood and shit and water"), and then claims that by giving birth she has completed the "exceptional / act" that male poets have tried in vain to emulate in their literary creations (8-9).

unexpected figurative language. Sylvia Plath's excessive and almost over-determined pregnancy poem "Metaphors", with its nine lines each containing "nine syllables", is even with its preponderant edible imagery successful in its idiosyncrasy:

I'm a riddle in nine syllables,
 An elephant, a ponderous house,
 A melon strolling on two tendrils.
 O red fruit, ivory, fine timbers!
 This loaf's big with its yeasty rising.
 Money's new-minted in this fat purse.
 I'm a means, a stage, a cow in calf.
 I've eaten a bag of green apples,
 Boarded the train there's no getting off. (116)

Her later poem, "You're", continues this strategy with even greater elasticity and energy. However, despite Plath's great wit, by describing her gestating self in a medley of metaphors, what is lost is the presence of the pregnant body itself. Yes, we can deduce that it is red, big, heavy, swollen, engorged, but these are just clues to the "riddle" of the body, which remains "[v]ague as fog and looked for like mail", to quote "You're" (Plath 141). The pregnant body is thus not presented as matter that *matters*, but as "a means" for the poet to engage in some metaphorical, and metaphysical, fun.⁵ As Voth Harman persuasively argues: "Extended metaphorical treatment of birth", or "body snatching" as she terms it elsewhere,

loses sight of the flesh which is so central to this act. This is both an artistic and ideological sin of omission: draping metaphor around the body tends to flatten and to etherialise a poem at the same time as it contributes to prevailing taboos about maternal bodies. Birth poetry, which is forced to navigate the tricky terrain of the ongoing arguments within feminism between so-called 'essentialists' and 'social constructionists', needs to pay very close attention to its imagery. Metaphor, which begins to make meaning out of physical difference, is so often the culprit in shifting a laudable focus on the female body into an essentialising, universalizing effacement of that particular body. (181-2)

In Metelerkamp's "Birth Poem" and Krog's poem "Birth", is the maternal body metaphorically effaced or metamorphosed into the spirit of literary creation? Or is it fully present, speaking confessionally about the experience of childbirth? If the

⁵ Plath's "Three Women: A Poem for Three Voices" does, in contrast, give the body its visceral voice: "There is no miracle more cruel than this. / I am dragged by the horses, the iron hooves. / I last. I last it out. I accomplish a work"; "A power is growing on me, an old tenacity. / I am breaking apart like the world. There is this blackness, / This ram of blackness. I fold my hands on a mountain. / The air is thick. It is thick with this working. / I am used. I am drummed into use." (180)

maternal body is present, then, according to Levinasian ethics discussed in the previous chapter, its presence establishes an ethical responsibility in the reader – if an experiencing maternal body is acknowledged and brought into ethical relationship, then childbirth and motherhood can no longer be culturally isolated or misappropriated for the oppression of women, largely on the basis of their reproductive capacities, in patriarchal societies.

Metelerkamp's poem certainly desires to speak confessionally about the embodied experience of childbirth. Not only does she want to “write a poem / for my children, song of their births, record / of their births”,⁶ but she also wants to say what remains unsaid, what perhaps is not sayable:

I thought I would tell I had not been told
adequately, that it cannot be told
adequately, I was told again, and
again, protected from the knowledge of
the process of which conception's the seed
and birth only a passing, by the pod
of women's silence, and I kept thinking
I will tell it all. (*Towing* 118)

Metelerkamp's poem thus aims to break the long historical and literary silence about childbirth, a silence which women have protected, or felt constrained to contain, within their bodies.⁷ And, despite the “[i]nexpressibility” and “unshareability” of pain, “through its resistance to language” (Scarry, *Body* 3-4), initially at least, it is successful in this aim to

tell of the birth pain
blowing slowly like a balloon tight as
the inside tube of a car tyre, hard
red rubber blowing all the bloody breath
out of me – nuclear mushrooming cloud,
apocalypse, controlled by the firmly
held hand, the rock of the ghostly perceived
father's presence;
grey walls; panting; clip-clop
heels of a nurse's routine interference
echoing through the sterile passages;

⁶ Note the movement from poem through song to record: the desire is thus not only to create (a poem or song) but to memorialize (record the facts, make a public record).

⁷ In a caesarean birth, the “pod / of women's silence” can be the incised and sutured abdomen itself. Metelerkamp states: “my wound / is closed on my stomach like a red seam / tightening the hard pod of my silence” (*Towing* 119).

galloping shoes, the child's heart amplified
 through muonium water blood joy seep-
 ing through the work, the work, the working womb. (*Towing* 118)

This is unarguably a detailed bodily description of the experience of a woman about to give birth in a hospital. This setting and masculine imagery (“car tyre”, “nuclear mushrooming cloud”) speaks to the increasing medicalisation and pathologisation of childbirth over the past four centuries. As Adrienne Rich notes, “within recorded history, until the eighteenth century, childbirth was overwhelmingly the province of women”, with mothers typically assisted by female relatives, experienced friends, or midwives (*Woman* 121). However in the succeeding centuries, with the rise of Enlightenment science, male physicians, aided by new technologies such as obstetric forceps, replaced female midwives (*Woman* 133). With the ever-increasing rates of caesarean deliveries, in South Africa at least,⁸ the medicalisation of childbirth has persisted into the present, despite recent revivals of interest in more natural birthing procedures.⁹

In “Birth Poem” the descriptions aren’t purely literal; metaphors are used, but rather than effacing the body, or presenting it as a Sphinx-like riddle (as Plath’s poems “Metaphors” and “You’re” do), these overlapping metaphors (the balloon, the inside tube of a car tyre) interspersed with descriptions of the bodily experience (“blowing all the bloody breath / out of me”) coherently focus the reader’s attention on the experience, rather than the metaphor, of motherhood and (pro)creativity – on the birthing body, its engorgement, the unbearable pressure under which it is placed. Rather than using traditional ‘earth mother’ imagery, the birth pain is repeatedly associated with “rubber”, which despite being originally made from plant-matter, is now predominantly produced synthetically. Thus birth, although a natural process, is, for this modern mother, experienced as something foreign and unnatural (like balloons and car tyres) and foreshadows the caesarian birth that is to come. The image

⁸ In a 2012 South African study, Rachele Joy Chadwick and Don Foster note that “caesarean section rates continue to climb in both high income and middle income to low income contexts, with no signs of abating” and that currently “private maternity care is extremely medicalised with caesarean section rate estimates ranging from 40 to 82 percent” (5).

⁹ Rich’s *Of Woman Born*, published in 1976, can be seen as an early reflector, and instigator, of revived interest in natural birth in theory; Chadwick and Foster’s study cited above gives empirical evidence of this revival through their discussion of women who chose planned home births instead of hospitalised deliveries.

of the “balloon” (also used by Plath in “Morning Song”), suggests not only the possibility of joyful birthday parties, but also the extreme pressure that the female body is subjected to during pregnancy and labour. When the metaphors seem about to eclipse the body – notably “nuclear mushrooming cloud, / apocalypse”, expressing both the seemingly inevitable destruction of the labouring body and the fact that childbirth cannot be other than apocalyptic (in the sense of momentous) for the mother – the poet reins them in, drawing us back to the bodies in the hospital room, and then back into the body of the woman in labour.

It is with her eyes that we note the “grey walls” leading to “sterile passages”, with her ears that we hear “panting; clip-clop / heels of the nurse’s routine interference / echoing” and “the child’s heart amplified / through muconium” so that it sounds like “galloping shoes”. The almost painful peristaltic movement of “the work, the work, the working womb” enables the reader not only to *cognitively* understand the powerful involuntary contractions that seize a woman’s body whilst in labour, but to also *corporeally* apprehend it, by mimicking this movement in her mouth with the repeated motions of lips and tongue. Furthermore, as the “th” and “w” sounds are both produced by forcing air out through a narrow opening in the reader-speaker’s mouth (“th” is a fricative and “w” an approximant consonant), in this alliterative line her mouth labours metonymically with the contracting uterus.

However, ultimately Metelerkamp’s poem claims that it is not able to “make it live adequately” and “re-creat[e] birth’s magnitude” (*Towing* 118; 119). This is not because Metelerkamp is an inadequate poet, but because she is a confessional poet who experienced two caesarean births. While her poem can thus not show a woman “squeeze[ing] a child out / into the world” it can devastatingly demonstrate the “relief and / rage and disappointment and fear and pain” experienced by a woman as a result of a “banal accident” during the birth process (*Towing* 119; 118).

Metelerkamp’s highly-emotional response to having a caesarean can be more easily understood by placing it within its historical context. As *Towing the Line* won the 1991 Sanlam Literary Award, the experience related in “Birth Poem” occurred within the 1980s. Emily Martin’s 1987 study, *The Woman in the Body: A Cultural Analysis of Reproduction*, explores the “anger”, “loss and disappointment” experienced by

women who underwent caesarean deliveries in the 1980s (65), and argues: “it is clear that caesarean sections affect women very differently and often more negatively than vaginal births” (82). Mira Crouch and Lenore Manderson’s examination of *New Motherhood: Cultural and Personal Transitions in the 1980s* also provides a useful context. Although their study was conducted in Australia, Australia is perhaps white South Africa’s closest international cousin (a fellow isolated, ex-British colony in the Southern Hemisphere whose white society and culture are often viewed as notably similar to that of white South Africa¹⁰), and so the results of Australian research can be seen as pertinent to a South African study. Crouch and Manderson argue that

anxiety concerning ‘success’ at giving birth is a dominant theme of the contemporary woman’s experience of labour. This anxiety is the result of the ideological construction of birth which in the 80s ... is at variance with – and often positively antagonistic to – older models of labour management that still dominate professional obstetric practice.... [In the 80s] ideal, the labouring woman must, in a hospital setting, avoid any complication or deviation in labour, or any concessions to, or acceptance of, technical-medical assistance. While the ultimate ‘failure’ is a Caesarean delivery followed by lactation failure, any variation may be read as ... grounds for imputed triumph of the medical establishment and the technological imperative. (67)

This ideological construction of birth that Crouch and Manderson examine could, in part, be seen as a feminist backlash against previous constructions of the birthing process. In *Of Woman Born*, published in 1976, one can see the emergence of this backlash. Rich writes:

women are now asking what psychic effect a state of semihelplessness has on a healthy mother, awake during the birth, yet prevented from participating actively in delivery. No more devastating image could be invented for the bondage of woman: sheeted, supine, drugged, her wrists strapped down and her legs in stirrups, at the very moment when she is bringing new life into the world. This ‘freedom from pain’, like ‘sexual liberation’, places a woman physically at men’s disposal, though still estranged from the potentialities of her own body. (*Woman* 166)

The second wave feminist reclamation of the female body and bodily experiences (a movement of which Rich’s text is an important part), thus encouraged women to more actively explore the potentialities of their gestating bodies. This led to the increased desirability of natural birth in the 1980s, as noted by Crouch and Manderson.

¹⁰ These similarities are often understood as partly responsible for the high level of South African emigration to Australia – in a 2003 study Australia ranked second, behind the UK, as the most popular destination of South African emigrants (Statistics South Africa).

However, as their quote above demonstrates, a total investment in the natural ideal can leave women having caesarean births for valid medical reasons (some “banal accident” in the birth process) feeling as if they have ‘failed’ and thus feel “disappoint[ed]”.

The later stanzas of “Birth poem” thus describe the poet’s unwilling submission to the (male) medical appropriation of birth, during a caesarean birth:

but let them take it from you with their old
authoritarian, caesarian
decree, the work is theirs and relief and
rage and disappointment and fear and pain
flood through – all abstracts concretised during
the process of banal accident

...

Twice I thought I would squeeze a child out
into the world; twice, at the last moment
the men did it for me: they were all there,
G.P., anaesthetist, obstetrician,
and paediatrician; and the women,
accomplices, there, holding the scalpel,
passing the swabs. (*Towing* 118-119; ellipsis added)

This excerpt attests that having a caesarean in a pro-natural birth social environment, even if a medical necessity, robs a woman of her agency and her sense of accomplishment, control or even involvement in the birth process (see Weyer 97-8). Through this poem Metelerkamp suggests that pregnancy and birth, housing an other inside one’s self, the process of splitting one into two, already fraught for women, is even more so under medicalised, caesarean conditions.

While identity is always under pressure in the birthing process – due to the splitting of the ‘I’ and sometimes the near-destruction of the ‘I’ in order to give life to the ‘not-I’ – the medical models of birth, which cause a “fragmentation of body from mind” pose serious risks to the sense of a coherent self (Rich, *Woman* 172). Martin argues that this is especially true of caesarean births, where “this experience of splitting between self and body is ... a result of spinal or epidural anesthesia” under influence of which women “experience their selves as becoming an object that doctor’s manipulate” (84). It is thus notable that directly after the “banal accident” that precipitates the caesarean birth, the ‘I’ immediately becomes vulnerable: it is positioned in precarious isolation, untethered to any stabilising reality, deeply indented on its own line; the second ‘I’ is

indented even further, almost to the right-hand margin, showing the self pushed to the edge of existence (Metelerkamp, *Towing* 118).

Metelerkamp describes the powerlessness of her position “in the hands of the male medical technology” by referring to the doctors as “them” (Rich, *Woman* 172). According to Tess Cosslett, in birth narratives “[t]hings are done to [the woman] by a faceless, all-powerful ‘They’: the third person plural removes the blame from any individuals, and attaches it to the institution as a whole, which is presented as an irresistible power” (59). Metelerkamp’s statement that “they were all there, / G.P., anaesthetist, obstetrician, / and paediatrician”, which emphasises how women “are undermined and subverted ... by the very manner in which we give birth in hospitals, surrounded by male experts” (Rich, *Woman* 26), is also overdetermined through her use of the excessive word “all” to refer to this powerful medical, scientific and patriarchal institution. This also correlates with her acknowledgment of “their old / authoritarian, caesarian / decree” that determines patriarchal birthing procedures and marginalises the birthing woman.

The reference to the “women, / accomplices, there” during the birth casts them as complicit with the male medical technology, however they do play an ambiguous role. Unlike the “men” who actively “do” something to Metelerkamp, the women are presented as passive assistants whilst “holding the scalpel[s], / passing the swabs”. In an interview, Metelerkamp remarks that the women are “neither using [the scalpel] themselves, nor preventing it from being used” (Cousins 11), but through their silent and passive complicity they function as agents of patriarchal power. While medical and patriarchal interference in the birth process is seen to appropriate or usurp the mother’s central role in the birth of her child,¹¹ this poem works to re-appropriate it. By writing this “Birth poem”, Metelerkamp reclaims her children’s births and her creative role in their births. While the medical institution displaced and dispossessed

¹¹ In my MA I noted Susan Gubar’s argument that “[Western] culture is steeped in myths of male primacy in theological, artistic and scientific creativity” (293). Through these myths, man, like Ovid’s Pygmalion, is able to “[evade] the humiliation ... of acknowledging that it is *he* who is really created out of and from the *female* body” (Gubar 292, emphasis in original)” (Weyer 99).

her, taking her “work” for itself, this poem, this “work”, is entirely and irrefutably her own.¹²

However, this attempt to reassert her central role in her children’s birth is problematised by her “failure”: the “failure” to give birth naturally is translated into a creative failure. Due to the “banal accident” of her caesarian, Metelerkamp says:

I
 find I can’t make it live adequately
 again the moment to charged moment.

I
 find I falter at the thought of the work
 of re-creating birth’s magnitude (*Towing* 118-9; ellipsis added)

Nevertheless, in describing a birthing mother’s struggle for agency within a medicalised birth, this poetic struggle is a feminist triumph, which, though superficially maintaining “the hard pod of [her] silence”, visibly and viscerally evokes the experience of hospitalized childbirth. In doing so, she reaches out to other potentially ‘failed’-feeling mothers, and situates the caesarean-birthing body in a confessional, embodied poem that establishes an ethical encounter with the reader.¹³

Like Metelerkamp’s “Birth Poem”, Krog’s “birth” attempts to sing a song and thereby also create a record of her child’s birth. Like Metelerkamp, there is a tendency towards presenting birth in metaphorical terms, which is then restrained and reoriented towards the real bodily experience. Thus, Krog’s baby’s body is described “in roses and blood” (*Down* 36). The traditional, almost clichéd, poetic symbol of the rose is utilized to imply the baby’s blood-“besmeared” colour and the numerous thorns of pain his birth is causing his mother (*Down* 36). Additionally it suggests that, for the poet, this child, like the symbolic rose, is love. Moreover, just as poets have

¹² This argument about the medical appropriation of birth and the birthing mother’s response to this marginalisation draws on a discussion in my MA (see Weyer 97-99). However, while my MA concludes this discussion by focusing on the connection between being a mother and a poet, my PhD uses this as an entry point to a detailed discussion of maternal embodiment in confessional poetry, an argument that is developed by putting Metelerkamp’s “Birth poem” in conversation with Krog’s “birth” in the rest of this section.

¹³ For a very different perspective on hospitalised birth in South Africa – a difference which can partially be attributed to being published twenty years after Metelerkamp’s “Birth poem” in a context that, as Chadwick and Foster note, is more accepting of caesareans and medical involvement in the birth process – see Colleen Higgs’s poem, “make her breathe / keep her safe”, in which “the Neonatal ICU” is “the sacred high tech inner temple / where [her] baby lies in a glass cocoon” and doctors are “high priests” who “dispense opinion / hope and medication” whilst the “nurses administer ... love” (37).

used the beauty and perfection of the rose to symbolize those same (hopefully attained) qualities of their verse,¹⁴ Krog describes her son as “my most superlative sound” (*Down* 36). While the sounds of a healthy, newborn baby might be experienced as “superlative” by any new mother, the textual context of this poem calls for a wider reading of this phrase. In the pregnancy poem, “first sign of life”, which directly precedes “birth” in *Down to My Last Skin*, Krog confides to her foetus: “I wanted to hold you in words / how you look / how you sound / how I am going to utter you” (35). Krog thus utilizes the childbirth metaphor: the child is both a real being and a metaphor for a poem, or of poetic creation itself. Even though the unborn child resists this poetic recreation, as he “drift[s] wordlessly in placenta”, Krog still imagines him in these terms: “like a poem you began without my knowing / a coupling of image and sound / ... / a verse trembling this morning into wanting to be written” (*Down* 35). The “most superlative sound” which Krog claims as her own, is thus easily understood as the sounding out of what in “first sign of life” is described as “a yet unwritten, but most awe-inspiring poem” (*Down* 35). Her child’s birth can be metaphorically co-opted and this praise poem can be written. However, it could be argued that, as Krog was a committed and fully-devoted poet before she became a mother, describing her child as a poem is perhaps the most “awe-inspiring” manner in which she can depict him. His creation and existence exceeds her creation and crafting into existence of poetry; among the sounds of her other creations, his sound is the most superlative.

Furthermore, it should be noted that, although in “first sign of life” there is a clear metaphorical preference (unborn child as poem), in “birth”, when presented with a flesh-and-blood child, the focus is firmly placed on the physical reality of the birth process and body. Thus the “superlative sound” is followed by the rather mundane bodily activities of new motherhood: “wash him with colostrum / his arms next to his body wrap him in nappies / ... / and feed him” (*Down* 36). But while these chores (wash, wrap, feed) might sound mundane, in the sublimity of new motherhood they are invested with fevered love and devotion. Rather than merely suckling on the colostrum secreted by the new mother’s breast, he is “washed” in it. Like Sylvia Plath’s son in “Nick and the Candlestick”, the baby is placed “in a manger” and thus

¹⁴ See, for example, Edmund Waller’s “Song (Go, lovely rose!)”: the rose bears the message of the poem and is thus used metonymically; both are envoys from the poet-speaker.

seen as Jesus Christ¹⁵ – in Christian theology, the saviour of the world – thereby positioning the mother (Krog or Plath) as the archetypal saintly mother, the Virgin Mary. In this religious symbolism, the earlier “wash[ing]” of the baby with his mother’s colostrum could be read as a baptism, the life-sustaining properties of the colostrum being viewed as a type of maternal holy water.

The holiness and purification assigned to mother’s milk in this poem recalls Kristeva’s discussion of motherhood and the Virgin Mary in “Stabat Mater”. Kristeva writes that “[m]ilk and tears became the privileged signs of the *Mater Dolorosa*”, the grief-stricken mother of the crucified Christ (“Stabat” 173). The symbolic import of these signs is explored in Marina Warner’s *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary* (192-223). Milk, which “appear[s] spontaneously in full perfection”, is a symbol of nutritious purity and is “a crucial metaphor for the gift of life” (Warner 194). While the Virgin Mary has been culturally imagined as “whole”, “seamless, unbroken” – she is, as Warner notes, “a ‘closed gate’, a ‘spring shut up’, a ‘fountain sealed’” (73) – this cultural attention to her “physical effluvia” of milk and tears weakens the image of the sealed off maternal body (205). (Milk and tears aren’t examples of the abject, so they don’t overtly threaten the boundaries of the self, but they do question its neat containment.) Furthermore, because what “milk and tears have in common” is that “they are the metaphors of non-speech, of a ‘semiotics’ that linguistic communication does not account for”, the value accorded to colostrum in Krog’s poem indicates the importance of the semiotic, which is associated in Kristeva’s work with rhythms and contractions of the uterine space (“Stabat” 174).

When describing the birth itself, in the first three lines of the poem, there is a repeated use of oxymorons: “little mammoth” and “straining lovely” (*Down* 36). These oxymorons infuse these lines with tension, and push at the boundaries of coherent understanding. They thus not only perform the “straining” of the labouring body, but allow readers to, cognitively, share this strain. Like the labouring mother, we are held taut in a state of tension until “at last” the baby “t[ears] loose / tumble[s], no slip[s] out besmeared into [her] arms” (*Down* 36). One should note the testing out of different descriptive phrases for this birth moment – even at this pre-eminently

¹⁵ Plath calls her son “the baby in the barn” (242)

maternal moment, the mother remains a poet who “want[s] to hold [her child] in words” as well as “in [her] arms” (*Down* 36).¹⁶ In trying to find the most fitting way to describe the birth process, Krog resists a reliance on metaphors. The highly symbolic “roses” is rapidly succeeded by the “blood” of the real labouring body. The word “mammoth” has, in many usages, lost its status as a metaphor, to become a mere synonym for huge. The underlying metaphor, that the baby Krog is attempting to squeeze out into the world not only feels gargantuan in its straining passage, but is a long extinct creature whose arrival is thus truly miraculous, indicates how birth is often experienced as a miracle by the new mother, as an “exceptional / act [performed] with [an] exceptional heroic body”, to use Olds’s expression from “The Language of the Brag” (9). Rather than relying on extended metaphors, as Voth Harman found typical in birth poetry, Krog (like Metelerkamp) keeps her attention firmly trained on the body of the mother. Where she does briefly evoke the metaphor of baby as a poem (“my most superlative / sound”), this is not extended into an anti-corporeal idealization of her birthing self and her child, but rather, through the consistently corporeal imagery, their fully embodied existence is emphasized.

The embodied experience of giving birth is also emphasized in the single use of the ‘I’ in the poem (a relative rarity in Krog’s confessional poetry), in which Krog attests: “oh I throb throb throb about my / boychild” (*Down* 36). The scarcity of the ‘I’ in the poem indicates the stress the ‘I’ is under when giving birth, the difficulty in maintaining and securing one’s identity during this cataclysmic process. Although ‘my’ is used frequently, this possessive is restricted to the baby itself – “my / boychild my onlyest my loveliest my smallest my most superlative / sound” – and the mother’s body *in relation* to the baby: the baby is “straining between my legs” and “slipped into my arms” and must be “[fed] from my heart” (*Down* 36). The sole ‘I’ in the poem focuses on the speaker’s bodily experience. She “throb[s]” with the after pains of birth, perhaps while expelling the afterbirth. After the exertion of giving birth, her exhausted muscles throb. With an elevated pulse and high blood pressure, her whole body, infused with blood in arteries and veins, is throbbing. The body throbs with life (“blood”, “colostrum”) and love for the adored (“onlyest”, “loveliest”, “superlative”) baby (“boychild”). In the unique designation “I throb throb throb”, Krog not only

¹⁶ Nicole Ward Jouve’s question, examined later in this chapter, “Can the mother write poetry?”, is here unequivocally answered: yes.

maintains the attention on the mother's body, but avers that, in writing from the first person about a similar birth process, it would be impossible not to: the 'I' throbs, it pulsates, it is pained. Furthermore, through the use of uninterrupted stressed single-syllable words – "oh I throb throb throb" – the strong pulses of the mother's body are transferred to the reader's body: the rhythm of her words brings about a physical response in the reader (Aviram 5) by changing the respiratory cycle of the reader (Thompson 6) that in turn changes the tempo of the reader's heartbeat. She throbs, we throb. More locally, the repetition of "throb" sets up a rhythmic movement or pulsation of the lips and tongue as they form each successive fricative "th", approximant "r" and plosive "b". As with Metelerkamp's "the work, the work, the working womb", the experience of the labouring mother's body is transferred in a bodily, and not merely intellectual or symbolic sense, through the power of embodied, confessional poetry.

Poetry of Daily Labour

In the second stanza of "birth" Krog demonstrates that while motherhood might come into being through a single dramatic event, maintaining that life through the quotidian routine of care (washing, wrapping, feeding) is what ultimately defines motherhood.¹⁷ The poem that follows "birth" in *Down to My Last Skin* develops a portrait of a mother mired in the duties of love that define motherhood. In "how and with what?" Krog is shown cleaning the sink after making breakfast, washing babies and nappies, powdering the bottoms of the former and hanging the latter out to dry (*Down* 36). In opposition to the popular, dated but persistent, mantra about the fulfillment of motherhood,¹⁸ this poem examines the everyday attacks on maternal devotion that leave the mother "wondering / how and with what does one survive [motherhood]?" (*Down* 37). And, reading this intricately detailed, day-in-the-life account, this reader cannot help but echo the speaker's question.

¹⁷ See Rich's previously-noted remark about the differences between motherhood and fatherhood.

¹⁸ While this has long been contested by feminists, at least as early as Rich's *Of Woman Born*, contemporary "media idealize and glamorize motherhood as the one path to fulfilment for women" (Kinnick 1). Resultantly the "western, middle-class, largely 'white' ideal of the 'good mother' in which women are expected to provide exclusive, constant and selfless care" still persists in South Africa, as elsewhere, in the twenty-first century (Chadwick and Foster 14).

“how and with what?” presents an unvarnished view of a rarely-versified vision of familial chaos. Despite the mother’s tireless energy in performing her many chores, the household is not content: “the one [child] cries with hunger / the other with anger / the eldest with his nervous vegetable knife voice / carves a whole superman flight through the noise” (*Down* 36). In a response to this ruckus her husband, rather than assisting his wife in reinstating calm and order, “closes the door against us all / and turns up the Mozart concerto” (*Down* 36). This desertion snaps the final thread of the speaker’s sanity:

and I go crazy

my voice yells a mixerpulpershredermincer
 my nose leaks like a fridge
 my eyes quake like eggs in boiling water
 my ears are post boxes pouting with calendars and junk mail (*Down* 36-7).

In these rather surreal images, Krog presents herself as the embodiment of maternal rage and outrage. Her body, daily sacrificed in the duties of maternal care, is satirically pictured as a host of domestic appliances (“mixerpulpershredermincer” and “fridge”). Not only are these appliances seen as the sole domain of the stay-at-home mother, but through her operation of them, she has become intimately identified with them – her function, like any of the kitchen appliances, is to make the home run optimally and efficiently.¹⁹ Identified in this way with household appliances, when she does try to voice her rage, her human voice has transmuted into a mechanical frenzy (the increasing violence of the kitchen appliance image, “mixerpulpershredermincer”, emphasizes her decreasing control of herself and her rage). While her body, in its “leak[iness]” seems to remain female, this leakiness has moved from her secreting sex to her unsexed nose, which is associated with another domestic appliance. Similarly, while her eyes are aligned with eggs, and thus a woman’s reproductive capacity, these eggs “quake ... in boiling water” – her femaleness and fertility have been sacrificed to feed her family. Although her ears, depicted as post boxes, seem to allow the speaker some receptiveness and communication with the world outside her home, these post boxes are filled “with calendars and junk mail” and thus prevent the speaker from receiving any meaningful

¹⁹ The roots of this were explored in the first chapter’s discussion of the 1950s marketing of new electric appliances, which were aimed at women to help them be better mothers and wives, and thus emphasized their service of others in the home, not fulfillment of their own desires.

or personal communication from the outside world. The mother thus appears isolated and trapped, desexed and even dehumanized, a mere mechanical appliance designed for daily labour which is not given any attention unless it breaks down.

In this portrayal, Krog gestures towards the deep current of maternal violence that exists in so many patriarchal societies. Second wave, Anglo-American feminism, through examining the political implications of private, domestic experiences, was able to verbalise this violence, as well as account for it in biological, psychoanalytic and historical materialist terms (to use De Beauvoir's divisions in *The Second Sex*). Rich, for example, frames her account of twentieth century motherhood in *Of Woman Born* with chapters titled "Anger and Tenderness" and "Violence: The Heart of Maternal Darkness". Due to such theoretical, as well as poetic,²⁰ discussions of maternal rage, it gains visibility and a vocabulary that works to manage it. While patriarchy controls women through a "divide and conquer" policy, splitting women into family or work situations where they are in allegiance with men but competition with other women (Rich, *On Lies* 136-70), this literature works to unite women, not only imaginatively through bonds of understanding and identification, but also socially by emphasizing the dangers of stay-at-home mothers' dependency and isolation.

In "how and with what" the use of mechanical, kitchen appliance imagery is succeeded with that of common kitchen items:

I illustrate a kitchen
 with hair whipping dull against novilon skin
 the milk coupons of my back bent uninterestedly inside the gown
 the legs veined like blue soap
 slippers like pot scourers
 I sulk like a flour bag
 I am chipped like a jug
 my hands drier and older than yesterday's toast (*Down* 37).

These images extend the poem's identification of Krog with domestic, particularly kitchen, objects. Her skin is described as "novilon", the trade name of a cheap, durable linoleum flooring, which is almost exclusively found in kitchens. As the

²⁰ Krog's "how and with what" can be seen to continue a tradition including such poems as "Lesbos" by Plath (see discussion in Chapter One).

entire surface of her body is described as a type of (hardwearing, hardworking) flooring, this continues her functional domestic image, but this functionality is carried to the extreme of domestic servitude – she is being trampled upon by her family. With the mention of “milk”, Krog’s maternity is reinforced, but rather than the biological production of breast milk in a lactating mother, Krog’s back is aligned with milk coupons – even when no longer feeding her children from her own body, her body is still “bent” by the tasks of love to afford further cost-effective sustenance for them. Her back is described as being “bent uninterestedly inside the gown”, which presents two strong analytical possibilities. Either she is uninterested in her daily devotional household work, despite her conscientiousness in performing these tasks,²¹ or any viewers of her “illustrat[ion] [of] a kitchen”, particularly her husband and children, would be uninterested in her being beneath the stay-at-home mother’s morning uniform of a dressing gown, as she is merely there to perform household functions, and thus doesn’t merit interest or concern. As regards her husband, this image additionally suggests a lack of sexual interest in her – her bare flesh “inside the gown” is not of erotic interest to him.²² Continuing this non-erotic imagery, her legs are described as “veined like blue soap” (while “sunlight soap” is specifically referred to in the opening lines of the poem, the description could more aptly apply to Argo soap, both of which are typically used for hand-washing clothes – and indeed “sunlight soap” is often used generically): their function, even at the haemal level, is to clean, not to walk, or run, or dance, or jump, and certainly not to entice. Returning again from the metaphorical to the embodied toll of motherhood, this description suggests the condition of varicose veins, a condition that women are more prone to and which is typically exacerbated by pregnancy and spending prolonged periods of time on one’s feet, and thus the daily duties of motherhood are seen having taking a clear physical effect on the mother. The cleaning and scrubbing image created by “blue soap” is extended with the next line’s depiction of the “slippers” as “pot scourers”, which also continues the impression of her as the antithesis of eroticism. The next image sees a possible repersonalisation with the noting of the human mood of “sulk[ing]”, which, like the “pout[ing]” of the post box ears mentioned previously,

²¹ This poem, originally published in 1981, and thus likely written during the late 1970s, here recalls Rich’s quote (from 1976’s *Of Woman Born*) that, despite societal assumptions, mothers do not find their “chief gratification in being all day with small children” (3).

²² However, this reading is undercut, or at least complicated, by Krog’s later description of herself as “smell[ing] ... / of semen”.

can be seen as typically, and derogatorily, ‘feminine’ postures. However, even this token femininity and humanity is stripped as her sulking is aligned with that of a “flour bag”. As flour is a staple of any kitchen, best kept in an airtight container, this reasserts her entrapment and imprisonment in the domestic domain, and the sense in which it is suffocating her. The destructiveness of this imprisonment and her careless treatment within it are again notable as she is “chipped like a jug”, a common kitchen utensil, the chipping of which, though not aesthetically pleasing, has little impact on its functionality, and thus is likely to elicit little concern. In the last of these images, Krog states that her “hands [are] drier and older than yesterday’s toast”, which reminds the reader of her “novilon skin” that works in tireless service of her family. More profoundly though, this image suggests the Christian symbolism of bread as Christ’s body, which is then absorbed into the bodies of Christian believers during the communion ritual. In Krog’s symbolism, though her hands are identified with bread, the daily bread to feed her family, they are like “yesterday’s toast”: not only have her hands been transformed into consumable toast, using another kitchen appliance and thus showing her total identification with this space, but her offering of her hands/toast is not accepted, her love and concern is left-over, to become hard and stale.

In this poem Krog’s depicts the effects of the institution of motherhood on her own experience thereof. Rich uses this phrase to refer to the cultural, social, political and economic patriarchal structures that control and limit motherhood and thus the way motherhood is “*defined and restricted under patriarchy*”, and distinguishes it from “the *potential relationship* of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children” (*Woman* xvi; xv; emphasis in original). The institution, “which aims at ensuring that the potential – and all women – shall remain under male control ... calcifies human choices and potentialities” (Rich, *Woman* xv). Specifically, “it has alienated women from our bodies by incarcerating us in them” (Rich, *Woman* xv). Through the institution of motherhood that defines the mother as only a (dehumanized, desexed) body, which works as a machine in the service of her family, she is deprived of her full, mindful embodiment.²³ Her identity, and relationship to her own body, is disrupted through this process which re-establishes the Cartesian binary

²³ On the impact of motherhood on a woman’s full embodiment, also see Wendy Woodward’s “A Domestic Fable”, in which the mother’s “body is collapsing into a jigsaw of pieces” (48).

and imprisons mothers within the physical realm of objects. The institution therefore does violence to mothers, and, as a result, incites mothers to violence of their own. As seen in “how and with what”, in response to the sharp “cries” of and “assault[s]” by her children and the abandonment of her husband, Krog “goes crazy” and enters into a frenzied state which peters out in her “half-hearted slaps against the clamour” before her escape “outside” (*Down* 36-7).²⁴

Krog’s “how and with what” concludes with the poet, on a Sunday morning, attempting to flee the scene of familial chaos, managing to escape only as far as the “outside ... step” where she “wonder[s] / how and with what does one survive this?” (*Down* 37). Metelerkamp’s “Dove”, which imagines life “on a Monday morning” picks up where Krog’s poem left off (*Towing* 122). The opening line, which describes Metelerkamp as “[p]eripheral, exhausted [and] washed-out” seems to compact and distill the impact of Krog’s list of kitchen images (*Towing* 122). While Metelerkamp is not as loquacious as Krog in describing what “the quotidian demands of [a stay at home mother’s] hard day” are, the consequences of trying to fulfill these demands are uncannily similar (*Towing* 122). Despite a mother’s ostensible central position in her family, reduced to her corporeal functionality (floor, jug, soap) she becomes peripheral, an appliance on a shelf, a bag of flour in a cupboard. The repetitive, incessant demands of motherhood leave her “exhausted”, a leaky fridge. In the period in which Krog wrote the original Afrikaans poem (the collection it appears in, *Otters in Bronslaai*, was published in 1981 – comparatively, Metelerkamp’s *Towing the Line*, in which “Dove” appears, was published in 1992) a fridge most commonly leaked due to condensation running into and filling the drip tray, due to the frequent opening and closing of the fridge, more often than the tray was emptied. A leaky fridge (and fridge-caretaker, typically the mother) is therefore exhausted and unable to cope with the demands made upon it (or her). With the adjective “washed-out”, not only does Metelerkamp reiterate her exhaustion, and imply that this is making her look unattractive (and thus not sexually interesting, like Krog), but also claims that her energy and appearance have been faded from repeated washing: of children, clothes, dishes, floors. Similar to Krog, it thus seems as if she has “blue soap” in her

²⁴ The poem, “extenuating circumstances”, which will be discussed later in this chapter, further develops this engagement with maternal violence, but from the specific perspective of the mother-as-poet.

veins – reducing her most essential human activities to the continuous cleansing of home and children.²⁵ The reduction is emphasized in the description of her as “the figure” (*Towing* 122). She is merely a shape, an outline of a person.

As a result of this dehumanizing reduction, Metelerkamp, like Krog, seeks escape. These poems grapple with a maternal desire for escape and attempt to account for it. While Krog, at home with children (and her husband) on a Sunday morning, can only flee as far as the “outside ... step”, Metelerkamp imagines absconding “on a Monday morning (when the baby’s asleep, / his sister at playschool)” (*Towing* 122). This brief window of opportunity (however precarious it might be, with the baby merely “asleep”) allows Metelerkamp, in her imagination, to flee to a “church” (*Towing* 122). The timing of this imagined escape is important. Monday morning presents not only the best opportunity for escape, it also exposes that the weekend, when both parents are typically at home with their children and which is conventionally depicted as idyllic family time, particularly with Sunday being the ‘day of rest’, in fact creates a need to escape. One can thus deduce that the barely mentioned “father / of [her] children” in “Dove”, like the retreating father in “how and with what?”, supplies little assistance with weekend childcare, and likely adds to her maternal workload, as she is required to care for him too. The stay-at-home mother does not desire to escape on a Thursday or Friday after a whole week of caring for children single-handedly; the father could thus be seen as more of a hinderance than a help (in “how and with what” the father’s retreat is certainly the catalyst for Krog “go[ing] crazy” [*Down* 36]). This is reinforced later in the poem when Metelerkamp prays to be able to “unblock the ... / ...conduits / of love for the father / of [her] children” (*Towing* 123).

In Metelerkamp’s envisaged escape to a church, additional qualities of her “[p]eripheral, exhausted, washed-out” condition are revealed. Despite her assertion that she is “tired / of failed saviours”, and thus attests that she is not looking for “Christ” in the church, the church is still seen as providing her with sanctuary (*Towing* 122). She describes it as “comforting” and “sooth[ing]”, a place where is she

²⁵ This discussion recalls, from the perspective of the mother-poet rather than the daughter-poet, fellow South African, Jennifer Davids’s frequently anthologised and -prescribed “Poem for my Mother”, where the mother is depicted “hunched over the washtub”. When the young poet-speaker presents the mother with her gift of a poem, she describes how “my words / slid like a ball / of hard blue soap / into the tub / to be grabbed and used by you / to rub the clothes” (188).

able to admit her exhaustion and desperation and “fall ... prostrate” (*Towing* 122). She imagines she will be able to attain some respite in “the dark anonymity of the nave” (*Towing* 122). It is thus only in surrendering her identity, and with it the duties and “quotidian demands” of motherhood, that she can rest (*Towing* 122). Perhaps, however, it is not merely this identity, but also that of an aspiring “poet and academic” that needs to be forgotten (*Towing* 115), as Metelerkamp is haunted by “specters of dead aspirations” and thus describes herself as “washed-out / onto the shore of dreams” (*Towing* 123; 122). She thus feels herself to be stranded on an unstable strip of land, constantly under threat from the tides, an untenable location in which to live. As examined in “Ripped like a ragged piece of paper” Metelerkamp

... find[s] [her]-
 self torn between the ambition to
 be what they call someone, recognized,
 named (poet or academic), and
 the inverse desire to accept
 the limits of anonymity,
 to see the invisible limits
 of the unseen, the unrecognized
 powers of the unnamed; to invest
 all tasks with dignity, to accept
 the rhythm of life-care with love (*Towing* 115).

“Dove”, like “Ripped like a ragged piece of paper”, is a published poem in Metelerkamp’s first, and award-winning, collection of poetry (satisfying her desire to be “someone, recognized, / named”), and many of the poems in this collection are about the anonymous, maternal “rhythm[s] of life-care”, thereby demonstrating that while these may be presented as competing identities, they are, in fact, often mutually informing. Nevertheless, in “Dove”, she expresses a need to surrender both these identities.

In being a middle class, stay-at-home mother, Metelerkamp has been assigned the role of “the Angel in the House”, as Woolf famously labeled this identity (“Professions” 1385).²⁶ Metelerkamp, describing herself as having “wings” with “feathers”

²⁶ In showing the historical complications of this role Rich draws on Woolf’s depiction of this figure to write that middle class women of the mid- to late-twentieth century “were expected to fill both the part of the Victorian Lady of Leisure, the Angel in the House, and also of the Victorian cook, scullery maid, laundress, governess, and nurse” (*Woman* 8). Metelerkamp, who in “Song of Marriage” both “swear[s]” that she is “no more than cleaner and cook” and calls herself “the dreaming girl” who “lies in the sun day after sun” seems to experience both facets of this dual identity (*Into* 104-108).

symbolically shows her (possibly ironic) acceptance of this angelic label. However, this angel flees her house in order to find peace: her feathers are “barbed” and need to be “soothe[d]”, her wings are desperately “splayed” as she “fall[s] ... prostrate ... / ... against the pew” (*Towing* 122). In these images, rather than seeing the angel capably and adroitly managing her household, one sees “the flight of worn out spirit of woman”: through the daily labour of motherhood the spirit, fused as it is with the body, is worn-out, worn-down.

In “fall[ing] ... prostrate” in the church, despite her distrust of “failed saviours”, Metelerkamp still assumes a position of reverence and submission. But when she asserts that she “doubt[s]” that the church will be able to soothe her, it becomes clear that her reverence is not for the church itself. Rather, her desire to retreat into “the comforting womb of the church” asserts that she wishes to escape her maternal duties by fleeing to her own mother. Displaying her desire to submit to the care of her own revered mother, Metelerkamp writes:

I think I shall have to make my own prayer
for the quotidian demands of hard day – swill it round
like pills with black coffee –
no; make it, rather,
mouths full of muffins at my mother’s breakfast
breaking the night;
night of specters of dead aspirations and
the baby crying and
crying; coo to me caressing voice
give me warm milk and
deep sleep again
deep sleep; (*Towing* 123).

In this excerpt, Metelerkamp wants to invert her role of maternal responsibility for her children and regress to babyhood herself, where her own mother can take complete care of her and allow her to recover from her exhaustion. Even as Metelerkamp desires a reprieve from the demands of motherhood, this desire takes the form of making childlike demands on her own mother. While one could read this passage as just expressing a need to be mothered, the fact that she asks the mother to “give [her] warm milk and / deep sleep *again*” identifies the mother as her own biological mother. This thereby ironically implies that there is no respite from motherhood. It should also be noted that, even envisaged by the adult Metelerkamp desiring to be mothered, mothering is described as an overtly physical undertaking: one cares for a

baby by fulfilling their bodily needs (warm milk, deep sleep) through the actions on one's own body (caressing voice, lactating breast, hands that arrange blankets).

In "Dove" Metelerkamp, like Krog, "wonder[s] / how and with what does one survive this" and comes to the realization that she will "have to make [her] own prayer / for the quotidian demands of hard day" (*Towing* 122). Her prayer is not directed to a saviour, but to the "spirits of women", women who have come before her and have learnt how to survive motherhood, women with experience and wisdom.²⁷ In concluding this poem, Metelerkamp asks:

... give me patience
and love to unblock the ducts
of love for my children, conduits
of love for the father
of my children;
inject me with potency
to wipe away this anaesthetic veil
keeps me from entering life lightly again;
give me strength to remember my love,
give me love –
no; I shall not pray for transfiguration,
for centuries long, long ago longing for peace
of Madonna and Child;
less, less, give me less, only
strength for the tasks
of love. (*Towing* 123)

Rejecting "transfiguration" and transformation into a perfect, but disembodied, "Madonna" with her perfect motherly love, Metelerkamp rejects the long-cherished ideal of motherhood, as self-sacrificing devotion and love for a deity-like baby – the baby "in a manger" – and instead accepts the lesser reality of fully embodied motherhood, that one needs "strength for the tasks / of love".

Writing Poetry from the Mother's Body

In Nicole Ward Jouve's provocative article "'No-one's Mother': Can the Mother Write Poetry?" she asks: "Must a woman poet kill the mother in herself, at least while she is writing? Do women write out of different selves? ... Is motherhood, being

²⁷ In Metelerkamp's oeuvre she frequently calls on "wise women" in order to hear women's voices through their written words, and find their legacies to their literary daughters (see Weyer 56-85).

bodily “occupied” by the other, is mothering, caring for others, compatible with lyric flight and freedom? (278-9). In *A Room of One’s Own*, when discussing women writers and the existence of a female literary tradition, Woolf repeatedly draws attention to the authors’ childlessness (75, 79, 86). Much of De Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* argues that the “fundamental fact that from the beginning of history doomed women to domestic work and prevented her taking part in the shaping of the world was her enslavement to the generative function” – and, of course, one of the primary tools we have to shape our world is literature (148). Olsen’s *Silences* explores how women’s maternity all too often silences their literary talents (note, for example, Olsen’s twentieth century extension of Woolf’s categorization –unmarried/married, childless/with children – of the central figures in the women’s literary tradition [16]).

The scarcity of mothers who write and publish literature, and the reasons for this scarcity are thus not new topics in feminist theory. Neither is the more specific scarcity of mothers who write poetry. Woolf notes that, despite the fact that “[t]he original impulse [of literary women] was to poetry”, most published women’s work was (in the early twentieth century) “with very few exceptions, all novels” (*Room* 85). Ward Jouve, responding to Olsen, comments on how few of the women writers Olsen lists are mothers and poets (279). She asks:

what of the incompatibility between the caring, the considerateness, the nurturing mothering demands, and tends to develop in its practitioners, and the cruelty that creation requires? ... Isn’t it even more imperative for the woman poet than for the woman novelist to kill the Angel in the House? Can you be a poet and not draw upon your darkest, your most destructive self – since you must draw upon your deepest, your whole self – that which dares wrestle with sexuality and death? (Ward Jouve 280-1)

However, despite this “incompatibility” Ward Jouve concludes, a posteriori, that “mothers do write poems” (296). She asserts that the question, “can the mother write poetry?”, is a “false” one which “came from making identities of ‘Mother’ and ‘Poetry’: not acts and experiences in a continuous process of change and reinvention” (295). (This clearly resonates with embodiment theory, which rejects abstract, stable “identities” and focuses rather on the processes of bodily existence.) Nevertheless, while there is clear evidence that mothers can and do write poetry (Krog, Metelerkamp, Plath, Sexton, Rich and Olds are but a few examples central to this

thesis), the question of how poetry can be written from the mother's body is, perhaps, more intricate and interesting.

In *Of Woman Born*, Rich famously declares: "For me, poetry was where I lived as no-one's mother, where I existed as myself" (12). What this declaration emphasizes is a split between the mother and poet identities, and therefore between the hands that wash, clothe and feed children, and those that wield pens, pencils, smooth paper or hover over keyboards. And, in Rich's case, the writer identity is asserted to be essential ("myself") while the mother role is temporary and peripheral (not-myself). How do more contemporary, South African poets, like Krog and Metelerkamp, who more fully and unreservedly embrace motherhood (read "first sign of life" [*Down* 35] and "Eve calls" [*Into* 73] in comparison to Rich's account of impending, and actual, motherhood in *Of Woman Born*) resist the splitting of their coherent, embodied identity and write confessional poetry from the mother's body?

In order to answer this question, it is first necessary to examine Ward Jouve's claim about the "incompatibility" of being a poet and a mother. Despite Rich's personal testimony, do all mother-poets feel that these identities are incompatible, that poetry requires "cruelty" that is radically antithetical to motherhood? The practical difficulties in combining motherhood, particularly being a stay-at-home mother of young children, and poetry are well-established. Olsen points out one facet of this difficulty in her previously quoted remark that "motherhood means being interruptible" (the same factor that Woolf saw as responsible for turning literary women away from poetry, and towards a steadier prose form) and that "[w]ork interrupted, deferred, relinquished, makes blockage – at best, lesser accomplishment" (18-19).

Krog partially circumvented this difficulty employing a "full-time domestic worker and a nanny for the baby [in order to] keep the mornings to herself for her literary life", explaining, in her 1984 interview with Knox, that she "can do nothing without help in the house" (62). In this way Krog, like many middle class, white South African women, relies upon the domestic labour of a lower class, black woman. White motherhood is here dependent on black women, who are often mothers themselves, temporarily taking over the white, stay at home mothers' duties of cooking, cleaning

and caring for children.²⁸ Krog's dependence on this maternal assistance is illustrated by the chaotic domestic portrait in "ode to a perfect match":

on this Monday morning
 on which Mavis didn't turn up
 amongst washing and toys
 in my bra and panties on the carpet
 ...
 your children busy fighting (*Down 22*).

The alliterative effect of "Monday morning / ... Mavis" emphasises Krog's regular reliance on the working presence of Mavis, that her labour is essential for the smooth running of her home. In this poem, caught between domestic and creative duties, Krog "abandon[s] the housekeeping / to write [her husband] an ode". Although the poem presents this carefree creativity idyllically ("I let my hair frizz out / throw the door open against the green" [*Down 22*]), this idyll is only possible on a temporary basis: if Mavis is absent for the rest of the week, let alone if Krog has no permanent household help, the accumulation of "washing and toys", along with other neglected chores, would soon impinge on and impede this glorious poetic abandon.

What is, of course, ironic, is that it is Mavis's *absence* that enables her presence and role in Krog's life to be visible in this poem, which is, incidentally, the only poem in Krog's English oeuvre in which she is (absently) present. While farm labourers are depicted in Metelerkamp's work, domestic workers are not, which could either imply that she does not employ a domestic worker – as her complaint about being "no more than cleaner and cook" to her family suggests (*Into 108*) – or that such a person is altogether elided in her poetry. What this elision (or possible elision in Metelerkamp's case) reveals is that "the domestic servant is traditionally expected to disappear into the background, to become invisible" and that it is only her failure to appear for work, and then dissolve into the background, which makes her a visible presence for the 'white madam'.

²⁸ For a poetic exploration of mothering and race in South Africa, see Ingrid de Kok's oft-anthologised poem "Small passing", which speaks of "women's hands [that] are so heavy when she dusts / the photographs of other children / they fall to the floor and break" and of "the nannies" who meet on "the pavements", "while the children play among them, / their skins like litmus, their bonnets clean" (*Seasonal 49*). Finuala Dowling also examines the relationship between a white, middle class woman and her black domestic worker in her poem, "It will be like this" (*Doo-Wop 55*).

To extend this line of questioning, one could ask about the general absence of black women's bodies in Krog and Metelerkamp's confessional poetry, especially in relation to Krog's autobiographical prose. While Nuttall sees racial "entanglements" – the "process of becoming someone you were not in the beginning ... through encounters with blackness" as a noticeable feature of *Country of My Skull*, and *A Change of Tongue* and *Begging to Be Black* also display this feature (*Entanglement* 58; 65-70), it certainly is not visible in their poetry. One possible reason for this centres on the notion of form: while novels are, on a textual level, typically polyphonic – and this diversity of interacting voices is no doubt a reason for the great popularity of the novel-form in the post-apartheid, and postcolonial, postmodern, world – textually, confessional poems are monologues. (They do, of course, as previously discussed, function dialogically, as an interaction between poet-speaker and reader-listener, but superficially they can seem to present a disentangled, contained voice, though this is often undercut, as is also discussed in the previous chapter.) Another reason could link to the autobiographical framework: confessional poetry is a self-reflexive medium in which white women poets write of their own white and female bodies, while black women poets write of their own black and female bodies. In confessional poetry, developing an empathetic imagination and engaging in embodied encounters with the other that give rise to entanglement are the responsibility and privilege of the reader in response to the text, not of the poet. For greater social entanglement to be enacted through confessional poetry, what is thus needed is a diverse group of poets and a body of readers who read across the boundaries of their own race, gender, class and sexuality.

Another facet of the incompatibility of being a mother and poet is remarked on by Metelerkamp in "Birth Poem" where she attests that motherhood exhausts women; it is the fact that they are "always too tired to / work on anything more [that] keeps the mothers / from writing" (*Towing* 117). But is there a more intrinsic incompatibility between being a poet and mother, as Ward Jouve suggests?

That literature has historically been seen as unwomanly, let alone unmotherly, cannot be in doubt (see Woolf [*Room*] and Gilbert and Gubar for their discussions of the perceived "monstrosity" of the woman writer). As a result of this, Gilbert and Gubar note women writers' susceptibility to an "anxiety of authorship" (as opposed to the

Bloomian “anxiety of influence” suffered by male writers) that can primarily be overcome through finding female precursors who can serve as literary mothers, and thereby shore up women writers’ confidence in their own ability, and right, to write. As noticed by Woolf, and expounded upon by Ward Jouve, until relatively recently few women writers have been poets (novelists dominate the field) and it is therefore likely that poets have greater difficulties finding suitable literary mothers, and are consequently more threatened by “monstrosity” than their novelist-sisters.

Krog has written two poems (in her English oeuvre) that overtly examine her monstrosity as a mother-poet. In “nightmare of A Samuel born Krog” she imagines herself as a literary mother, writing in blood:

the desk is warm and bloody like a newly slaughtered carcass
from the drawers transparent synovial fluid drips
...
the clothes on my body take on a life of their own
they rear like snakes and breathe like fish
my tongue jumps around tail upright acrimonious
the salivary rattle their pincers
the hand falls on the white breath of the page
an animal with fur on its back (*Down* 49).

Here, Krog’s organs of speech, which she views as her poetic foundation (for, as Krog notes in “poet becoming”, “the poet writes poetry with her tongue” [*Down* 59]), is where her monstrosity is primarily located: like a deadly scorpion her “tongue jumps around tail upright acrimonious / the salivary glands rattle their pincers”. Similarly, her writing “hand” is “an animal with fur on its back” that maniacally “falls” on the innocent “white breath of the page”.

In “extenuating circumstances”, Krog does not describe herself as (perhaps unwillingly) transforming into a monster through the act of writing poetry, but actively seeking out monstrosity to enable her to write:

every word stubbornly tilted into writing
betrays the lunacy
lying just below the vocal chords

all the more strangely it leaks

down the jugular
molars shredding mouthlinings

the breast silts up with something that could be pain

I stretch my hands: come
come graphite! come paper! come language!
come to my sanity
and bring mildness afterwards (*Down 46*)

The “lunacy” of the mother-poet is repressed and silenced (it lies “just below the vocal chords”), but in order to write, she embraces this lunacy through a witch-like incantation. Krog then sees this embrace of creative monstrosity as having the following nightmarish consequences:

in the tidy sitting room on the couch
the youngest skew on his dad’s chest
sits my whole family
beheaded
with aortas reeling staining
through the spittlesoft sounds
the blubbering blood swabs
I recognize fragments of clothing
and the third child’s turned-in fourth toe (*Down 46*).

In “extenuating circumstances” Krog thus places the poet and mother identities at opposite ends of the spectrum – these identities are viewed as not merely incompatible but as mutually destructive. In these poems, Krog seems to agree with Ward Jouve – in her original hyponthesis – that poetry and motherhood are not only incompatible, but that the creation of poetry requires “cruelty” and “destruct[ion]”.²⁹

Metelerkamp is less dramatic than Krog in her engagement with this question. In “Loss”, however, she comes to a similar conclusion, through her use of the mythological character Philomela.³⁰ She “describes her despair at her inability to find

²⁹ This argument is, of course, incomplete and will be returned to and modified shortly – the pause here is primarily for rhetorical effect. The logic of this argument is that of a Hegelian dialectic: the thesis has been presented, but the antithesis and synthesis still await.

³⁰ A summary of Philomela’s story:

According to Ovid, Tereus, husband of Philomela’s sister Procne, was charged with escorting Philomela to visit her sister. Overcome by lust, he instead took her to an isolated cabin, raped her, and then cut off her tongue when she threatened to tell of her violation. Philomela wove a tapestry describing her ordeal which she sent to her sister. To revenge herself on her husband, Procne killed their son Itys, after freeing Philomela, and served him to Tereus who unknowingly ate him. When he discovered what he had done, he tried to kill both sisters, and all three were transformed, by the gods, into birds. (Weyer 88)

To extend the MA's argument beyond the purely personal realm, through its invocation of the "reason" of the "father", this poem also speaks more broadly to patriarchy and the language of the father that her child (in "the terrible twos") is in the process of acquiring.³² As a woman and a poet, Metelerkamp is both "controlled [by] and controlling" of this patriarchal language that exerts "forces / implacable to [any individual's] control". In light of this, Metelerkamp's desire to "cut, / quite cleanly, the tie of these terribly / symbiotic twos" refers not only to a desire for a separation from her (two year old) child and her husband (the marital couple as the "symbiotic two"), but also from her dependence on patriarchal language. Her poem thus presents resistance to, and a desire to divorce herself from, "patriarchal colonial / poetics", a resistance which is theoretically expounded upon in her article "Ruth Miller: Father's Law or Mother's Lore", and search for a type of language that could take its place, because "separation is only / the start; the gap must still be filled" (*Towing* 109).

While these poems by Metelerkamp and Krog could be seen to support Ward Jouve's (initial) contention that poetry and motherhood are incompatible, couldn't the fear and horror they describe be seen as evidence of literary women's almost inevitable "anxiety of authorship"? They fear they will be perceived as monstrous, and so when overcome by anxiety and temporarily accepting this designation, they recoil in horror. These are not poems written from the heart of maternal darkness, but poems written from an illusionary precipice dreamt up by patriarchal poetics, built on the foundation of Cartesian duality with its binary either/or logic.

Despite the fact that, as Louise Viljoen notes, "one of the most important themes in Krog's poetry ... [is] the strenuous demands posed by combining a writing career with the role of wife, mother and housekeeper" ("Mother" 198) (and one could argue the same about Metelerkamp), Krog has never accepted that these roles are incompatible. In her 2006 interview with Michelle McGrane, when asked, "How have you reconciled your roles as wife, mother and daughter with your responsibilities to yourself as a writer", her response is striking:

³² The MA thus once again serves as springboard from which the PhD launches into new, uncharted territory: the MA's personal and biographical approach in its single-author study provides useful preliminary analytical material but is theoretically and thematically superceded by the PhD's wider-ranging interest in women's embodied poetics and the, soon to be discussed, ethical potential of writing from the mother's body.

Firstly, one has one life. It would be pathetic to try and keep it pure and bare in the hope of writing *The Big Poem*. In my book, *The Big Poem* compensates for nothing. Being embedded in a full-blooded life could enrich what one has to say; the feeding of your children could feed the writing.... [I]f the feeding of the children destroys the writing, then one should also accept the possibility that one perhaps did not have enough to say anyway.

Secondly, to accept as the only choice [that a woman can be either a mother or a writer, very rarely both], is to buy into that very male either/or notion. Male writers never had to “give up” penis, balls and beards – they turned it into the very essence of their writing. They never chose between a family and writing – they turned their singularity into the only category. Why do we assume that to be a good writer we have to be like them? Why do we assume that an epic poem about heroism or the loneliness of choice can be part of the canon, but a short poem about childbirth cannot?

Krog thus rejects Ward Jouve’s original hypothesis. By describing how male writers turned their maleness “into the very essence of their writing”, thereby presenting women with a “very male either/or” decision (be a feminine woman, or a masculine writer), Krog displays an understanding of the workings of women’s “anxiety of authorship”, but she refuses to “buy into” the patriarchal usurpation of literary creation. Adopting the first personal plural in a series of forcefully feminist rhetorical questions (“Why do we assume ...”, “Why do we assume ...”), Krog argues that, united, women can choose not to accept the rules of the patriarchal literary establishment. Therefore, to return to the argument about “extenuating circumstances”, what Krog is doing in this poem is not choosing to place the mother and poet in opposition, but instead demonstrating an awareness that the institution of motherhood (the incarceration in the body-object) is antithetical to the institutionalized definition of being a poet (the mind-subject engaging in “lyric flight and freedom” [Ward Jouve 279]).³³ It is not (the potentials of) motherhood and poetry which are mutually exclusive and -destructive, but the institutions thereof. These institutions are, of course, open to revision and redefinition, and can be negotiated through one’s own experience, as well as the experiences of others by means of an ethical and empathic response to their confessions.

Similarly, in Metelerkamp’s 2006 interview with McGrane, she focuses on the experience of mothering, describing motherhood as “a constantly changing way of

³³ Ward Jouve’s initial characterisation of all poetry as “lyric flight and freedom” is therefore an additional false assumption that invalidates her question: “can the mother write poetry?” (279). The poetry it describes is created by a patriarchal poetics that forbids mothers to enter its hallowed halls.

being” (rather than an institutionally-defined “role” that one is socially encouraged to “embrace”) shortly after stating: “I think the whole process of life is constant change”. She thus sees her life and her maternity as completely synchronous, and thus her writing life and motherhood are compatible. Furthermore, the emphasis on process and change accentuates the embodiment principles that ground her thinking (about poetry and motherhood). Like Krog, she is aware of, and working to destabilise, the institution of motherhood through her poetry. When considering whether “the mothers [have] shifted / meaning in their mothering”, despite the fact that “the literature / the documentation the / records answer no the myths / remain intact”, she counters that while “we are living with these / [mythical] mothers” we are “slowly / inserting ourselves into / interstices of routine” (*Stone* 11-2). Through her confessional poetry of the maternal body, Metelerkamp is thus working to crack open the institution of motherhood from within.³⁴

This averred compatibility between poetry and motherhood can thus also be seen in the subjects of Krog’s and Metelerkamp’s poetry. While Rich, asserting that her ‘poet’ and ‘mother’ identities were not coherent, couldn’t or wouldn’t write poems about her children (*Woman* 12), Metelerkamp’s and Krog’s collections witness that motherhood can serve as both the subject of poetry, and a catalyst for the writing of poetry. But beyond this, they also write poetry from the body of the mother.

The first way in which they do this is by not waiting for “the Big Poem” (to use Krog’s words), nor searching for “the Word” (to use Metelerkamp’s [*Into* 17]), but by using “words, / ... / like *make*, / *do*, in place of / *epiphany*” (*Into* 15; emphasis in original). As Metelerkamp advises, women poets should be “wary of falling into [the] trap of hankering for the lost Word; we can relinquish a longing for the perfect form.... We need to widen the gap between the Word and our words, reveling in quotidian poetic language’s difference from the Word” (“Ruth Miller” 253). Writing from the mother’s body is to revel in the quotidian.³⁵ Like Krog, who sardonically

³⁴ The imagery of this poem reminds me of Plath’s “Mushrooms”, as does the slow process of feminist change Metelerkamp is describing (though this is seen to gather greater momentum in Plath’s poem): “The small grains make room. / Soft fists insist on / Heaving the needles”, we “[w]iden the crannies, / Shoulder through holes”, we are “[n]udgers and shovers / In spite of ourselves”, “Our foot’s in the door” (139-40).

³⁵ As Rita Felski argues, the quotidian is specifically gendered feminine, is aligned with the domestic space, and is linked to repetition, routine, habit: the quotidian is therefore most closely associated with

informs the reader that “God, Death, Love, Loneliness, Man / are Important Themes in Literature” while “childbirth”, along with “menstruation ... menopause, puberty / [and] marriage are not” and then eschews writing about the Important Themes to focus instead on the lesser, lower case subjects (*Body* 20), Metelerkamp attests:

The process of life is what I want
to write about, anyway, the day-
to-day process of tasks of love and
repetition of the preparing,
like fields for sowing, the repairing,
like blades for cutting – food and sleep and
work for food and sleep and sometimes, like
a breeze, a breath of home-made holy
spirit, recreation;

recreate
for the desire to recreate
our world, inch little by little in
each preparation slightly further
limit by limit; (*Towing* 115-6).

Poetry from the mother’s body is about cyclical process, not linear progress to a grand climax or epiphany. In her discussion of the quotidian and its “cyclical structure” (18), Rita Felski quotes EP Thompson’s contention that “[t]he mother of young children has an imperfect sense of time and attends to other human tides” and that “[w]hile much paid work is equally repetitive, only the domestic sphere is deemed to exist outside of the dynamic of history and change” (19). This demonstrates the traditional privileging of linear over (“imperfect”) cyclical time, and how a mother’s immersion in cyclical time and its “day- / to-day process of tasks of love” is seen to somehow place her outside of time and change, despite the constant change involved in caring for children, who exist, as Metelerkamp remarks, in a state of “constant metamorphosis / from birth; this lightning process” (*Towing* 117). Writing from the maternal body is thus writing that is created from and embraces bodily processes and metamorphosis.

The focus on routine and repetition, and the affinity for a cyclical logic in composing poetry, is highly evident in Metelerkamp’s poetry (see Weyer 25-30), particularly as

the lives of stay at home mothers of young children. Felski describes this “distinctly female space” as one in which “women traditionally cook, clean, change diapers, raise children and do much of the routine work of family reproduction” (30).

the shorter poems of her debut collection have increasingly been superseded by book-length poetic cycles (*Into the day breaking, requiem, carrying the fire, Burnt Offering*). While this could be less evident to an English reader of Krog's poetry, with *Down to My Last Skin* condensing and re-organizing a whole career's worth of poetry collections (it is evident in her Afrikaans collections, *Lady Anne* and *Jersalemgangers*, as well as the series of poems about Susanna Smit in *Otters in Bronslaii*), *Body Bereft* clearly shows a similar affinity for a cyclical logic and process, rather than linear progress (see, for example, "Four seasonal observations of Table Mountain").

Despite Metelerkamp's and Krog's rejection of "the Word" or "the Big Poem", poetry from the mother's body demonstrates how beauty, art, brief moments of perfection are contained within the quotidian, the material, the routine of daily life, and therefore how motherhood can be fully compatible with the creation of poetry. Metelerkamp, through her mother-sculptor-persona Karen in *Floating Islands*, thus sees her artistic goal as follows:

To take the everyday

*tasks every day, like the
breakfast dishes, the cooing doves
I have pulled from the sky,
to take the mundane, daily, turn*

*the quotidian, daily, make
of it longing, appeased;
beat it like mud off a mat
into gold, motes of gold*

*caught in the door way
as they fall from the sun (Floating 31, emphasis and ellipsis in original)*

Quotidian poetry, written from bodies firmly planted on the ground, bodies that have lives and duties beyond awaiting "the Big Poem", bodies of mothers, might not manage "lyric flight and freedom" (Ward Jouve 279), but they can "[tow] the line", "little by little", "limit by limit" and thereby "recreate / our world" (Metelerkamp, *Towing* 116).

In Olsen's discussion of the incompatibility between writing and motherhood she writes:

motherhood means being instantly interruptible, responsive, responsible. Children need one *now*.... The very fact that these are real needs, that one feels them as one's own (love, not duty); *that there is no one else responsible for these needs*,³⁶ gives them primacy. It is distraction, not meditation, that becomes habitual; interruption, not continuity; spasmodic, not constant toil. (18-9; emphasis in original).

While Olsen asserts the need for solitude, independence and continuity for successful writing, as writing comes from mental "meditation",³⁷ writing from the mother's body is prefaced upon being responsive, interdependent and engaged with the process of change, it comes from embodied interaction.³⁸ While this has been briefly and partially discussed in relation to Krog's "poet becoming" in the previous chapter (where Krog's contention that the poet "breathes deeply with her ear" implies that one writes poetry through listening to others, poetry is thus fundamentally responsive [*Down* 59]), this is especially evident in Metelerkamp's "Tea with Janet Frame" (*Floating* 92-4).

This poem attempts to gain wisdom from a "mother" about how to write poetry (*Floating* 92). It is set in the feminine domestic space and during the feminine ritual of "having tea" accompanied by "a sandwich, a cake" and is thus located in the quotidian sphere of maternal bodily nurture (*Floating* 92). The advice the mother gives in this poem, is that poetry is created by listening, and therefore as a poet you need to "listen for [your] life, / for [your] living" and need to "catch / ... [other] voices to write" (*Floating* 92). The mother explains

...– this is how you enter [the space from which to write] –
after breakfast when the others
are at work, at their books, then;
only on days in which children are ill you
do not write and the days when

³⁶ This proviso indicates that Olsen is writing from an institutional understanding of motherhood.

³⁷ The writing method described is reminiscent of Keats's in "When I have fears", which was discussed in the previous chapter as an example of a traditional solitary, purely intellectual creative practice, as opposed to Krog's embodied, responsive practice in "poet becoming".

³⁸ Of course, as with any other writing practice, there are occasional failures in the attempt to write from the mother's body. In Krog's "two years this month", which examines her experience of 'writer's block', it is the interruption of a child needing his poet-mother's attention that seems to prevent her from being able to write (*Down* 52-3). Counterbalancing this, however, is the fact that it is this very interruption, poetically depicted as italicised lines of quoted verse, that is the catalyst for and subject of this completed poem (*Down* 53).

sister and sister-in-law
come to stay and afternoons
and evenings when you take care
of children and holidays
(children's holidays and yours)
otherwise listen and write –
and listen while you cook stir
the pots sifting sounds words shapes – (*Floating* 93)

The space from which to write is the body of the mother, who is interrupted by caring for children and visits from family and is *responsive* to these interruptions. She writes from her responsiveness (“listen and write”), and melds her quotidian bodily tasks with the creation of poetry (“cook stir / the pots sifting sounds word shapes”), rather than seeking a pure space for solitary creative contemplation. The corporeality of the poems is emphasised in their designation as “sounds” and “shapes”, and at the end of the poem, the method of writing from the mother's body is clearly demonstrated:

and she will strip off the lid
peel back the ream of foolscap
and begin [writing]; and I, meantime

will turn to my tea
laughing, chatting about
poems and stories about
trees and childhood about
colonies, islands, need –

and she'll be listening, writing,
hearing other words, words
scratching the paper through the nib
soothing with its rhythms (*Floating* 94)

This creation of poetry is an embodied practice, located within the quotidian sphere, which, rather than eschewing interruptions, is interactive and interdependent.

In this poem, the “mother” is renowned New Zealand writer, “Janet Frame”, whose autobiography³⁹ Metelerkamp's poet-persona Amanda receives for Christmas in the previous poem (*Floating* 91). Metelerkamp's writing from the mother's body is evidenced by her decision to write this manifesto of poetic creation, not in the didactic form of a poetic “essay” or even a cerebral meditation, but as an embodied

³⁹ The titles of the three volumes of Frame's autobiography – *To the Is-land*, *An Angel at My Table* and *The Envoy from Mirror City* – are referenced in Metelerkamp's the lines about “the Angel at my Table, / the Is-land, the Mirror City” as well as her listening for “the envoys from the dark” (*Floating* 92).

interaction, mother and daughter having tea, through which a dialogue is constructed. In this dialogue, the ‘I’, ‘you’ and ‘she’ are unstable and changeable: initially Frame is the mother (‘you’ later ‘she’) and Amanda/Metelerkamp is the speaking daughter (‘I’), but as the poem progresses – and specifically at the moment Metelerkamp accepts Frame’s invitation to enter the quotidian, feminine space of ritual with her: “*come in, / come in and have some tea*” (*Floating* 92, emphasis in original) – Metelerkamp transitions into the mother (‘she’, later ‘I’) talking to her own “adolescent” self (‘I’, later ‘she’ and ‘you’). The switching between first-, second- and third-person in the poem is indicative of a fluctuating, ambivalent narrative perspective, rather than a coherent, unified speaking self. This troubling of stable boundaries between subjects and emphasis on ambiguity raises another facet of writing from the mother’s body: one is writing from the grotesque body.

When pregnant, one is simultaneously ‘I’ and ‘not-I’, one is housing an other inside one’s self, one is involved in a process of gestation. Bakhtin’s description of the grotesque body, examined in the previous chapter, emphasises that it “is a body in the act of becoming” that “ignores the impenetrable surface that closes and limits the body” and is characterised by its “ambivalence”, which indicates that “pregnancy” is an exemplary grotesque condition (317; 318; 420; 368). As with the pregnant body, so too the birthing body, which is the embodiment of the grotesque as a body that “transgress[es] its own body” and bodily boundaries (Bakhtin 317). Writing from the maternal body is therefore to write from a position of ambiguity and transgression which calls into question the boundaries containing the self. It is writing that embraces the abject.

As noted in the previous chapter, for Kristeva, the abject contains “‘creative juices’ that flow ... in the form of 1) the revolutionary possibilities of poetic language and 2) the maternal re-enactment of ... the ‘original narcissistic crisis’ through pregnancy and childbirth” (Weiss 46). In “Revolution in Poetic Language”, the semiotic *chora*, whose rhythms enable the creation of poetry, is envisioned as a uterine space of pulsations and contractions, which Kristeva, writing from a daughterly perspective, sees poetry as seeking to return to and create from. In “Stabat Mater”, which intersperses her academic discussion of motherhood with (typographically fracturing) reflections on her personal experiences thereof, she instead works from a motherly

perspective. Emphasising the grotesque status of the maternal body as “immeasurable, unconfined”, she explores the implications of writing from this body: “A mother is a continuous separation, a division of the very flesh. And consequently a division of language” (Kristeva, “Stabat” 177; 178). She writes

a woman as [a] mother [is] ... a strange fold that changes culture into nature, the speaking into biology. Although it concerns every woman's body, the heterogeneity that cannot be subsumed in the signifier nevertheless explodes violently with pregnancy (the threshold of culture and nature) and the child's arrival (which extracts woman out of her oneness and gives her the possibility – but not the certainty – of reaching out to the other, the ethical). (Kristeva, “Stabat” 182)

This indicates the poetical as well as the ethical potential of writing from the mother's body: writing from a position of grotesque heterogeneity, transgression and ambivalence one reaches out to the other, accentuating the corporeal connections with and openness to the other, demonstrating that one is responsible to the other.

The intersection of embodiment, interrelational identity and ethics is emphasised in Metelerkamp's definition of “what it means to write from the mother's body”: “to value our present material existence and to nurture metamorphosis – just as a mother provides for the needs of her growing children; it has to do with valuing material processes and feeling our necessary links with each other” (“Ruth Miller” 255). In writing from the mother's body we can “redefine[e] the terms we have inherited” and the institutions these terms are embedded in, and “can go on transforming our circumstances and ourselves” (Metelerkamp, “Ruth Miller” 255). Therefore, to write from the maternal body assists a poet to escape her imprisonment in the body-object that the institution of motherhood constructs and confines her within, by potentially enabling her to transform this institution. And by reading this confessional, embodied poetry, empathetically identifying with the ‘I’ of the speaker and engaging in an ethical face-to-face relationship with the body of the poem, the reader as well as the writer has the opportunity of participating in this act of socio-political transformation.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Erotic Body

Over the past fifty years, many passionate and polemical debates within Anglo-American feminism have focused on the issue of heterosexual, genitally-penetrative sex.¹ The relationship between sex and female identity – cultural, social, political, economic and even physical – in different societies and locations (both real and literary-imaginative) at different times (in the past, present and possible future), has been variously, and often vehemently, formulated. The vociferousness of these debates reached fever pitch in the North American “sex wars” of the 1980s.² On the one side of the war were the radical feminists, largely aligned with the anti-pornography movement, who focused on sex within the constructs of a patriarchal society as a dangerous and damaging act of violence towards women; on the other were “libertarian feminists”, who focused on sex between consenting partners as liberating and mutually pleasurable (Ferguson 106).³ Though, as Ann Ferguson notes, both positions can be held simultaneously without any logical contradiction, these wars turned feminists against each other (as well as, or even instead of, their mutual foe: the institutions of patriarchy), causing perilous rifts within western feminism (106).⁴ Perhaps because neither argument contradicts or distorts the other, there has been little attempt to work these strands into a dialectical synthesis.⁵ Instead, each has developed its own intellectual tradition. On the radical feminist side, key contributions have been made by Susan Brownmiller, Andrea Dworkin, Susan Griffin and Catharine MacKinnon; on the libertarian side by Gayle Rubin and Carole S. Vance.⁶

¹ For purposes of brevity, when “sex” is henceforth used in this chapter, it will refer to heterosexual, genitally-penetrative sex.

² One could, perhaps pinpoint the Barnard Conference of 1982 as its climax (see Comella 202-205).

³ For a delineation of these feminist trajectories, see Diprose (*Corporeal* 76-78).

⁴ For example, Catharine MacKinnon, in 1990, “equate[d] the opposition to her own anti-pornography campaign by groups such as FACT (Feminist Anti-Censorship Task Force) with the death of feminism as she knows it” (Diprose, *Corporeal* 76).

⁵ In 2011 Meg Barker notes that while “over the past few years ... there has been a move towards a more subtle and sophisticated recognition of tension and paradox ... much past writing on gender and sexuality ... [is] haunted ... by the spectre of the feminist sex wars and the pro- / anti-sex positions associated with this” (1).

⁶ It can be noted that there are more, and generally more prominent and well-published, authors in the radical camp. Possible reasons for this are:

The origins of this divided and divisive tradition can be traced back to the work of Simone de Beauvoir. In *The Second Sex*, De Beauvoir explores at length the biological conditions of mammalian sex, focusing on male domination and female submission (35-69; 392-423). In the statement that penetrative sex “always constitutes a kind of violation” and is “an act of violence”, the basis of the radical feminist viewpoint that all sex is rape is easy to spot (*Second* 394). However, in her later essay, *Must We Burn De Sade*, sex is re-imagined as having great ethical potential. With this in mind, as Debra B. Bergoffen has demonstrated, one can see this perspective expressed in *The Second Sex* as well, albeit briefly and in a “muted voice” (160). Here sex is seen as “pleasur[able]”, but more significantly as an ethical liberation from the violent Hegelian master-slave struggle for sovereign subjectivity (in which patriarchal othering positions women as slaves and objects) *and* from the Cartesian struggle for a supreme, unsullied mind or spirit (in which patriarchal othering positions women as fragile flesh and mere matter) (De Beauvoir, *Second* 422). De Beauvoir thus writes: “The erotic experience is one that most poignantly discloses to human beings the ambiguity of their condition; in it they are aware of themselves as flesh and as spirit [or mind], as the other and as subject” (*Second* 423). The work of De Beauvoir thus ambiguously presents both the radical and libertarian arguments.

And so too does that of Antje Krog and Joan Metelerkamp. I’m not suggesting that Krog and Metelerkamp are daughters of De Beauvoir, but rather that the ambiguous presentation of the erotic in their poetry recommends a return to De Beauvoir’s theory. While other theorists have more recently engaged with these concerns, De Beauvoir is crucial not only for her foundational work in exploring both sides of this ambiguity, but also for the way in which she draws links between feminism, embodiment and ethics, which are, of course, key and interrelated terms for the development of my thesis. With recourse therefore primarily to De Beauvoir, as well

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- This position is more aligned with the historical thrust of feminism: focusing on Man’s (patriarchy’s) domination, violation and diminishment of women
 - This position is more clearly political, as its contributions to the anti-pornography movement illustrate
 - This position is less ambiguous: current forms of sexual relationships are structured by and dependent on patriarchy, patriarchy is oppressive, men are (still mostly deemed) patriarchal, therefore sex with men is bad
 - Lastly, and perhaps contentiously, being passive and at the mercy of others – or as Simone de Beauvoir would phrase it: being “confined to the limits of immanence” (*Second* 621-2) – is easier than to take authentic action. While radical feminism aims to fight against overarching systems of victimization and oppression, it nevertheless enables women to occupy a victim-position which, as an individual, she is largely powerless to change.

as later theorists who have further developed this field of feminist enquiry, this chapter will closely examine the ambiguous presentation of the erotic body in the poetry of Krog and Metelerkamp, and then consider the ethical potential of this body, as well as that of writing, and reading, this body in poetry.

Take me, Break me / Take me, Make me

In *The Second Sex*, in an oft-quoted passage describing mammalian reproduction, De Beauvoir emphasises that, during sex, the female is “taken” and “broken”:

Even when she is willing, or provocative, it is unquestionably the male who *takes* the female – she is *taken*. Often the word applies literally, for whether by means of special organs or through superior strength, the male seizes her and holds her in place; he performs the copulatory movements; and [...] he penetrates her. In this penetration her inwardness is violated, she is like an enclosure that is broken into. (53-54; emphasis in original)

This biological argument in *The Second Sex* becomes interwoven with the later socio-cultural understanding of sex in the chapter “Sexual Initiation”, in which De Beauvoir asserts that “it remains an act of violence that changes a girl into a woman: we still speak of ‘taking’ a girl’s virginity ... or ‘breaking’ her maidenhead” (394). This vision of sex, which has been developed in much radical feminist writing (see, for example, Catharine McKinnon’s argument that “sexuality, socially-organised, is misogynist” [in Diprose, *Corporeal* 76]) is also clearly visible in the poetry of Krog.

In “Love is All I Know”, the section of *Down to My Last Skin* that engages with Krog’s relationship with her husband, she variously describes their lovemaking as painful, threatening, a persecution and a violation. His penis is a “bloody” “blade” which “cuts” “from all sides”; it “conquer[s]” her and issues commands: “bend or open-up” (*Down* 31). This violent “conquest” (*Down* 31) is vividly described in “marital psalm”:

sometimes he *catches* me by the hind leg
as one big piece of solid treachery
persecutes me
fucks me day and night
violates every millimetre of private space
smothers every glint in my eye which could lead to writing (*Down* 30,
emphasis added)

While one could argue that this is a rare form of intercourse which only occurs “sometimes” (*Down* 30), the relentless repetition of the following poem, entitled “stripping”, undermines this: “and I think of its [her husband’s penis’s] *years and years* of conquest / *night after fucking night*” (*Down* 31, emphasis added). In “stripping”, the relentless persecution suffered in “marital psalm” culminates in Krog’s castration wish – “I look forward to the day the cock crumbles” (*Down* 32) – a day she is confident “will come” because “for generations / the women in [her] family kapater [castrate] their men with / yes with stares” (*Down* 32).⁷ Rather than merely describing a castration-fantasy, this poem is in fact part of that process of castration. It depicts Krog “watch[ing]” or staring at her naked husband, thereby, according to her family legend recounted in the poem, castrating him (*Down* 31). The body and the text therefore intersect at this point: Krog’s gaze at her husband’s body leads to her castration wish, a wish which is then fulfilled in the poem, as *its* gaze at her husband’s body culminates in his textual castration. It is thus significant that in “marital psalm” it is the “glint in [Krog’s] eye that could lead to writing” that her husband is “smother[ing]” with his sexual persecution; in “stripping”, the glint, and the writing it enables, responds by smothering the spouse’s sexual potency.

In “stripping”, the cock really does crumble:

in a rosepoint pout it swings only hither and dither
 ... it doesn’t ever want to flare
 but wiggle waggles unwillingly
 boils over like a jam pot or fritters away like a balloon (*Down* 32;
 ellipsis added).

By using effeminate (“rosepoint pout”), domestic (“boils over like a jampot”) and childlike (“balloon”) images and sing-song nursery rhyme language (“hither and dither”; “wiggle waggles”), the conquering cock is emasculated, becoming instead a flaccid figure of female ridicule. Rather than reading castration here as a simple, if severe, physiological strategy for seeking revenge for sexual violations, it can instead be read symbolically. But a symbol of what? And why? Once again, a return to De Beauvoir’s foundation insights can be helpful.

⁷ The violent dominance of the penis would, in many cases, naturally decline and “crumble” with a man’s advancement into old age (which brings about a decrease in virility and an increased likelihood of erectile dysfunction), but Krog’s poem focuses on her active castration of her husband.

In *The Second Sex*, De Beauvoir analyses the sex act in terms of its construction of the subject-object relation between the sexes. She argues that while man, as sexual subject, actively enters and penetrates the female body, the woman's sexual function is limited to being a passive receptacle, an object:

For a man ... erotic pleasure is objectified, desire being directed towards another person instead of being realized within the bounds of self. Erection is the expression of this need ... a man reaches out towards his partner, but he himself remains at the center of this activity, being, on the whole, the *subject* as opposed to *objects* he perceives and *instruments* that he manipulates; he projects himself towards the other without losing his independence; the feminine flesh is for him prey, and through it he gains access to the qualities he desires, as with any object. (De Beauvoir, *Second* 393; emphasis in original, ellipses added)

Through this discussion, De Beauvoir indicates the manner in which the language of sex reflects the male-subject/female-object dualism in sex. A man “enters” “possesses” and “penetrates” a woman, he “takes” her and “has” her. (The violence in these expressions should be noted, as in the old English terms: “fuck”, “screw” or “bonk”.) Krog’s poetry uses this violent, subject-object sexual language: her husband “fucks” and “conquer[s]” her, she is his “conquest” (*Down* 30; 31). Of course, in De Beauvoir’s discussion of how the language of sex reflects the physiology of sex (in its subject-object dimensions), the emphasis is not on a biological essentialism or destiny, but rather on how a “physiological fact ... takes on meaning” in a social and cultural sphere (*Second* 67). Biology can be seen as priming social norms and expectations, but biology does not impose on people “a fixed and inevitable destiny” (De Beauvoir, *Second* 65). Biological considerations are instead important as, because people are embodied subjects, “the body [is] the instrument of [a person’s] grasp upon the world” and will thus influence how a person experiences the world, as well as how people in the world perceive and experience each other (De Beauvoir, *Second* 65). De Beauvoir thus emphasises the reciprocity between body and culture: culture is read through the body, and the body, in turn, is read through culture; the two cannot be separated.

The way in which brute physiological matter takes on meaning in a patriarchal society, thus creating societal norms and conventions, can, for example, be illuminated with reference to the most typical body positions assumed during sex. In

the missionary position (the most common and widely-practiced position),⁸ the man, like most other male animals (though not using a rear-entry position), mounts the woman (De Beauvoir, *Second* 405). In accordance with this, Krog's husband is also described as "l[y]ing on top" (*Down* 26). In this language and society, the positions of above and below are not neutral, but value-laden. That traditionally women are physically positioned under men during sex is, within this system of signification, a sign of their inferiority, their weakness, their submission. The physical facts of her body position and her body's function in the sex act are all inscribed with meaning: that a woman typically lies underneath a man and that the man's body penetrates her body while her vagina could be viewed as a passive receptacle for his semen, together have come to mean that woman is "inferior", a "passive object", "overpowered, forced to compliance, conquered" (De Beauvoir, *Second* 726; 360; 405). Krog's use of words like "conquer", "persecutes" and "violates" locates her in this same position of objectified inferiority (*Down* 30; 31).

This patriarchal construction of sex, like that of pregnancy and new motherhood as examined in the previous chapter, creates a situation in which a woman's objectivity is typically emphasised and enforced, to the detriment of her subjectivity. She is not recognized as a subject, only as an object. While this can be harmful and distressing for most women, it can be positively debilitating for a writer whose work depends on her creative subjectivity. In "marital psalm", as we have seen, Krog describes her husband's incessant lust and the resultant incessant sex as "smother[ing] every glint in [her] eye that could lead to writing" (*Down* 30). As sex denies her subjectivity, it destroys the inner light or "glint" of creativity (which presupposes subjectivity); it thus leads to her creative abilities being stifled and "smother[ed]".⁹

Castration, the desire to "do away with [her] inferiority ... by destroying the male's superiority", as the phallus is "the most obvious and the most detestable symbol of

⁸ In Alfred Kinsey's *Sexual Behaviour in the Human Female* (1953) he notes that "this is the traditional [sexual] position through European and American cultures" and there seems to be the "belie[f] that this is the only normal position for coitus" (362; 363). To indicate that this status hasn't altered that much, see Les Krantz and Chris Smith's *The Unofficial US Census: Things the Official US Census doesn't tell you about America* (2011) which attests that the missionary position still remains the most widely practiced sex position in the US today (79%), and thus most likely in the rest of the western world.

⁹ Of course, Krog has been able to write this poem and others, depicting her "violate[d]", objectified state. I am not therefore arguing that her subjectivity is completely annihilated by repeated sexual intercourse, but rather that during the intercourse it is elided due to the overemphasis on her objectivity, which seems responsible for Krog's desire to castrate her husband in "stripping".

physical possession” and objectification, is not the only way women have tried to deny or overcome the inferiority and objectivity which societal perceptions of the sexual relations between the sexes imposes on them (De Beauvoir, *Second* 726; 346). Another position, which Krog explores via the persona of Lady Anne Barnard, in the poem “Lady Anne alone at the Castle”, is the appropriation of the position of sexual aggressor or predator.¹⁰ Krog depicts Lady Anne “lust[ing] after [her husband]” who has been away for “two weeks” (*Down* 64). She voices Lady Anne’s “militant erotic desire” (Viljoen, “Postcolonialism” 68): a “desire: to grab you [her husband] by the hips / from behind grow male”, “to bloody fuck you between tincool buttocks into phenomenon” (*Down* 64). With this use of the adverb “bloody”, which recalls the “bloody thick cock” that “cuts” like a “blade” in the poem, “stripping”, Krog emphasises the violence of Lady Anne’s fantasy, making it the mirror-image of the violation perpetrated in “stripping”. But notably, Lady Anne would need to “grow male” in order to appropriate this role of sexual aggressor; it is not a role she can claim in her current embodied and engendered state.

In *A Change of Tongue* Krog gives an autobiographical foundation for Lady Anne’s fictional desire to invert the traditional sexual roles and become the aggressor. Describing a scene from her final year of high school, Krog depicts her attempt to assert her subjectivity by claiming the role of the sexual aggressor:

Suddenly, she pulls him underneath the weeping branches and pushes him up against the tree trunk so that the bark crunches behind his back. She unzips his fly and puts her hand into his underpants. He gasps and in his eyes his black pupils wash across the blue.
 “What are you doing?” he asks hoarsely.
 “I think I want to rape you or hit you or something.” (Krog, *Change* 135)

But she quickly learns that this position is not an acceptable one for her to occupy when her boyfriend reprimands her: if “you want to play the master – find someone else” (Krog, *Change* 135). Significantly, he implies that she cannot naturally and properly inhabit the position of master, she can only “play” at being a master, it can never be more than a pretence. While this usage does suggest that domination is a role that can be performed (it *is* possible for her to “play” the master-role – unlike Lady

¹⁰ As Lady Anne Barnard, the well-connected wife of the colonial secretary at the Cape of Good Hope (from 1797-1802), served as unofficial “First Lady” of the Colony and Castle, her high social status can both be seen as prompting, and prohibiting, this role of sexual aggressor. So too could her age: twelve years older than her husband.

Anne, she does not need to fundamentally change who she is, or “grow male”, in order to do so), it simultaneously asserts that one’s partner needs to recognise and accept one’s adoption of this role (and her partner categorically does not). Her depiction of her husband in *Down to my Last Skin* as an “authoritarian”, “dictatorial” “autocrat” clearly shows that he is not the “someone else” that she can even pretend to “master” (Krog 26; 31).¹¹

Down to My Last Skin can thus be seen as presenting sex as a violation which Krog responds to by desiring her husband’s castration (“stripping”) or fantasising, through the persona of Lady Anne, of inverting this relationship of dominance and submission to become the violator. Paradoxically, however, *Down to My Last Skin* simultaneously presents Krog as fervently desiring sex and even desiring her own sexual objectification. And these desires appear to be shared by Metelerkamp, too.

In “Song of marriage”, Metelerkamp invites her husband to “[t]ake me from behind when I’m not looking” (*Into* 104). Similarly, in “I don’t glance at your grizzled hair”, Krog tells her husband to “tell me you take me” (*Down* 25). By putting themselves in the position of the passive erotic object that is taken by the sexual partner, Metelerkamp and Krog seem to accept docilely a weak, objectified eroticism that radical feminism has long disparaged. While the grounds for this feminine passivity have been thoroughly explored and explained, especially in Anglo-American feminist texts of the late 1970s and early 1980s,¹² much feminist energy has been used to encourage and enable women to take a more active approach to their own eroticism. This occurred most notably in the context of second wave, Anglo-American feminism (the same context that produced the school of confessional poets discussed in Chapter One), through the development and legalisation of female contraceptives (which spurred on the free love movement¹³) (*Griswold v. Connecticut*) and abortions (*Roe v. Wade*), and through the exploration and discussion of female sexuality in its myriad

¹¹ In the acknowledgements of *A Change of Tongue*, Krog thanks “[her] husband, John, who is, and since that day in school, always has been [her] first reader” (2003: 369). This links her husband to the boy who Krog’s young protagonist in part one of the book writes poetry to and who subsequently becomes her boyfriend (2003: 105-111). Krog thus indicates that the boyfriend who “[she] want[s] to rape ... or hit” in this extract from *A Change of Tongue* can be identified with her husband.

¹² See, for example, Susan Griffin’s *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her* and *Pornography and Silence: Culture’s Revenge against Nature*, Andrea Dworkin’s *Woman Hating* and *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, as well as De Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*.

¹³ Which can be judged as laudable by libertarian feminism, or dangerous by radical feminism.

formations – in academia (for example, in the work of De Beauvoir and Kate Millett), literature (Erica Jong), art (Vivienne Binns and Georgia O’Keefe), and consciousness-raising groups (Anne Koedt). The “efflorescence of sex-positive feminism” in the aftermath of 1982’s Barnard Conference, which has continued since, greatly encouraged literary and theoretical engagement with eroticism (Queen in Queen and Comella 280).¹⁴ The legislative advances of second wave feminism were also reflected and extended in South African’s New Constitution of 1996 (see specifically the sections on equality and freedom and security, which includes reproductive rights). The apartheid state’s “draconian policing of sexuality ... stringent censorship and ... regime of moral prohibition”, have post-1994, not only been overturned legislatively, but also in public discourse: Posel notes the “veritable explosion of sexual imagery, display and debate” (“Getting” 54). In the context of “South Africa’s sexual liberalisation” (Posel, “Getting” 53), Metelerkamp’s and Krog’s desire to be “taken” by their husbands seems at first glance to be an unfortunate step back (and set-back) in feminist advancement. Krog’s poem equates being taken with being “overcome”, conquered, taken over, subjugated, a dispossession of the self. Metelerkamp’s *mise-en-scène* reads like a ravishment: with her back turned, even the possible agency of her gaze is disallowed. What seems even more alarming in an initial reading is that she envisages this ravishment occurring “before [she] get[s] a minute to slip away”; it seems as if she is being caught (“catch me”) and “[t]aken” without her full consent, let alone her co-operation (*Into* 104).¹⁵

However, in contradistinction to this picture of passive ravishment, it should be noted that Metelerkamp is not merely describing a scene, she is issuing an instruction, a directive: “catch me. / Take me from behind while I’m not looking” (*Into* 104). As Metelerkamp is issuing a command, she cannot be viewed solely as a passive object of eroticism. She is a willing subject, the director of her own erotic encounter. Likewise Krog, in “I don’t glance at your grizzled hair”, presents her encounter in the imperative: “oh hold me have me / ... / overcome now kiss me” (*Down* 25). Despite the evident authoritativeness, this imperative is also an exhortation in which as much is at stake for the speaker as for the addressee. Krog’s command is initiated by the

¹⁴ Carol Queen defines “sex-positivity” as “the cultural philosophy that understands sexuality as a potentially positive force in one’s life”, as opposed to being dangerous and damaging (in Queen and Comella 278).

¹⁵ This could also be read as an incidence of role-playing.

emotional exclamation “oh”. The self is made vulnerable by this emotional exposure of her need, as there is a possibility for rejection, as well as humiliation. This cracks open her potentially cold command, revealing the core of longing and desire.

Similarly, in “Song of marriage”, Metelerkamp masks her desire as a directive. Her instruction to be “[t]ake[n] ... from behind while [she’s] not looking” is invested with urgency. Read as a complete stanza, the vital implications of her directive/desire not being fulfilled are evident:

Catch up with me – catch me.
 Take me from behind while I’m not looking
 before I get a minute to slip away
 to turn myself to a tree –
 bring your message
 burning
 come running – slay
 that sly one who lies in the sun day after day
 with the flies,
 with her cool riddles
 questioning, questioning – (*Into* 104).

In this stanza Metelerkamp alludes to Ovid’s story of Apollo’s attempted rape of Daphne in his *Metamorphoses*. Metelerkamp’s husband, imagined in the guise of “Apollo” (*Into* 105), is depicted as chasing after her fleeing Daphne-figure. Although, in Ovid’s tale, Daphne is resolute in her rejection of, and flight from, Apollo, in Metelerkamp’s revision she wants to be caught and taken before she manages to elude Apollo by “turn[ing] [herself] to a tree”.

Metelerkamp’s usage and revision of this myth is worth exploring. Rather than representing a (possibly misogynistic) comment on the inconstancy and changeability of women’s desires, or their adherence to perverse seductive strategies (such as ‘playing hard to get’), I would suggest that Metelerkamp is interrogating the complexity of desire in her own marriage. The figure of Daphne, who is pierced by an arrow that prevents her from returning Apollo’s love, prefigures the damaged image that Metelerkamp draws of herself, in *carrying the fire*, as a result of her maternal legacy of suicide:

I was born, I told you, with a bit missing :
 a child of love, but a bit missing –
 before I was born

(before my mother was married)
 my grandmother shot a hole through her head
 right through my mother and into her unborn children – (31).

Metelerkamp seems to be worried that, like Daphne, she will be unable to accept and return sexual love and instead will try to flee from it. This flight response is not due to a lack of desire – she wants to be caught – but due to past damage from “the snare’s scar” she finds herself “limping from longing / away from the chase” (*Into* 106). She thus asks her husband to “[r]emind me. / How I can want you” (*Into* 104).

From this discussion we can see that her directive, “Take me”, is therefore also a desperate plea, ‘please don’t allow me to me to slip away and become inaccessible to you’. She seems to fear that, without his determined pursuit and possession of her, she will inevitably raise her defences and cover her skin in scaly bark; she will manage to remove herself from him totally – remove herself to another life form – and he will be unable to scale her defences. She is thus afraid that she cannot make herself vulnerable and open to him, that she will defensively retreat into a position of autonomous, bounded subjectivity.

Furthermore, she implies that by taking her sexually, he can “slay” the sphinx-like version of herself, who is characterised by her “cool riddles” and “sly” “questioning, questioning”. The sphinx, a monstrous creature who plays word games, is an apt metaphor for a female poet (especially in light of Gilbert and Gubar’s argument, in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, of the historical construction of women writers as monstrous). One could argue that it is this monstrous writing self, which indolently (“lies in the sun day after day”) indulges in her poetic “questioning, questioning” which needs to be slayed. However, the overwhelmingly cerebral characterisation of this self (its riddles and questions), as well as its “cool[ness]”,¹⁶ seem to additionally imply an ideal ‘masculine’ self: rational and independent (as opposed to emotional and interdependent). It is this autonomous, independent self which Metelerkamp

¹⁶ In the poem “And listen”, Metelerkamp uses the word “cool” as a synonym for academic impersonality, distancing and pseudo-objectivity: unemotional coldness, which is contrasted with the “warm[th]” of Metelerkamp’s subjective “perspective” (*Floating* 24-5). Similarly, in “Song of marriage”, the riddle’s “cool[ness]” (its distanced pseudo-objectivity) is contrasted with Apollo’s “burning” (passionately engaged) message.

wishes her husband to sexually “slay”, and thus reintegrate her into the sphere of relational, embodied subjectivity and grotesque openness to the other.

In contrast, Krog’s desire is not for her husband to “slay” a deficient, malformed version of herself, but rather to make her existence possible. In “I don’t glance at your grizzled hair”, what Krog particularly seems to desire is her husband’s desire for her: “desire desire again / desire once again fire / my body till it seems I strangely vibrate” (*Down* 25). In reading other poems from “Love is All I Know”, it becomes clear that this desire is connected to her desire for self-definition, a need or desire she claims only her husband is able to fulfill. Speaking directly to him, she writes: “you define me” and later describes him as the (only) “man who makes [her] possible” (*Down* 25; 30). Significantly, he is singled out as such directly after he has been described as the man who “lusts after [her] with disconcerting fitness” (*Down* 30). The deliberate juxtaposition of these two descriptions of the lusty husband and the one who frames her being, her ontogenesis, seems quite troubling from a contemporary feminist perspective. It suggests that, without garnering a man’s lust, a woman is unable to be defined, recognized or individualized, as an ‘I’. Paradoxically, to develop an independent identity, she is dependent on male lust – a man lusts, therefore she is. (For purposes of provocation and argumentation, this statement is setting up, as falsely desirable, a patriarchal notion of identity as independent, autonomous, bounded. This thesis is concerned with relational, interdependent, embodied subjectivities, and by working through this fallacious argument it will explore the implications of the erotic for their recognition.)

What are the societal structures which could be responsible for this troubling conflation of lust and ontogenesis? In *The Second Sex*, De Beauvoir describes the sociological training of young girls to focus their energy on their appearance in order to make themselves into pleasing objects for men (298-308). Clearly this could be seen to be responsible for a woman’s definition of herself in terms of her sexual desirability, and so in terms of being a sexually desirable *object*. However, De Beauvoir does acknowledge that even in the 1940s some girls were brought up similarly to their brothers, which enabled them to “escape the defects of femininity” (*Second* 308). Krog’s upbringing in South Africa in the 1950s, as described in *A Change of Tongue*, shows that she was granted, or managed to appropriate, a great

deal of freedom in which she was able, like a typical boy (and post-enlightenment and colonial subject), to discover herself as a means of dominating nature: she regularly climbed onto the barn roof, the windpump (40) and high up into the branches of a tree where she would “stand without holding on to anything, in perfect balance” (99). But she does seem aware that this is not the role that nature, or society, has chosen for her. Describing a particularly evocative scene from her childhood Krog writes: “She pricks a circle with an arrow sticking out of it into the skin of her thighs. She rubs ink over it. She is a man. With this she lays down all weakness and softness, vulnerability and emotion. Impenetrable” (*Change* 63). Krog thus shows her young self demonstrating her awareness that women are meant to be weak, soft, vulnerable and emotional, and then rejecting these characteristics. She desires to be a subject, not an object, and seems to be able to renounce the socialization which attempts to make her an object. Linked to this desire for autonomous subjectivity is the young Krog’s desire to be a writer: the male sex sign (like the phallus that it represents) that she chooses for herself is symbolic of the pen (and hence the power of writing), which is reinforced through the inking of this symbol. While writing on one’s own body can be read as an act of agency and self-definition (see, for example, Yvonne Vera’s essay “Writing Near the Bone”), it can also be read as an act of objectification. Paradoxically, in this latter reading, through the same movement with which Krog asserts herself as a subject and a writer, she simultaneously constructs, or in a patriarchal view, reduces herself to a text, a surface, an object: she wants to *write*, but in doing so, is *written on*. Underpinning this binary classification is the system of the Cartesian dualisms: subject/object, writer/written. Through this dualistic thinking women have been positioned as objects, and thus as artworks, not creators of art.¹⁷ Unless one manages to escape this dualistic system, being a written text opposes one’s status as writer. Therefore even though Krog performs a rebellious refusal of feminine socialisation and assertion of her own subjectivity, this act can nevertheless also be read as asserting her own objectivity.

However, Krog’s tendency to define herself in terms of her sexual desirability doesn’t necessarily evidence a process of self-reduction or objectification. In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, De Beauvoir writes: “The individual is defined only by his relationship to

¹⁷ Dworkin’s riddle “Q: Why haven’t women made great works of art? / A: Because they are great works of art” reflects ironically on this historical construction of women (*Woman* 117).

the world and to other individuals” (156). As Sonia Kruks argues, with this clear deviation from Jean-Paul Sartre’s individualist existentialism, De Beauvoir asserts that “subjectivity ... cannot exist without intersubjectivity” (53). This theory is a foundational principle of the Southern African philosophy of *ubuntu* (“a person is a person through other persons” [Krog, *Country* 399]), which strongly influences Krog’s thinking.¹⁸ The notion of intersubjectivity is also key in the work of phenomenologists Maurice Merleau-Ponty (xix-xx) and Emmanuel Levinas (*Ethics* 98), and has more recently been productively engaged with by Jessica Benjamin (27-48) and Kelly Oliver, who argues that “subjectivity is necessarily intersubjective and dialogic” (*Witnessing* 5). Intersubjectivity, in its focus on the relationship between subjects, is also a tenet of (post)structuralism, which envisages that no being or thing has an autonomous or positive identity, as identity or meaning is only formed through relations with all other beings or things in the system in which they occur, and thus each entity is wholly “constituted by nothing more than relationships” (Cilliers 44).

This relational identity is heightened in the case of women, who are traditionally positioned and identified as mothers, wives, sisters or daughters, whereas men have typically been viewed, independently, as men. But rather than just emphasizing women’s, traditionally-assumed, relational identity, the poetry of Krog and Metelerkamp, like the theories of De Beauvoir, Benjamin, Oliver and Paul John Eakin, asserts that male identity is also relational, that men are also interdependent, intersubjective beings (see Benjamin 27-48, Eakin 47-50, Oliver 4-6). In accepting that “[s]elf is self-in-relation: no other kind exists” (Ostriker 46), one must also accept that in different situations, different combinations of these relations would be emphasised and come into play. The sex act can be seen as one of the richest of these situations in terms of identity formation, in that the physical, sexual, reproductive, spiritual, mental and emotional levels can all be accessed simultaneously.

Moreover, De Beauvoir, due to her focus on the ambiguity of existence (being both subject and object, or, in Krog’s recently discussed writing-on-the-body scene, both writer and written), prioritises the erotic. In *The Second Sex* she argues that “[t]he erotic experience is one that most poignantly discloses to human beings the ambiguity

¹⁸ See especially “Conversation 4” and “Conversation 5” in *Begging to be Black* (155-6; 184-6).

of their condition; in it they are aware of themselves as flesh and as spirit [or mind], as the other and as subject” (423). It is within the erotic experience that you are able to recognize yourself as a fully embodied, ambiguous being, an acting subject and acted-upon object. Without losing your sense of subjectivity you are simultaneously aware that you are an other for your partner: “the subject ... is aware of its flesh as the other it becomes for its lover” (Bergoffen 163). In light of this argument, Krog’s claim that her husband’s sexual desire for her “make[s] [her] possible” (30), is not troubling or anti-feminist. It is aptly insightful. His lust enables their lovemaking, which provides an opportunity for Krog to recognize the ambiguity of her existence as a subject and object, mind and flesh, and thus to fully recognize her own embodied self.

However, the erotic is not only important for one’s recognition of oneself, but for one’s recognition of the other. De Beauvoir develops this thesis in *Must We Burn De Sade?* (1953). This long essay interrogates the assumptions underlying, and the implications of, the violent form of eroticism present in the Marquis de Sade’s novels. De Sade’s claim that “‘every man wants to be a tyrant when he fornicates’ ... gets at the heart of patriarchal sexuality”, and radical feminism’s opposition to it (Bergoffen 119). De Beauvoir sees in De Sade’s writing “the perversion of refusing to relinquish one’s status as absolute subject”, which is “perverse in so far as it misses the fundamental way in which the erotic expresses the ambiguity of our condition as consciousness, as flesh, as subject, and as other” and in which it “refuses to recognize the other” (Bergoffen 118-9). Bergoffen thus writes that “Sade ... repeat[s] the errors of Cartesian dualism. He severs the domains of body and spirit and reduces the erotic flesh to a mechanical body” (130). He also repeats the errors of the Hegelian theory of the violent master-slave struggle for sovereign subjectivity which disallows reciprocal recognition.

In opposition to this, De Beauvoir views “[t]he erotic relation [as] a privileged situation in that we encounter the Other both as body and consciousness” and, therefore, eroticism has a “value as a unique shared [and reciprocal] experience” (Tidd 44). In *Must We Burn De Sade?*, she argues: “The state of emotional intoxication allows one to grasp existence in one’s self and in the other, as both subjectivity and passivity. The two partners merge in this ambiguous unity; each one

is freed of his own presence and achieves immediate communication with the other”

(33). Bergoffen explains:

The erotic is the moment I recognize myself in the other without reducing the other to my double or dissolving myself in their otherness. The intoxication of the erotic is an intoxication of ambiguity not identity.... [T]he intimacies of the erotic disturb the boundaries that mark consciousness off from the body and separate self and other. The erotic ... is grounded in an original openness to otherness (120).

The ambiguous presentation of the erotic in Krog’s poetry is thus highly suggestive. Ambiguously recognising herself and her husband as both subject and object, self and other, Krog poetically explores the complex erotic theorised by De Beauvoir. As expressed in Krog’s poetry, the erotic “makes [one] possible”, but it also makes one vulnerable. Bergoffen speaks of the risks of true reciprocal recognition in the erotic encounter:

It is as an erotically desiring embodied being that I risk myself before you in the most dangerous way possible. It is here that you and I are called upon to affirm our subjectivity without repressing the ambiguity of our condition. More than anywhere else, the erotic is the place where the risks of recognition are laid out. It is the place where I am called upon to risk my vulnerability before you and take up your vulnerability in my flesh. (181)

There is vulnerability in being an object for a desiring subject, in not clinging to an idea of one’s sovereign subjectivity, one’s mastery over the objectified other/slave. As Bergoffen notes: “To recognize the other as really free is to understand the other as a point of resistance to me. It means accepting the dangers of the other” (133). The risks of this, particularly in a patriarchal culture where reciprocal recognition is typically denied to women, are profound.¹⁹ However, in a risk-reduced situation, within a relationship of equality and reciprocity, the ethical rewards for risk are equally profound, as it “is through the experience of vulnerability that we escape the boundaries of the self and meet the face of the other / otherness” (Bergoffen 203).

Contemporary scholars have used the foundational insights of De Beauvoir to develop coherent ethics of the erotic. Bergoffen argues that

to refuse to value the erotic plays into patriarchy’s hands; for it is by marginalizing the gifting generosity of the erotic that patriarchy goes unchallenged in structuring the subject according to the ontology of

¹⁹ See the earlier discussions of violent sexual conquests represented in “marital psalm” and in “stripping”.

transcendence, and goes unchecked in aligning the ontology of transcendence with the demands of violence. Patriarchy would have us believe that our erotic relationships are natural / animal. Beauvoir shows us that the erotic belongs to the realm of the moral. Far from abandoning the drama of the erotic to the other side of our humanity, Beauvoir shows us that the way we live the erotic experience of abandonment in / to the flesh of the other is a defining moment of our being. (180)

We should note here that, for Bergoffen, “flesh is not that which objectifies me, but that through which I express myself as gift” (163). Exploring the ethical concept of the gift, Rosalyn Diprose asserts that “[g]enerosity ... is not reducible to an economy of exchange between sovereign individuals. Rather, it is an openness to others that not only precedes and establishes communal relations but constitutes the self as open to others”; it is “the dispossession of oneself, the being-given to others that undercuts any self-contained ego, that under-cuts self-possession” (*Corporeal* 4).

In *Undoing Gender*, Judith Butler develops a similar argument. She describes the body, which “implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others but also to touch and to violence”, as being both “mine” and “not mine” (Butler, *Undoing* 21). She writes that “to be a body is to be given over to others” (Butler, *Undoing* 20). Like De Beauvoir, she focuses on the erotic encounter, when one is “transported beyond oneself by a passion” and is thus “es-static ... outside of oneself” as the basis of her ethical argument about the undoing of the autonomous self (Butler, *Undoing* 20). “Sexuality”, she asserts,

is a mode of being disposed toward others.... If we are outside of ourselves as sexual beings, given over from the start, crafted in part through primary relations of dependency and attachment, then it would seem that our being beside ourselves, outside ourselves, is there as a function of sexuality itself, where sexuality is not this or that dimension of our existence, not the key or bedrock of our existence, but, rather, as coexistence with existence, as Merleau-Ponty once aptly suggested. (Butler, *Undoing* 33)

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty notes that “sexuality is not an autonomous cycle” but rather “has links with the whole active and cognitive being” (157). Similarly to De Beauvoir, he expresses awareness of the body as ambiguous, seeming “autonomy and dependence” and that “sexual experience [is] ... an opportunity ... of acquainting oneself with the human lot” (Merleau-Ponty 167). He clarifies how this erotic opportunity functions: “to thought, the body as an object is

not ambiguous; it becomes so only in the experience which we have of it, and pre-eminently in sexual experience” (Merleau-Ponty 167).²⁰ The erotic experience, as “a unique expression of reciprocity and generosity ... opens boundaries between consciousness, flesh, self, and other” (Bergoffen 133). Krog’s and Metelerkamp’s poetic engagement with the erotic is thus also an ethical discourse.

The Grotesque, Erotic Body

Through its focus on the opening of boundaries, and its rejection of autonomous subjectivity, the erotic intersects with the grotesque. While Krog challenges a stereotypical and limiting feminine sexuality with her presentation of a castration-fantasy and a gender transgressing militant eroticism, Metelerkamp primarily disturbs this feminine form of sexuality by embracing and advocating for the grotesque body. Both the diction and content of Krog’s husband’s accusation in “Marital Psalm” – that their children “have to see / how their friends read about their mother’s splashing cunt / and their father’s perished cock” – imply not only a lengthy tradition of writing erotic poetry in the confessional mode (as explored in the first chapter), but also a lengthy tradition of writing the grotesque erotic body (*Down* 30). However, on further investigation (of Krog’s English translations), there is, in fact, little sustained engagement with this mode. Additionally, although Viljoen’s “Groteske, Monsteragtige en Abjekte Vroueliggame in Krog se Poësie” [Grotesque, Monstrous and Abject Women’s Bodies in Krog’s Poetry] has convincingly argued for the importance of the grotesque body in Krog’s Afrikaans poetry, her argument traces the depiction of this body in the context of menstruation (203-6), motherhood (207-9), menopause (209-13) and ageing (213-7); the context of eroticism is notably *absent*.²¹ In Metelerkamp’s poetry, in contrast, one can find a sustained engagement with the grotesque erotic body. Rather than accepting a narrow and neat vision of feminine eroticism, Metelerkamp demonstrates its multiplicity and messiness through a

²⁰ To recall the discussion of the second chapter, due to De Beauvoir’s close engagement and affinity with *Phenomenology of Perception*, it is quite likely that her argument about the ethical potential of the erotic was developed in response to Merleau-Ponty’s ideas on the topic.

²¹ See, for example, the final lines of Krog’s “sonnet of the hot flushes”: “you grab death link a runt and plough its nose / right through your fleeced and drybaked cunt” (*Body* 17). Though this image is that of the grotesque body, presented in an arguably erotic form (the protruding “nose” ambiguously penetrating “right through” the open “cunt”), the focus is here on the ageing, menopausal body’s deconstruction of death (see Viljoen, “Groteske” 210). This carnivalesque inversion is a hallmark of the work of the grotesque body, but this is not an engagement with the grotesque *erotic* body.

thorough display of the grotesque body in uncontrolled throes of eroticism. *carrying the fire*, with its focus on obsessive desire and the power of the erotic, is fittingly the collection that presents the intersection of female eroticism and the grotesque body.

Throughout this collection, Metelerkamp directs attention to the grotesque openness (“openly, opening” [*carrying* 14]) and penetrability (“in in in in in” [*carrying* 27]) of the erotic body. She tells herself to “[o]pen all [her] orifices, take it in” (*carrying* 99). She describes a dream:

and how I come :
 your cock down my throat like a snake
 could not have been dreamt

by any adolescent :
 old snake of a woman’s
 wide open throat (*carrying* 86).

What is evident in this fragment is not only the grotesque openness of the eroticised throat, but also its transgression. The snake-image recalls the conventional and Lacanian use of snake as a symbol for the penis (an idea which Metelerkamp also plays with in her poem “Sean and the Snake” in *Towing the Line* [124-5]) and thus of the symbolic order itself, which is later glossed by Metelerkamp as the “snake of speech of course” (*carrying* 86). But the surface reading of bestiality should not be ignored. In other sections of *carrying the fire*, Metelerkamp describes sexual encounters using images of horse-riding (“grabbing my reins now ecstatic in gallop”) and bovine-husbandry (“come with your cock like a farmer’s arm up a cow / feeling for what stirs there”) (*carrying* 26-7; 21). These are clearly socially-transgressive depictions of eroticism. The excessiveness of the grotesque, erotic body is also repeatedly engaged with, unsurprisingly for a collection preoccupied with erotic obsession. Metelerkamp writes:

I want you and want you and want you:
 nameless flowers whispering namelessly
fuck me and fuck me
 cerise and carmine and puce and gold
 tendrils and spiking
 scents and whispering, laughing
fuck me and fuck me (*carrying* 16; emphasis in original).

This is reminiscent of the earlier lines: “the trees’ agitation the leaves’ / susurrations, the green in the depth of the grove / bending and whispering / *enter me enter me*”

(*carrying* 14; emphasis in original). In both these fragments desire is not only excessive, but dispersed throughout the natural surrounds, to be echoed back to the speaker from flowers, trees, leaves. Sexual desire is situated within the sphere of nature, a part of the earthly cycle of prodigal fertilisation. This sphere and cycle can be seen as the basis of Mikhail Bakhtin's understanding of the grotesque through his discussion of the transgressive spring carnivals of the Middle Ages that celebrated the "world's revival and renewal" (7).

In the 'poem' "keep coming up"²² Metelerkamp defends the erotic body, and its grotesqueness, as "essential":

my god, essential, like
scimitar cock soft stomach

skin thin come
kiss like sun
waking and coming
and in and through and to
like mount
like Venus
like pubis vulva vagina
deeper way underground
cunt tunnel muscles and held
cervix and crux
yes and rising again
sweet salt essence (*carrying* 29-30).

Bakhtin's assertion that "the grotesque body is cosmic and universal [and] is directly related to the sun, to the stars" is echoed by the cosmic and all-embracing, unrestricted "kiss like sun" as well as the association of the morning star, Venus, with the mon pubis. However, as with the Rabelaisian images that Bakhtin examines, the poem also contains a movement downwards, as it pushes "deeper way underground": a physical movement into the earth as opposed to a heavenly ascension. This ambiguity of the grotesque body is symbolised in the "crux" of the poem.²³ This word, developed from the Latin for "cross", recalls Christ's crucifixion, his bodily death and his *bodily* resurrection (being "underground" and then "rising again"). The

²² *carrying the fire* is a long, poetic cycle, divided by # signs to signal the start of a new 'poem' within the cycle. "keep coming up" is the first line of this 'poem'.

²³ It is significant that, in Metelerkamp's poem, the "crux" is associated with the "cervix", the ambivalent space in the female reproductive system that is typically defined as the "lower end of the womb" (OED) but yet protrudes into the vagina.

story and symbolism of Easter, indelibly linked to the symbolism of the spring carnivals that preceded and co-existed with it, are about the grotesque ambivalence of regeneration, of life out of death. As Bakhtin, describing “figurines of senile pregnant hags” in the “famous Kerch terracotta collection”, asserts: “this is a death that gives birth.... Life is shown in its two-fold contradictory process; it is the epitome of incompleteness. And such is precisely the grotesque concept of the body” (25-6).

In this extract, Metelerkamp focuses almost exclusively on the “material lower bodily stratum” that Bakhtin emphasises as central in the image of the grotesque body (368-436). She attends to the protuberances of the body, such as the “cock” and “stomach”, which transgress neat bodily boundaries and push out into the world. The stomach, as median point between the consuming mouth and excreting anus, is metonymic of two of Bakhtin’s “main events of the grotesque body ... [e]ating [and] defecation”, and thus of the biological imperative of taking the world into our bodies and expelling that which cannot be absorbed (317). The stomach can also be seen as implying a third “main event”: pregnancy. The “cock” and “cunt”, which are, with the anus, the central organs of the material bodily lower stratum, represent the act of copulation. But this life-giving act is simultaneously associated with *la petite mort*, or the little death, of orgasm.²⁴ Similarly ambiguous, both sets of genitalia contain protuberances²⁵ and openings – both expand into and seek connection with other bodies, and simultaneously enable or invite encroachment and entry of the other into themselves. (By writing the body in this grotesque mode, Metelerkamp unwrites its biological over-determinism that is suggested at times – as discussed earlier in this chapter – in De Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*.) Since, in the grotesque framework, expansion and incorporation into the other is not an encroachment, as bodies are not individual and sealed off from each other, connection and interpenetration are seen as natural. This is alluded to in the near-rhyme: “skin thin”. In the grotesque body, the skin is not a solid boundary between inside and outside, self and other, but is “thin”, fragile, vulnerable. This lack, or at least uncertainty, of boundaries is exemplified in the line “and in and

²⁴ The various cultural beliefs that ejaculation results in a loss of virility, or that a man can only experience a set number of ejaculations before he will die (see, for example *De Secretis Mulierum* – attributed to a disciple of Albertus Magnus – for a medieval expression of this belief), also contribute towards this ambivalence.

²⁵ The protuberances of the female genitals, more typically ignored in favour of the vaginal opening, are particularly remarked on in Metelerkamp’s poem: “like mount / like venus / like pubis vulva”, which further depicts the body as transgressive.

through and to". This is unchecked, unlimited movement. It transgresses divides between inside and outside by coming in, but then, rather than sustaining this position of entry, it pushes "through", or beyond, and then arrives *at* or "to". But what is moved through or arrived at is not a self-existing, nameable entity, a being with defined and nameable boundaries. Through her depiction of the grotesque, erotic body, she thus questions the idea of abjection.

Metelerkamp's *carrying the fire*, which contains repeated references to many of Julia Kristeva's examples of the abject, especially "menstrual bleeding" (46, 64-5, 38) and "sweat" (four occurrences on page 26 alone), presents a challenge to the theory of abjection, and its notion of the bounded self. This is also emphasised as it is written in a first-person, confessional voice: as the confession of a subject who has not been defined by the process of abjection, it presents a radical "challenge [to] notions of subjectivity based on a logic of exclusion" (Oliver, *Witnessing* 6). It thus challenges not only the patriarchal system of abjection but also, through this, the masculine myth of autonomy and the idea of the contained, bounded, independent self. In *carrying the fire*, Metelerkamp describes her poetic desire, to:

take back those words

banished, punished :

open them : undefiled them :

old words, old as the earth, for growth,

fuck cock cunt (carrying 17; emphasis in original).

Through *carrying the fire* she is seen to be fulfilling this desire. By reincorporating the grotesque and abject into the individual body image, and into society's way of thinking about the body and self, Metelerkamp can open up fertile theoretical space from which to critique patriarchal notions of bounded subjectivities.

The Erotic Body of the Poem

A poem such as "keep coming up" is not only a body, as are all poems (as argued in the second chapter), but is, more specifically, an erotic body. The poem rhythmically pulses and contracts, the lines dilate hungrily, suck in air frantically, quiver closer and

closer to ecstasy. The poem is a desiring body, an obsessive body, an ecstatic body – it clenches in on itself and explodes outwards. In a later poem from *carrying the fire*, this principle of poem as erotic body is explained and exemplified:

metaphor and reality are
one

aren't they don't they come together
like making them
one we make them like love
like after-love seep like
osmosis

...

let me tell you this is real
this is not a metaphor any more
than desire is not a metaphor
any more than sex you may say well it's
not

sex not real
only desire really
and I can say no
but how can I say it more
clearly

what comes to me because I want it to come
like metaphor and reality coming
together like two bodies coming
and coming ... (*carrying* 61-2; ellipses added).

In my MA I argued that this poem connects language or “metaphor” (as language is metaphorical, with words acting as substitutes for their referents) with the world or “reality” (Weyer 54). This connection or “com[ing] together” is described sexually, with the porous boundaries between “metaphor” and “reality” causes “seep like / osmosis” between them.

However, within the new conceptual and theoretical framework developed by the PhD that advances an understanding of embodied poetics, it is possible to argue that Metelerkamp is not solely, or primarily, speaking about language in general, but about poetry: the attempt to connect metaphor and reality, to engender metaphor from reality, and reality from metaphor. Poetic creation, like sexual procreation, is about

effecting a connection and, through this connection, letting new life, and new life-forming substances, be released into the world.

If the poem is an erotic body, then in what position does this place the reader? If a poem is naked and vulnerable, an exposure of the self, an opening of the self for the eyes of the reader, then what is the reader's ethical responsibility to this body that "solicits me and calls me" (Levinas in Diehm 55)? And what if the poem is a confessional poem, a poem voiced by and enfolded in the poet?

In an interview with Ross Edwards, Metelerkamp calls on Muriel Rukeyser's understanding of poetry as 'a process, an energy, a *current between poet and reader*' (62; emphasis added). In doing so she emphasises the responsive role of the reader and the relationship between poet and reader. At the conclusion of the poetry section of *carrying the fire*, Metelerkamp addresses the reader directly for the first time in her poetic oeuvre. Employing a typically confessional tone of sincerity, openness and vulnerability, Metelerkamp speaks to the intimate relationship between poet and reader:

Listen. You have given me
secret audience you have listened as if you could do it again and again

clear my hysteria out of the air
like simply sweeping aside all the old fear like dead

words like need like love
like classics, syntax

I could give you more but I don't know what you want –
don't know how

you want it – how do you want it – tell me
whisper, this is what you want, I mean this is what I want

writing my self for you like with fingertips
piercing you, under your skin

here you are
leave the clothes on the floor here I am

paintings hanging like plants underwater strangling for air
when it's dark, when it's damp, take the mattress out on the grass –

like little noses lips whiskers fingers

intense as mice shrews

nips stripes hairs damp lips
in the dark in the neck on the lips

god, like a boomslang's eyes close
in the grass dead-dangerous

push me open like a small frog unearthed legs pushed back
your whole body your need – (*carrying* 93-94).

Metelerkamp overtly depicts the relationship between poet and reader as a sexual. The reader is asked “how do you want it”, encouraged to respond by intimately “whisper[ing], this is what [I] want”, instructed to “leave [her/his] clothes on the floor”, a “mattress” is brought out, foreplay involving “fingers”, “lips” and “the neck” is engaged in until the reader is exhorted to “push [the poet] open”, and sexually position her with her bent²⁶ “legs pushed back”. In this context, the reader’s “whole body” and “need” seem poised to penetrate the opened poet. As the poet has previously “pierc[ed]” the reader “under [her/his] skin”, this relationship is reciprocal and grotesquely interpenetrative.

However, to see this poem as merely describing the relationship between poet and reader seems to ignore the very body that is connecting them: the poem itself. Although some early readings of confessional poems seem to regard them as acts of poetic ventriloquism (you might be seeing/reading the poem-puppet, but it is the voice of the poet-ventriloquist that you are hearing), poems themselves, at least in the moment of their reading, are living, speaking bodies. Therefore, in the argument above one could replace “poet” with “poem”. It is the poem itself that the reader is penetrating and being penetrated by. As an erotic body the poem is vulnerable to the reader: in allowing itself to be an object of pleasure for the reader, it risks being misrecognized by the reader as merely object, text. An ethical engagement with an erotic poetic body demands that the reader recognises the poem as an ambiguously embodied subject, and in the interaction with the poem, reciprocally recognizes her/himself as subject and object, self and other for the poem.

²⁶ Using the image of a “frog”, this is a logical deduction.

Metelerkamp earlier explores the failures of reciprocity in the interaction between reader and poem:

impatient readers scratching for truth
like at an itchy cock
they keep rubbing up the wrong way
like at a woman with thrush
torment it (*carrying* 80).

In these lines a reader perversely ignores the ambiguity of the erotic situation, refuses to relinquish her/his authority, subjectivity and sense of autonomy and thus sees the partner/poem as a mere object of her/his pleasure. As a result, the poem is reduced to “an itchy cock” or a vagina infected with “thrush” – a sexual object treated carelessly and cruelly in the readers’ “impatient”, self-obsessed search “for truth”. And through this treatment they “torment” the poem, making it unlikely to reveal its truth, let alone bring pleasure. Reciprocity is needed in the relationship between reader and poem. The reading of erotic poetic bodies therefore has the potential to be an ethical activity – through an erotic interaction with the poem, as with an erotic interaction with a lover, one can learn how to conceive of oneself, and one’s relations with others, ethically.

The poem is an erotic body that the reader responds to sexually.²⁷ As such, there is a reproductive potential in the reading of poetry – new life can be created from this encounter: new poems can be written, dissertations created.... Moreover, to employ Rukeyser’s image, activated by the current flowing between the poet’s constructed words on the page and the reader’s responsive engagement with these words, life is breathed into the poem itself. Thus, in the sexual relationship between the poet and reader, the poem itself can be seen to be (re)born in the moment of reading.

²⁷ In *The Pleasure of the Text* Barthes refers to this as *jouissance* or “bliss” (67)

CHAPTER FIVE

The Ageing Body

In interviews, both Joan Metelerkamp and Antjie Krog express poetic awareness of and interest in the ageing of bodies. Metelerkamp has suggested that “[p]erhaps ageism is more a growing issue than feminism: the tyranny of a world that wants eternal youth, that will not look at what life gives – which is change – and won’t give age any place” (in Edwards 58-9). Krog, in her interview with Michelle McGrane, focuses not only on “giv[ing] age [a] place”, but granting it centrality and purpose in her poetry, asserting that she “need[s] to grow old in poetry”, thereby granting her poetry a central place in her ageing, too. While issues of ageing have crept more subtly into Metelerkamp’s poetry in her last four collections (*Into the day breaking, requiem, carrying the fire, Burnt Offering*), Krog has dramatically placed the ageing body at the centre of her most recent collection, *Body Bereft*.¹

Body Bereft, as signaled by both the title and David Goldblatt’s striking and provocative cover photograph – a close-up shot of a naked, middle-aged female torso, with raised veins, liver spots, sagging skin and drooping breasts – examines menopause and ageing and the effect of these processes on a woman’s life. It describes the mundane daily tasks of acknowledging ageing, or accepting fear and anger, of living with disintegration, and of loving someone as he disintegrates. It explores the physical, psychological, emotional and relational effects of ageing. Above all, it confronts the reader with the ageing, menopausal body that is typically rendered invisible, in art and in life, thereby giving this frequently silenced body a voice.²

This chapter will explore the available cultural narratives of ageing and the need for new narratives to be constructed. It will examine Krog’s writing of the ageing body,

¹ Discussing the oeuvre of Krog’s poetry in Afrikaans, Louise Viljoen notes that ageing has been an important theme from *Otters in Bronslai* onwards, but due to the selective nature of Krog’s translation of her poetry into English, this theme was only fleetingly represented in her English oeuvre until the publication of *Body Bereft* (“Groteske” 213).

² Some critics have, of course, not taken kindly to this confrontation. Stephen Gray’s vitriolic review “Letting it all (hang) out”, in which he is repulsed by Krog’s “candid[ness]” is the most notable example (4).

and particularly the eroticism of the ageing body, in *Body Bereft*. Then it will discuss Metelerkamp's engagement with the ageing in *carrying the fire* as a response to her familiar legacy of matrilineal suicide.

Narratives of Ageing

Ageing is typically viewed, and studied, from a biological and a sociological perspective. Within the field of gerontology different discourses of ageing are used and produced depending on this perspective. Biological ageing, which refers to “a standard pattern of physiological change over time”, has come to be dominated by the discourse of medicalisation – as has childbirth, as discussed in the third chapter – that posits ageing as a “disease” which needs to be treated and managed, if not completely cured, through recent advances of “anti-ageing medicine” (Vincent 192-9). Joining the discourse of “medicine” from a biological perspective, are those of “welfare and neo-liberal ideology” that dominate a sociological study of ageing (Tulle ix). This sociological study focuses on “the life course as a sequence of stages and age statuses to which ... specific age-based normative expectations are attached” (Vincent 193). Because the “idols” of contemporary “secular society” are “ever-increasing industrial productivity” (Sontag, “Double” 31) and contemporary western society is marked by “the process of detraditionalization [which] tends to diminish the relevance of the old as sources of tradition-based wisdom in postmodern society” (Polivka and Longino, Jr 6), “ageing well is narrowly defined as a relationship to work activity” (Biggs 114). In both the sociological and biological models, ageing is fundamentally understood as decline: a decline in productivity, resulting in a decline in social value, or a decline in health and physical functioning.³

While in contemporary western societies, ageing is viewed negatively for both genders, Susan Sontag, along with other feminists critics who have followed her lead,⁴ has argued that there is a “double standard of aging” according to which growing older “afflicts women much more than men” (“Double” 29). This double standard “denounces [ageing] women with special severity”, both on the level of

³ See Mike Hepworth's “Embodied Agency, Decline and the Masks of Aging” for a more detailed discussion of ageing as decline.

⁴ See, for example, Cherry Russell's “Ageing as a Feminist Issue”.

biology and sociology (31). Biologically, women's reproductive function is nullified with the onset of menopause, while men "suffer no evident cut-off point of their [reproductive] capacities" and therefore women's "bodies are likely to be monitored for signs of 'old age' almost as soon as they have made their transition from 'youth'" in a way in which men's bodies are not (Hockey and James 162). There are clear social implications that are connected to, but also that exceed, this biological ageing. For women, great social importance is placed on their "[b]eing physically attractive" and "beauty is identified ... for women, as youthfulness" (Sontag, "Double" 31). On the basis of both reproductive obsolescence and the loss of youth-identified beauty women's ageing impacts most strongly on their (perceived, potential) eroticism. Although it is true that "old age [for both men and women] remains outside th[e] 'sexualised world', with the stereotype of asexual old age pervading not only popular culture, but also policy, practice and research" (Gott and Hinchliff 64), the exclusion of older women from the realm of the erotic is particularly extreme. Sontag argues: "That old women are repulsive is one of the most profound esthetic and erotic feelings in our culture" and that "an older woman is, by definition, sexually-repulsive – unless, in fact, she doesn't look old at all" ("Double", 37; 36). Therefore, "for most women, aging means a humiliating process of gradual sexual disqualification" (Sontag, "Double" 32). As Krog and Metelerkamp prioritise the erotic in their explorations of ageing, as will be discussed in greater detail later in the chapter, they both work against this exclusion of older women from the realm of the erotic.

From the biological and sociological *discourses* of old age as decline of health, productivity and eroticism, *narratives* of old age as decline are created and reiterated, constructed patterns into which the later lives of people are woven and warped. As Emmanuelle Tulle states: "the dominant narrative of old age ... is the association of old age with inevitable, wholesale decline, physical and cognitive, as well as social and cultural. ... [O]lder people themselves operate within a range of expectations, which are bounded by this narrative" and therefore what is important is "the liberation of older people from restricted narratives and consequently restricted identities" (ix). Mike Hepworth concurs that "[t]he issue facing old people is the creation of a narrative of the self and continuous engagement with the question: 'how shall I

live?” (128).⁵ While individuals are required to develop their own answers to this existential question, these answers will be developed out of the existing narratives of ageing. However, if these narratives prove restricting, new, liberating narratives need to be constructed. Therefore, as Sontag notes, “[g]rowing older is mainly an ordeal of the imagination” – the ordeal of drawing on restrictive narratives of ageing within the collective cultural imagination, or the ordeal of trying to imagine old age anew (“Double” 29).

Krog’s “manifesta of a grandma” examines the available narratives of being a grandmother, in media “headline[s]”, “children’s books” and primarily in the “well-known [Afrikaans] children’s rhyme ‘Grandpa and Grandma’ / on that bloody stoep with their errant sphincters” (*Body* 31).⁶ Krog notes the effect of this rhyme on constructing the narrative of being a grandparent in South African culture:

For ever and ever in three
rhyming couplets metered in the falling
rhythm of dactyls this senile hogwash of stoepsitters
is conveyed from generation to generation
as the very essence of grandpa- and grandmahood (*Body* 32).

This South African stereotype of “grandmahood” is joined by other restricted narratives of older women that are entrenched in western culture, as can be seen in the “mythic caricatures” of older women as hags and crones (Sontag 37). Stories are populated by witches and evil stepmothers, the three fates and the weird sisters. For example, Metelerkamp’s *carrying the fire* references the fairy tales of “Cinderella, / ... Psyche ... [and] Vassilissa”, each containing antagonists who are stereotypically dangerous and vengeful older women who set an endless series of seemingly impossible domestic tasks for the beautiful young heroines: the evil stepmother, Venus as an envious mother-in-law and Baba Yaga, the witch (24).⁷ Krog’s

⁵ This is a question of individual identity and experience that ageing people need to answer independently. As Chris Phillipson explains: “in the conditions of advanced modernity, growing old moves from being a collective to an individual experience. The notion of an aging society ... becomes secondary to the emphasis on aging individuals – the crisis of aging is seen to originate in how individuals rather than societies handle the demands associated with social aging” (in Polivka and Longino, Jr 6-7).

⁶ Krog supplies the original version, as well as an English translation, of this “obscene Afrikaans children’s rhyme, cherished by generations of small [Afrikaans-speaking, South African] children” as an addendum to this poem (*Body* 32).

⁷ The story of a young daughter-figure challenging and replacing, in looks and power, an older mother-figure is described by Sharon Olds, in her poem “35/10”, which describes the ageing of a mother and

“Dommelfei / crone in the woods” develops a portrait of the crone, Dommelfei (the name is taken from the wise woman in Waldemar Bonsels story *Mario und die Tiere* [*Mario and the Animals*]), who is described as the fairy tale grandmother of “a red-hooded grandchild” and who, like a broomstick-borne witch, “rides her life out / like a song” (*Body* 68).⁸ Against the derogatory image, and narrative, of crone and hag, an older man is able to occupy the “traditional patriarchal role as ‘sage’ and ‘wise man’” (Davidson, Daly, Arber 179). (In contrast to this usage, “wise woman” is often used as a euphemism for a witch.)

The different cultural understandings of ageing for men and women can also be seen in art, for example in Auguste Rodin’s renowned sculptures. “Old Age” depicts “a naked old woman, seated, [who] pathetically contemplates her flat, pendulous, ruined body” (Sontag 37) and “Youth and Old Age” depicts an embrace between a young girl and an old woman. Sontag’s “double standard” is clearly at work: ageing is seen to inevitably affect and devastate women; men, by contrast, are depicted as eternally young, strong, vigorous, even when occasionally depicted as still and seated, mental vigour is asserted (see “The Thinker”, “The Age of Bronze”, “John the Baptist Preaching” and “The Walking Man”).

Poetry has also provided gender-specific images and narratives of ageing. The looming threat of ageing as loss of feminine beauty and sexual appeal serves as the impetus for a host of classic *carpe diem* poems, for example Robert Herrick’s “To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time”, Edmund Waller’s “Song (Go, Lovely Rose!)” and Andrew Marvell’s “To His Coy Mistress”. Erica Jong’s “Aging (balm for a 27th birthday)” and Sylvia Plath’s “Face Lift” express the female horror of ageing, and attempts to decelerate and reverse this threatening process, with “wrinkle creams” which promise “youth beauty / not truth” (Jong 15) and surgical procedures:

Now she’s done for, the dewlapped lady
I watched settle, line by line, in my mirror –
Old sock-face, sagged on a darning egg.
They’ve trapped her in some laboratory jar.

daughter – with the daughter on the cusp of adolescence as the mother approaches menopause – as “an old / story – the oldest we have on our planet – / the story of replacement” (28).

⁸ Further examples of engagement with these stereotypes within the confessional genre include Sexton’s revisions of various fairy tales in *Transformations* and Plath’s description of the “three ladies” who are “witches” and “Godmothers”, in her poetic response to Giorgio de Chirico’s painting “The Disquieting Muses” (74-6).

Let her die there, or wither incessantly for the next fifty years,
 Nodding and rocking and fingering her thin hair.
 Mother to myself, I wake swaddled in gauze,
 Pink and smooth as a baby. (Plath 155-6)

While men's ageing is poetically addressed, it is not viewed as a dire threat, but rather a new challenge, an opportunity for further masculine accomplishment: "Old age hath yet his honour and his toil. / Death closes all; but something ere the end, / Some work of noble note, may yet be done" (Tennyson 1952). Therefore although Alfred Tennyson's "Ulysses" and his aged companions

... are not now that strength which in old days
 Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are,
 One temper of heroic hearts,
 Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
 To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield. (1952)

While ageing men are thus encouraged that "[t]is not too late to seek a newer world" and "sail beyond the sunset", the "aged wife" and is left to remain "[b]y this still hearth", a barren hag "among these barren crags" (Tennyson 1952; 1950). Even WB Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium", probably the best-known of his poems dealing with ageing,⁹ although speaking uncompromisingly about being "a dying animal", still sees *purpose* for "old men": they need to go on a spiritual or metaphorical journey ("[sail] the seas and come / To the holy city of Byzantium") to find "the singing-master[s] of [their] soul[s]" because "An aged man is but a paltry thing, / A tattered coat upon a stick, *unless* / Soul clap its hands and sing" (Yeats 2311-2, emphasis added). Once an old man has found his "sages" and taught his soul to sing, he is no longer "paltry", but gains wisdom and rhetorical power as a historian, contemporary commentator, or oracle and is thus "set upon a golden bough to sing / ... / Of what is past, or passing, or to come" (Yeats 2312).

The attempt to find purpose in female ageing is rarely visible.¹⁰ Jenny Joseph's oft-quoted "Warning", speaks of ageing as an excuse for challenging normative feminine

⁹ Others would include "A Dialogue of Self and Soul", "The Circus-Animals' Desertion" and "Among School Children".

¹⁰ Instead, the typical attitude seems to be that taken by Ruth Fainlight in her recent poem "Ageing": "Pointless to bewail / the decline, bodily and mental; / undignified; boring / not to me only but everyone, / and ridiculous to celebrate / the wisdom supposedly gained / simply by staying alive."

behaviour (being inappropriately attired, uncouth, fat).¹¹ While ageing is thus constructed as providing liberation from social restraints, the poem concludes by recognizing that, other than societal conventions, there is nothing preventing one from liberating oneself from these constraints before one is “an old woman” – this is not a specific purpose of ageing (Joseph 168). (It is, however, possible to argue that menopause offers ageing women “liberation from a need to control sexuality tightly to manage reproduction” [Gott and Hinchliff 73], but this is not Joseph’s contention.) Marge Piercy’s “Sign” more daringly links the experience of finding a “first white hair”, which she “pluck[s]” and describes as “silver ... [that] does not melt”, to finding a clear role for ageing:¹²

Gradually, I am turning to chalk,
to humus, to pages and pages of paper,
to fine silver wire like something a violin
could be strung with, or somebody garroted,
or current run through : silver truly,
this hair, shiny and purposeful as forceps
if I knew how to use it. (21)

This poem acknowledges bodily transformation, but this is not read as simple decline. Instead the change is described as “purposeful”, the images speak of creativity and artistic expression (“paper”, “violin”), teaching and learning (“chalk”), violence and electricity (“[garrote]”, “current”), as well as nutrition through decomposition (“humus”). While the purpose of ageing, and the ageing body, still has to be realized (“if I knew how to use it”), its identification with “forceps” implies that, although it might be difficult to fully deliver this purpose, the purpose of the ageing body works towards birth, not death.

¹¹ The poem, for example, expresses delight at the idea of “learn[ing] to spit” and “wear[ing] terrible shirts and grow[ing] more fat” (168). Similarly, South African Margaret Legum’s “Sauntering” envisions old age as a timeless time of sensual abandon, “lead[ing] to baths at midday, / night swims, afternoon films and eating / nothing but smoked salmon all week, / and stew in bed” (14).

¹² South African poet, Liesl Jobson’s “Secret Signs” also depicts this moment of discovery. More daringly, though, Jobson’s poem speaks of finding “a lone / grey curl / in [the] / proud thatch” of her pubic hair, a discovery that recalls her pubescent sprouting of pubic hair (21). Linking these two signs of physical maturation, Jobson raises awareness of women’s intimate relationships with their bodies as they age – the “shy cleft” that transforms into a “proud thatch” – but these signs only provide the speaker with a “shock”, there is no accompanying sense of purpose, as with Piercy’s poem.

Krog's Revisionary Narratives of Ageing and the Erotic

Krog's "Dommelfei / crone in the woods", while initially appearing similar to Joseph's speaker ("she has sloughed / the demands of gender and behaviour") is granted purpose in ageing, working as a traditional healer and wise woman, and functions more like one of the sought-after sages in Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium", though she "minister[s]" to the body as much as the soul of other ageing individuals:

she'll knead your thighs, she'll minister your
upper arms with balms, your forsaking heart
your flaking skin, she'll comfort. she'll unfasten
your mind and preserve your tongue gently
in the lower jaw, and when she sends you

alone into the cold wind of ageing
you'll be searing from the marrow-bone. (*Body* 68-9)

While her gifts are more modest than those of Yeats's sages, and she is more overt in her attention to the body, the vital warmth, comfort, counsel and care she provides seem perfectly suited to her purpose of helping others survive the "the cold wind[s] of ageing".

Is *Body Bereft* Krog's search for such a sage/crone? Does Krog herself, in *Body Bereft*, seek to become such a woman? *Body Bereft* certainly is focused on exploring and evaluating the available narratives of ageing, notably in "manifesta of a grandma", as previously discussed, but also "hormone sonnet", where she engages with her own mother's (lack of a) narrative of menopause (18). Diana Hume George notes the "special relationship of the aging woman poet to her own mother" (138), through which she constructs her own narrative of ageing in response to the maternal narrative she has inherited, a feature which is even more marked in Metelkamp's work than Krog's, as the final section of this chapter will discuss. In exploring and evaluating the available narratives, it is clear that these are confining, and therefore that new narratives need to be constructed. *Body Bereft* attempts to do so.

If *Body Bereft* is viewed as written in defense of the ageing, menopausal body, working to construct new, liberating existential possibilities of this body through her

poetic engagement with it, then the poem “God, Death, Love” is an apologia for this poetic practice:

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

meanwhile terror lies exactly in how
one lives with the disintegrating body
in how one accepts that the body no longer
wants to intensify with exhilarating detonations

in how one loves the more-and-more slaked-ones
in how one resigns to vaginal atrophy and incontinence
or that the blade cleaving through one’s heart
is probably a heart attack

to jump from the ageing body to Death
has suddenly become a cop-out act (20)

This poem asserts that while “menopause” and the bodily ageing it signifies has not been regarded as one of the “Important Themes in Literature” as, for example, has “Death”, it is in fact a far worthier and more complex subject to tackle than death, which is pure, absolute, ideal. That it is, to use Sontag’s phrases, more courageous to explore the “subjective, profane pain of aging” than the “objective, sacred pain of old age” and its inevitably-associated death (29). From the early Greek origins until today, elegies have abounded in the poetic canon – Max Cavitch calls elegies “one of the oldest and most distinguished verse traditions” and notes that “[t]o this day elegy remains a ... widely-practiced poetic genre [that] figures prominently on the contemporary scene” (1) – indicating that death has uniformly been regarded as a suitable and satisfying subject of poetry, and that it is a subject about which many poets feel able and encouraged to write.¹³ According to Krog, the “terror” that could

¹³ Some notable examples of the elegiac mode in the history of poetry are Catullus’s poem 101, John Milton’s “Lycidas”, Thomas Gray’s “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard”, Percy Bysshe Shelley’s “Adonais”, Tennyson’s “In Memoriam A.H.H”, WH Auden’s “In Memory of W.B. Yeats” and “Stop all the Clocks”. In this study, Metelerkamp’s *requiem* and “Joan” in *Stone No More* are good examples of the elegiac mode. For a fuller discussion of elegies, see Max Cavitch’s *American Elegy: The Poetry of Mourning from the Puritans to Whitman*; David Kennedy’s *Elegy*; Peter Sacks’s *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats*; R Clifton Spargo’s *The Ethics of Mourning: Grief and Responsibility in Elegiac Literature*; Jahan Ramazani’s *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* and Karen Weisman’s *The Oxford Handbook of the Elegy*. Diana Hume George’s argument, developed from an interaction with Karen Mills-Courts’s *Poetry as Epitaph: Representation and Poetic Language*, that because poetry “has always attempted to incarnate, to give body to idea, to memory ... [a]ll poetic language is both elegiac and epitaphic” is also relevant here (136).

motivate, but often prevents, the writing of poetry exists not in death, but “in how / one lives with the disintegrating body” and its grotesque “incontinence”, and, beyond living with, “in how one loves” this disintegrating body that “no longer / wants to intensify with exhilarating detonations”. Therefore, Krog opines that “to jump from the ageing body to death / has suddenly become a cop-out act”. This asserts not only a stubborn “resign[ation]” to and “accept[ance]” of the ageing process, but a poetic decision not to jump over ageing as a legitimate theme, landing neatly at the “Important Theme” of “Death”.¹⁴ Krog thus states that the ageing body must be accepted and explored in language, and this task is *Body Bereft*’s primary purpose.

However, this task is difficult due to the invisibility of ageing itself. According to Simon Biggs, despite the fact that there “are growing numbers of older people”, which seemingly makes them “more visible as a social group”, the “blurr[ing]” between “previously fixed life stages” means that “the particular tasks and challenges of growing older are becoming increasingly hidden” (110-113). Therefore, as Margaret Gullette states, “[a]lthough [ageing] operates in plain sight, it is almost invisible”, or in Christopher Bollas’s phrase, it is “the ‘unthought-known’ of our everyday social and personal experience” (in Biggs 113). Moreover, despite, or perhaps because of, the few stereotypical images and narratives, there is a “virtual absence of a sustained cultural discourse on aging in the humanities” (Henneberg 4) as a result of which we are “culturally illiterate about ageing” (Woodward in Henneberg 3). In order to break this silence and overcome this illiteracy, some imaginative artists, like Krog and Metelerkamp, work to construct new discourses of ageing. However, “the *experience* of aging – like that of time passing – is essentially imperceptible” as “it is the body itself that both offers and denies us access to knowledge of our aging” (Hockey and James 169; 170; emphasis in original). Ageing

¹⁴ Sharon Olds’s poems about her father’s battle with cancer (published in *The Father*) are exemplary of a poetic decision to engage with the messiness of dying (as opposed to the neatness of Death). See, for example, “The Glass” with its descriptions of “the glass of mucus”, of “pus” from the “tumour / ... in his throat” that he needed to spit out “every ten minutes or so”: “like a glass of beer foam, / shiny and faintly yellow, he gargles and / coughs and reaches for it again, / and gets the heavy sputum out, / full of bubbles and moving around like yeast –” (Olds 59). In a South African context, Isobel Dixon’s section “Meet My Father” in *A Fold in the Map*, also explores her father’s illness and death, with the poems “Lamb” (50-51) and “Drip” (58) especially paying close attention to the dying body. Finuala Dowling’s volume, *Notes from the Dementia Ward*, focuses extensively on her mother’s mental devolution due to dementia, but also marks on the physical realities of dying, such as the “soiled sheets”, “frail bones / and failing sight” (9).

is thus invisible, imperceptible, unknowable: it is unspeakable. How then does one write poetry of the ageing body?

A central, and related, question in *Body Bereft* is: “what is written in the weathering of our bodies?” (14). Rather than presenting the body as a metaphorical writing surface – the self writing on the body – this line asserts that the body writes the self, the weathering and ageing of the body rewrites and reforms the self. But how is this self rewritten through this weathering? In order to answer this question, Krog needs to be able to “translate disintegration” from its corporeal form into language, into poetry (*Body* 11). However, as “how do you say this” attests: “at times it seems easier to rage / against the dying of the light / than to eke out the vocabulary of old age” (*Body* 29). Therefore, not deigning to take the simple route of straight up rage, or the institutionally sanctioned route of strait-laced (or jacketed?) silence, Krog writes this collection in order to seek out, and where this is impossible, to eke out, a vocabulary of old age, from the detritus of a language wherein ageing is almost absent. But this process of searching for and scratching out an appropriate language is arduous; you are constantly confounded by the doubt about “how do you say this”. Krog thus writes: “I simply don’t know how ageing should sound in language” (*Body* 28). As ageing remains largely unspoken and unwritten, the language available to Krog fails her. In order to translate “what is written in the weathering of our bodies”, Krog requires the assistance of a lexicon and library of images that do not yet exist in the established narratives of ageing. Additionally, something about the ageing body itself – its immediacy, its ineluctability – seems to resist language: “your ... beard is perhaps / too here, too close for language, too grey with grit” (*Body* 28).

Without a nuanced literary history of writing the ageing body, and with this body itself as a resistant subject of literary scrutiny, Krog’s progress in this project is unsteady and uncertain, a process of trial and error. Her dominant method of attempting to “eke out / the vocabulary of old age” is of sounding out the existing glossary. The speaker tongues and tastes these words. Some are vehemently vomited out at first contact, like “grandma”, which “has such a poo sound, sounds so blubbery / so almost tubbery, it mumbles so cuntless, so toothless”; and yet the speaker is forced by the poem (and the existing vocabulary of ageing) to repeatedly mouth (off about) this offending word (*Body* 30). Other words catch in the craw/core of the

collection, like “disintegrating” (*Body* 11, 20, 51), “decay” (*Body* 88, 95, 111) and, especially, “loose”, which becomes a menopausal mantra in the poem “when tight is loose” (*Body* 23-4). To quote the opening stanzas of the poem:

it must have happened gradually, but
she feels overcome – suddenly her body
is simply loose, as if nothing wants
to be firmly tied and trim. for example
her teeth, hair, everything down to her
pelvic floor is now loose, even her

eyes bubble – the left with its own
eccentric jumpiness. here is the upper lip
plying the accordion and yesterday when
she pointed at something, her upper arm
flapped its own new suede purse –
her thumbs are crumbling away and refuse

to open bottles, taps or masturbate.
her stomach lies like a dish in her lap.
there are blue medallions on her thighs
and if she *has* to look down, she sees
her knees shrinking like forgotten
prunes in a bowl. her skin in loose from

her flesh like a shuddered boiled-milk
skin. what should be tight is loose
and what should be loose is very
tight, because if she looks left all
her shoulders simply have to turn as well; (*Body* 23, emphasis in original)

What Krog describes in this poem is not only a corporeal loosening (of the speaker’s “teeth, hair, everything down to her pelvic floor”), but the inescapable effect of this on her sense of self, her identity: “she feels overcome” by her rebelliously transforming body, she feels dispossessed. Although these bodily changes “happened gradually”, their cumulative effect is radical, sudden. In the loosening of her organs, she feels she is “crumbling away”, as if “the wholeness that once was [hers]” has disintegrated (93).

The ageing body is “eccentric”, not socio-culturally centred. While the “young skin and fluent / bod[y]” of youth is the standard, socially-accepted corporeal form, the “eccentric jumpiness”, the “flap[ing]”, wavering, wobbliness of the aged body is deviant. In this, the ageing body is transgressive, not defective. It is a body that visibly “refuse[s]” to be stable, signaling the hidden or unacknowledged instability of

all selves. The ageing body calls attention to itself as a body, as does the pregnant, or newly maternal, or erotic body.

What the poem thus emphasises is the Western philosophical ideal of the bounded, autonomous self, an ideal which the “tight” coherence of the stereotypical young body seems to embody, coming into conflict with the real “looseness” of its corporeal boundaries, through an acknowledgement of the way in which the ageing body grotesquely “transgresses its own body” (Bakhtin 317). While ageing thus seems to threaten a person’s sense of “wholeness” by means of physical disintegration, it does this only by revealing that s/he was, in fact, never whole and complete. The ageing process therefore makes visible that the body, and the embodied self, is always “in the act of becoming” (Bakhtin 317). Therefore, as with the grotesque experiences of pregnancy, giving birth and having sex, the experience of ageing reveals the ambiguity of the human condition.

It is perhaps for this reason that this poem – along with a significant number of the other poems that explicitly examine issues of menopause and ageing – uses the third-person speaker “she”, instead of Krog’s more typical confessional “I”. Others are “it rumbles softly” (“she unfastens her long heart. never / had she been so meager, so lonely” [13]); “leave me a lonely began” (to be discussed shortly) and “half of her is someone else” in “softsift of the hourglass” (where alienation and loss of self is signified strongly in the typographical disjunction in the poem, as well as in the final stanza: “enraged she rips into everything / inside herself, but quivering in her ribs / one can see that already / she’s been by the half-dead eclipsed” [51]). Additionally, Krog uses the second-person “you” in “sonnet of the hot flushes”, and the general, representative third-person “one” in “God, Death, Love”. While the third person is still infrequently used, it is notable that *Body Bereft*, which attempts to come to terms with, and find language adequate to a description of, physical ageing, employs a third person speaker more often than *Down to My Last Skin*. Rather than signalling a break from confessionalism, this usage poetically embodies the experience of loss and sense of alienation encountered in the ageing process: the loss of the socially-privileged coherent, unified self, the loss of the dream of one’s own bounded autonomy, the sense of alienation from oneself, as previously imagined. The sense of loss and fragmentation associated with ageing is embodied not only in the adoption of a third-

person speaker, but also in the body of the poem. The poem shows its yearning to maintain and return to a stable, coherent identity in its consistent use of tight, regular sestets, however this imposed structure only serves to emphasise the fragmentation within, as the meaning of the individual phrases and sentences transgresses the neat boundaries of poetic line and stanza.

The transgression of neat boundaries also speaks to the relationship between ageing and the abject. As abjection works to construct identity through establishing and maintaining exclusionary boundaries, it is significant that it is the attack on her borders, her “loosening ... / seams” that is causing this crisis of identity. While Krog’s oeuvre contains repeated references to many of Julia Kristeva’s examples of the abject, for example “vomit and shit and sweat” (*Down* 37), “piss” (*Body* 24; *Down* 54) and menstrual bleeding (*Body* 16, 27; *Down* 54), the poem “When tight is loose” interestingly uses Kristeva’s most fully-developed image of abjection, that of “skin [being] loose from / ... flesh like a shuddered boiled-milk / skin” (*Body* 23). Kristeva’s detailed discussion of abjection examines what happens “[w]hen the eyes see or lips touch that skin on the surface of milk” (*Powers* 2). Although the milk skin is “harmless, thin as a sheet of cigarette paper”, it is rejected and abjected physically with “gagging sensation[s]”, “spasms in the stomach”, “perspir[ation]”, “dizziness, nausea” (*Powers* 2-3; emphasis in original). However, as “food is not an ‘other’ for ‘me’, who am only in their desire, I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which ‘I’ claim to establish *myself*” (*Powers* 3; emphasis in original). In the attempt to create an enclosed, bounded self through abjection, the self is itself abjected. The use of the third person in this poem is thus particularly apt. In doing so, it could also be seen to demonstrate the cost of abjection, and thereby imply the necessity of embracing the abject.

While the ageing body, as “when tight is loose” demonstrates, calls attention to itself as a transgressive, excessive body, the social response to this body is to cloak it in invisibility – not to see it, not to listen to it. In “leave me a lonely began”, Krog writes about this phenomenon:

... suddenly he looks
up and shouts to the back: “coffee shop’s
empty, we can close!” and she realises: he
does not see her. she sits as nothing. that where she

is is simply air or glass or emptiness
 he did not *not* see her, or perchance look
 past – he looked right *through* her. she’s
 vanished without tamper or trauma;

to the waiter she’s merely table-leg or chair
 how did it come to this where nothing
 exists any longer that acknowledges her
 as a woman? (*Body 21*, emphasis in original)

With the epigraph from Tamara Slayton (“the voice of the menopausal woman is feared / and denied. She has been made invisible or / encouraged to remain forever young ...”), this poem attests to the social transformation of the menopausal woman into “air ... or emptiness” (*Body 21*). The concluding image, “*this* she knows: nobody will ever again breathlessly / peel desire from her shoulders”, explicitly links her perceived lack of desirability to her social invisibility (*Body 22*, emphasis in original). At first this diction seems to circumscribe erotic interaction as youthful: the description “breathlessly / peel desire from her shoulders” suggests the passion and excitement of new love, young love, the revelation (“peeling”) of selves not yet known to each other. By this definition of eroticism, ageing women would be not only invisible, but unerotic, and eroticism itself would be impossible within a decades-old marriage. However, this reading is informed by ageist prejudices that define ageing as asexual and certainly not a time of great physical passion. In fact, Krog’s confessional poems in *Body Bereft* attest to heightened arousal and a continuous process of erotic revelation.

Body Bereft debunks myths of asexual old age.¹⁵ It questions prevailing Western cultural stereotypes of ageing women, for example the “inevitabl[e]” presence “in contemporary children’s books” of a “misshapen / a grandma anachronistically in Dr Scholl’s shoes / joyously knitting – spectacled and bunned” (*Body 30*). It particularly questions their lack of sexual appeal or appetites. Her garrulous, vociferous, “manifesta of a grandma”, takes umbrage at the cultural depictions of grandmothers, which imply that such an aged woman is not supposed to “get cock past [her] lips

¹⁵ This is also function of Sharon Olds’s *The Unswept Room*, in which, as reviewer, Kate Daniels, notes, Olds sensually “celebrat[es] the fifty-year-old’s ‘withered and scrawny’ body” and eagerly imagines making love at eighty “with the same / animal / dignity, the tunnel remaining / the inside of a raspberry bract” (16).

anymore” and, if “sexually harass[ed]”, “should actually / be grateful [if] someone still wants to fondle her” (*Body* 30-31). *Body Bereft* primarily seeks to address the subject of ageing and eroticism from within Krog’s own long-established marriage. This collection is Krog’s attempt to “find the words to love someone [she] has lived with for thirty years” (Krog in McGrane). *Body Bereft* thus seeks language in which to “write [the husband’s] ageing body” with love, and to “[love] the more-and-more-slaked” spouse in her writing (*Body* 20).

Although Krog demurs in “how do you say this” – “I really don’t know how to write your ageing body” – the rest of the poem makes a valiant effort to find the language of ageing eroticism:

in the meantime the irises of your infamous blue eyes
have over the years buckled under green
more stuttering now but two enduring sincere

shadows that have loved me a whole life long
my forefinger traces your eyebrows
from where grey hair crackles like lightning.
face that I love; face of erosion

if I pull you towards me your hair is thin and light
your scalp surprises me with its own texture
the grooves cutting down from your ears

the mouth that could scathe so brilliantly still
moves fragrantly against my temples but mild now
– as bread. your hands allow my breasts to sink into
your palms like glasses of dark wine.... (*Body* 28; ellipsis added)

The image of her breasts as “glasses of dark wine” which are tenderly cupped in his hands, renders the sensuality of the ageing body. The image engages four senses simultaneously (the look, taste, scent and texture of the wine in its glass), showing the sensual complexity and richness of their ageing sexual relationship. The specification of a deep red wine, which can transform and better its palate over decades, implicates a desirable maturation of eroticism during the ageing process. The comparison of his mouth to bread speaks not only of the fragrant mildness of his mouth’s caresses, but also of how essential those caresses have become to her; they are her daily bread. But beyond this individual analysis, the combination of these images, “bread” and “wine”,

recalls the sacrament of Holy Communion, and so signifies the spiritual, transformative power that their eroticism has attained through decades of intimacy.

These stanzas contain an interesting inter-play with Krog's poems about her husband in *Down to My Last Skin*. In the preceding collection, his "infamous blue eyes" have been a "mean / messy blue" with "sparks / fl[ying] from [them]" (*Down* 26), they have been "napkin-blue eyes" from which "mercy is absent" (*Down* 23), they have "glitter[ed] haughty with impatience" (*Down* 24), they have been "after all these years still acrimoniously blue" (*Down* 22). But as years have merged into decades, these merciless, haughty, impatient blue eyes have "buckled under green" and have become "more stuttering now". His mouth was previously rendered "secure", *not* "mild" (*Down* 26). And now, although his "hair crackles like lightning", it is "grey", "thin and light", no longer "luxuriously buoyantly dark" (*Down* 24). The "face that [she] love[s]", which used to be "so slender so arrogant" and is previously described as "determined", has become a "face of erosion" [*Down* 24; 26]). However, the "face of erosion" *is* the "face that [she] love[s]"; the gradually greening blue eyes are *still* "two enduring sincere / shadows that have loved me a whole life long". So, in strict accordance with the Bard: "love is not love / Which alters when it alteration finds".

Or, does love alter to accommodate the alteration? Other than the obvious physical signs of ageing, the husband presented in "how do you say this", and in particular, the relationship between the husband and wife presented in this poem, is quite markedly different from that presented in *Down to My Last Skin*. In "Love is All I Know", Krog presents a fairly consistent image of her husband. As an example, reconsider "Sonnet (I will always remember)" where he is depicted as "authoritarian", "power[ful]", the "boss"; he holds her "as always", he always "lies on top", his "hands [move] / with the orders of a boss" (*Down* 26). However, in "how do you say this", she is the active partner: she "pull[s] [him] towards [her]", his hands merely *allow* her breasts to sink into his palms – they demand nothing, only receive. These alterations, in their roles and relationship, is made explicit in the final stanzas of the poem:¹⁶

... I think I'm

¹⁶ In this poem that speaks of the difficulty of trying to "eke out / the vocabulary of old age", the repeated phrase "I think I'm trying to say" performs Krog's struggle to find language that is adequate to her task.

trying to say that I find the thickening of your
abdomen attractive, that an erection against a
slight curve leaves one wet in the mouth. god,

I think I'm trying to say that I can surrender to
your thighs for the very first time because of
their soaking whiteness, that I prefer the soft
looseness of your buttocks to the young hard

aggressive passion of our youth. you no longer
use sex for yourself but for me. you no longer
want to breed children from me but calmly reveal

yourself. into the luxury of experience I
stretch myself out. it is as if you are deeper, as if I'm
quieter, as if we come to be much more complete. (*Body* 28-9; ellipsis added)

These stanzas present a vision of intimacy antithetical to “the young hard / aggressive passion of ... youth”, but which is nevertheless deeply erotic. The ageing husband’s aroused body, with its erection resting against a “thicken[ed]”, “slight[ly] curve[d]” abdomen is intensely erotic to his wife, inciting her to become “wet in the mouth” – not only a literal, physical symptom of sexual arousal, but also symbolic of her body’s desire, its grotesque opening to accommodate the other within the self. Though in *Down to My Last Skin*, Krog has often described their eroticism in terms of violence, a “stubborn struggle” (29) which she actively participates in (“I can fight him spectacularly” [30]), in *Body Bereft*, we see Krog “surrender” to her husband “for the very first time”. This isn’t a hard-fought surrender of the besieged wife, or even a pre-emptive surrender of the “battered bride” (*Down* 24); this is a trusting exposure of her vulnerability (to recall Simone de Beauvoir’s argument about the risks of the erotic that is developed further by Debra B. Bergoffen in the previous chapter). In this old erotic relationship, where “you no longer / use sex for yourself but for me. you no longer / want to breed children from me but calmly reveal / yourself”, the selfish sexual motives of youth have been displaced by a greater responsiveness and responsibility to the other, as well as a potentially risky “reve[lation]” of the self. And as “you” “reveal” yourself, thereby making yourself vulnerable, the “I” is able to “stretch [her]self out” and explore the fullness of her own embodiment as, ambiguously, subject and object. In doing so, she adopts a posture that is not only sensually alluring, in asserting confidence in her own appeal, but that is also

physically and emotionally at risk: the body that is stretched out and fully extended before the viewer is unprotected, undefended, vulnerable to any physical or emotional attack. But, because both parties are revealing and exposing themselves, both are able to abandon the ideal of Cartesian subjectivity or Hegelian mastery and “surrender” themselves to their embodied ambiguity, thereby becoming “much more complete”. In fact, this poem suggests that they are only able to do so because they have “the luxury of experience” that comes with decades of marital and sexual intimacy. Krog, in particular, is only able to “surrender to / [her husband’s] thighs for the very first time because of their / soaking whiteness”, because ageing has changed his body, softened and gentled it, making it seem less threatening, and thus more inviting. Therefore, rather than inhabiting or circumscribing eroticism, *Body Bereft* implies that ageing couples in ageing relationships cannot just access deeper levels of intimacy, but through this, they can abandon themselves more fully to their sexual partners, and therefore also to eroticism itself.

Krog’s assertion that she can only “surrender to / [her husband’s] thighs ... because of / their soaking whiteness” also points to another facet of the confluence of intimacy and ageing. With this description of her spouse’s thighs, the poem possibly indicates that, with ageing, his body has become more like her own. The phrase “soaking whiteness”, with its resonances of domesticity and cleanliness, of liquidity and femininity, of milk and maternity (reinforced by the etymology of “soak” from the Old English word for “to suck”), seems more applicable to a woman’s body than a man’s. Although Richard Dyer has explored the “association of [racial] whiteness with death” and thus how whiteness is feared, in Krog’s poem the pallor of the ageing skin does not provoke a response of terror, or veneration, for the sublimity of approaching death, but is rather associated comfortingly with a feminine nurturing of life (208). This association with femininity is strengthened by the very next description of the husband’s body in the poem: “the soft looseness of your buttocks”. Not only is “soft” a typically feminine adjective, and stereotypical (and often perjorative) categorization of women, “looseness” also recalls the earlier poem “when tight is loose”, in which the ageing, menopausal female body is repeatedly typified by

its looseness.¹⁷ These descriptions present a view of the male body as becoming more similar to the female body as it ages, and, through this process, a deeper level of intimacy and eroticism is established.

The effect of similarity on intimacy within a long-established marriage is further developed in “marital song 3”. Here Krog confesses: “now, after thirty years our hair smells the same / our stomach linings growl around the same food” (53). Through lengthy cohabitation, their bodies have altered, becoming more “the same”. This process of confluent ageing has developed to the extent that “we no longer know where which commences”: they have become coterminous. If the boundaries of “self” and “other” have been so deeply eroded, to the point of erasure, then an unbounded intimacy, predicated on the concept of the boundary-transgressing grotesque body, seems inevitable.

However, although Krog’s designation of their marital unit as “family” seems peaceful and harmonious, the near-universal existence of familial fighting and feuding, signified in the poem’s very next sentence, immediately undercuts this impression: “we have become family. we are fighting / for survival together like two open mouths” (53). While the use of “we” and “together” implies that they are fighting on the same team, the line break after “fighting” also enables one to see them fighting against each other. Coterminous co-existence can be experienced as claustrophobic and result in competition and aggression. In this fight, they are symbolically reduced to “two ... mouths” that are “open” in hunger, in anger. The mouth, symbolic of our most basic need (milk, food) is therefore also, according to Sigmund Freud (in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*), the site of our most basic desire and pleasure, as well as of deprivation and frustration. And the mouth, the mouthpiece of even the pre-linguistic self, is also our most basic means of expressing these emotions. In this description then, rather than an old marriage leading to a more profound and nuanced form of intimacy, it instead can cause the partners to revert, or regress, to more infantile forms of intimacy.

¹⁷ It is notably also used to describe him in *Down to My Last Skin*, where his “looseness” is identified with “fragility” and “illness” (27).

This poem thus presents an ambiguous view of the relationship between ageing and intimacy. The possible threat of violence (“we are fighting”) emerges again at the end of the poem, however in a more mature cast:

each word between us devotedly revenges itself
with the live weight of thirty years

nobody could call this a conversation
although my neck longs for your hands

and between my shoulder blades
at times lightly, your tongue (53).

Each word within their thirty years of cohabitation and conversation becomes sinisterly animated, a long-memored avenger, that is weighted for its most damaging impact. However the threat of strangulation – seen in the juxtaposition “your hands” around “my neck” – is disrupted not only by the speaker’s “long[ing]” for this contact, which reinterprets this action as a caress, but also by the tenderness and gentleness, but also the sensuality and eroticism, of the action of the final couplet.

Metelerkamp: Ageing and the Matrilineal Legacy of Suicide

The subject of ageing is given a unique weighting in Metelerkamp’s confessional poetry because of her particular familial legacy of matrilineal suicide. Metelerkamp’s maternal grandmother “committed suicide in 1951” (*Stone* 3).¹⁸ The effect of this act, committed before Metelerkamp’s birth, on the course of her life, is described with awful poignancy in *carrying the fire*:¹⁹

I was born, I told you, with a bit missing :
a child a love, but a bit missing –
before I was born
(before my mother was married)
my grandmother shot a hole through her head
right through my mother and into her unborn children – (31)

¹⁸ This information is given in a dedication to “At the centre you sit” that opens *Stone No More*. This collection is dominated by the ever-present absence of Metelerkamp’s grandmother, named “Joan Rose-Innes Findlay”, which reaches its elegiac climax in the long cycle poem at the centre of the collection: “Joan” (*Stone* 22-34).

¹⁹ My MA traced the effects of Metelerkamp’s legacy of matrilineal suicide in more significant detail than is warranted in this context. For a more detailed discussion, see Weyer 29-30, 63-65, 99-107 and 126-129.

The “hole” that Joan Rose-Innes Findlay shot in her own head is thus seen as being responsible for the later suicide of her daughter, Metelerkamp’s mother. In *requiem*, Metelerkamp’s elegy for her mother, she describes her mother as following her own mother’s example of suicide, down to the most macabre detail. She writes:

[you got] up
 from the table, into
 your room, to the dark
 cupboard with its stinkwood, secret
 drawer... (*requiem* 18, ellipsis in original)

From this hidden repository, with its “secret[s]” and symbolic stench, Metelerkamp describes how her mother “took that little revolver, / the one that came round again to you” (*requiem* 48). With this cyclical movement the revolving revolver returns to the daughter from the dead hand of the mother. Writing in the direct aftermath of this revolution, Metelerkamp expresses grave fears that she is “accursed” (*requiem* 16), an heir to an awful maternal legacy, and that her daughter too will be its inheritor:

I though it would stop with me,
 thought I could never do it,
 even in my wildest dreams,

what your mother did to you,
 Mother, what you did to me –
 but she dreams I shut the door

on her: my daughter. (*requiem* 19)

Metelerkamp’s identity as a “[w]oman who drank / death in, in the placenta –” (*carrying* 87), is also heightened by the fact that she shares her maternal grandmother’s first name. In my MA I discussed how this naming

entrenches her position in this suicide cycle. This is particularly evident in “Joan” where her use of only their shared first name in the title allows the poem to be both an elegy for her grandmother and for herself. The fact that Metelerkamp never knew her grandmother further enables her grandmother to be undifferentiated from her, she who “bears [her grandmother’s] Word, lead, stone in the womb” (*Stone* 5). (Weyer 102)

In this final section of the chapter, I would like to build on this argument by reading *carrying the fire* as the response of an ageing Metelerkamp to this legacy.

carrying the fire, the volume that directly followed *requiem*, is the first in which Metelerkamp explicitly discusses her own ageing. While in *Into the day breaking*

Metelerkamp describes her husband as ageing, with “greying hair, tired eyes, / shoulders that stoop through the door”, she maintains silence about her own ageing (107). However, in *carrying the fire*, Metelerkamp repeatedly mentions her age, “forty five” (32, 41, 50) and refers to herself repeatedly as “middle aged” (99): a “middle aged mother” (31), a “middle aged matron” (35), as having a “middle aged body” (19). This sudden surfeit of references to ageing and to having reached the “middle” of her potential life expectancy, tipping the scales of life from youth to old age – or as Ingrid de Kok describes life “After Forty”: having “[g]ot half-way with this gene basket” and now “rolling downhill” (*Seasonal* 70) – is striking, but what does it signal?

In modern Western society (and even more so in earlier genteel society²⁰), one’s age is too personal a detail for most adults, especially women, to share with mere acquaintances, or to expect others to share with you. Sontag notes that a woman’s age is “her [‘dirty’] secret, her private property” and therefore to ask a woman her age is to “ignore[e] a taboo” and be “impolite or downright hostile”, subjecting the questioned woman to “a miniature ordeal” (29). The explicit naming of one’s age thus signals intimacy, openness and blunt honesty, and as such, is a frequently used device in confession poetry. One could note, for example, Robert Lowell’s oft-quoted: “These are the tranquilized *Fifties* / and I am only forty” (“Memories of West Street and Lepke”), Plath’s: “I am only thirty” in “Lady Lazarus”, Anne Sexton’s: “I am thirty this November” in “Division of Parts” and her poem titled “Menstruation at Forty”. Similarly, Krog opens her poem “refused march at kroonstad monday 23 october 1989” with the statement that she is in her “thirty-seventh year to heaven” (*Down* 102). Metelerkamp’s overt referencing of her age in *carrying the fire* is thus a typical gambit of the confessional collection; one that signals honesty, inspires trust and evokes intimacy in the relationship between poet-speaker and reader. However the sudden deployment of this strategy in *carrying the fire* – a strategy which she continues to use in *Burnt Offering*, repeatedly mentioning her age as, or almost, “fifty” (39; 43; 44) – indicates that there is something specific at stake in this volume that has encouraged, or necessitated, an awareness and acknowledgement of her own ageing process.

²⁰ One thinks, for example, of Elizabeth Bennet’s shocked reaction to Lady Catherine de Burgh’s pointed questioning of her age in Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*.

In the poem “Deliver me” from *requiem*, Metelerkamp writes:

What happened to my body, Mother –
what happened to yours, what you did to yours,
I think this has happened to mine,
is happening to mine –

not age oh god that has so little to do with it
mother, more like it:
what happened to the body
that taught me to love, love
my body that I shared with love
what happened to that, Mother:

you lay on your bed on your back like a cold shelf
cold thin yellow of all
you had run away from
you lay on your bed solid cold
of love having all run out
in cold blood
nothing whatsoever of you left
your utter body abandoned.
shoes at the foot of your bed still
not touching not even
rock lives so little.
absolutely you had abandoned.
what happened to your body. (51)

In this poem, Metelerkamp suggests that something has happened to her mother’s body, that she did something to her body, which caused, or enabled, her to commit suicide. Metelerkamp asserts that this something was not ageing, but an “abandonment” of the self, the body, due to a lack of “love”. Simultaneously, Metelerkamp offers with trepidation that a similar abandonment or lack of love is “happening to”, or within, her own body. In this poem Metelerkamp states that after “love ha[s] all run out” there is “nothing whatsoever of you left”, which, to Metelerkamp’s embodied sensibility, is the same as one’s “utter body [being] abandoned”. Abandonment of love, of body, is an abandonment of the self, and so is self-annihilating, if not outright suicidal.

The kind of love discussed here, whose lack leads to an annihilating abandonment of the self, is, more particularly, eros:

age has nothing whatsoever to do with it
only love. Love
give me back my body

let me take some body to mine
god!
behind my bones, below my ribs
as if there were only one thing for it
and that is all.

When he sits in his chair, my husband,
saying if he's not careful he'll be finished by fifty,
meaning he feels finished now,
legs should get up and make their way there, lame body
slumped in its own chair
should break
open, over the arm
of that chair, should rise
again and again, take me
where the thick of life kicks in – (*requiem* 51-2).

With this desire to get her body back through “tak[ing] some body to [her's]”, and this encouragement to, more specifically, take her husband's body into her own “where the thick of life kicks in”, Metelerkamp connects life and bodily salvation to eros. It is erotic love that can “deliver [her]” from her mother's fate.

Metelerkamp repeatedly insists, in the opening stanzas of the poem, that “age has nothing [or ‘so little’] to do with it” and references to being worn out before one is old creep into the poem. Her husband's reported comment that “if he's not careful he'll be finished by fifty”, which implies that “he feels finished [in other words: tired, old, dead] now” is matched by Metelerkamp's description of her “lame body / slumped in its own chair”. It is these elderly, deathly postures – each slumped in his or her own chair – that are preventing eros from flowing freely, causing Metelerkamp to feel that there is “nothing ... of [her] left”.

In this poem her feelings of bodily abandonment and decrepitude seem connected to the passage of biological time (“warm blood of the monthly migraine”) as well as of ecological and sociological time (“like before the hole in the ozone, / like before AIDS”). They coincide with her increasing loss of herself, her body (“like before I kept turning my back to where / the body might want to take me”). Therefore, despite her overt claims that “age has nothing to do with” her sense of abandonment and decrepitude, these references subtly suggest that ageing influences and reduces her openness to eros, her embrace of her body, her life-sustaining maintenance of the self.

In *requiem*, it is the suicide of her mother, an act presented as an utter abandonment of her eros-deprived embodied self, which focuses her awareness that her body is being similarly abandoned, and that she therefore needs to deliver herself by letting eros “take [her]”. At the conclusion of *requiem*, before the poem “Sanctus” (65) which is explicitly positioned as an “afterword” (63), Metelerkamp’s plea is for “new life, life again, body love / bring me back, / resurrect me” (62). *carrying the fire*, whose publication directly follows that of *requiem*, performs this act of deliverance, transformation, resurrection. As *carrying the fire* is preoccupied with ageing, as established earlier, its determination, and almost desperation, to do so is unsurprising, as studies have repeatedly shown a correlation between ageing and suicide. De Beauvoir’s *The Coming of Age* (1970) discusses how “[o]ld age is by far the most usual time for suicide ... [and] that the percentage of suicides increases from forty to eighty years of age” (275).²¹ (Metelerkamp’s mother, described as being “twenty” in “nineteen fifty” in 2003’s *requiem* [46], committed suicide at around seventy years of age.) A 2012 article by Ajit Shah on “elderly suicide rates” reiterates that “suicide rates [increase] with ageing” (52). Therefore, as Metelerkamp ages the pull of her matrilineal legacy of suicide becomes stronger as her statistical susceptibility to suicide increases.

Written in an interwoven four-part structure, *carrying the fire* tells of an extra-marital affair, which, as the book progresses, becomes (along with an imagined rekindled romance in the third section) symbolic of an encounter with eros, “the god of love”, with “love itself” (*carrying* 82; 72). The Russian lover and the US-based ex-boyfriend are reconfigured as “angel[s] of [Metelerkamp’s personal] annunciation” (*carrying* 95).²² The message isn’t simply or explicitly stated (“I wasn’t sure / what I heard. I knew / the angel had spoken” [*carrying* 75]), but the central concerns are eros and transformation: “The angel speaking. It will be. It is. You are. I Am. *The eternal act*

²¹ De Beauvoir notes that Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure-Principle* (1920) suggests that “as the years pile up, so the ‘death wish’ prevails over the will to live”, as a psychoanalytical explanation for this correlation, but that “most psychoanalysts have given up this idea” (*Coming* 442). She also discusses the psychosis of “involuntary melancholia” which is described as “particularly characteristic of ageing” (*Coming* 495).

²² See the numerous descriptions of this synthesised figure as a messenger and angel of annunciation on pages 68; 74-6; 83; 99-101; 104-106; 108-109; 111; 117-8 of *carrying the fire*.

of creation in the infinite I Am...” (*carrying* 100; emphasis in original)²³ which is “[a]nnounc[ed]” in the “glowing belly” swollen from “angelic sex” (*carrying* 109). Through eros, Metelerkamp can be transformed, and, through this erotic transformation, delivered from her mother’s fate.

The dominant ideology in the collection is that of “artistic praxis”, which Metelerkamp defines as “the artist transforming herself as she transforms her material” (*carrying* 102; 118). Images of transformation, of new life forming from the old, abound. Metelerkamp uses grotesque images of opening and unclogging, of disgorging part of the old self to deliver a new self, to signify this transformation (see especially “open this blocked throat, / ears, eyes, cry / cry easily” [49] and “*push, push, choked river / push our / snaking river / unclog your mouth / to the sea*” [79, italics in original]). Snake imagery, even more pervasively, slithers through the collection (*carrying* 18; 23; 38; 74; 79; 86; 94). While also speaking to the eroticism of this collection (“your cock down my throat like a snake” [*carrying* 86]), it consistently evokes the idea of regeneration through referencing snakes’ biological imperative of moulting. For example:

... you come to me

concentrating, consciously coming
out of your skin

like in the middle of the gravel path
snake in the thick of the country – (*carrying* 84).

Snakes shed their skin to rid themselves of parasites (as well as to replace the old, worn out skin). Analogously, Metelerkamp repeatedly describes her matrilineal legacy of suicide as an additional weight that she is required to carry. She is required to live “dragging the weight of suicide women” (*carrying* 58) and perpetually “carry that weight” (*Into* 106) which is described as a “stone- / weight” (*Stone* 24) and a “dead weight” (*requiem* 58). Therefore this legacy can be seen as parasitic: she – and, more specifically, her womb, as the weight is described as “lead, stone in the womb” (*Stone* 5) – is the host this legacy requires to survive, but its survival threatens her own. In response to this parasitic inheritance, she desires to detach herself from it, like

²³ Metelerkamp quotes here from Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s well-known definition of the primary imagination (“the living power and prime agent of all human perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM”) in his *Biographia Literaria* (1595).

a snake shedding its infested skin. In doing so she hopes to heal herself from the devastation of her mother's suicide that is so hauntingly depicted in *requiem*.

It is thus also notable that, as well as being associated with knowledge, in both the Judeo-Christian (with Moses) and Greek mythological (with Asclepius) traditions, snakes are associated with healing.²⁴ Confessional poetry, a genre initially, and traditionally, conceived of as providing "soul's therapy" for the poet, in a poetic version of the Freudian "talking cure", is also associated with healing (Rosenthal "Poetry" 154). Therefore, while the affair itself is presented as a method of healing in the collection, through its gift of "body love" and erotic rejuvenation (*requiem* 62), so too is the *writing* of this confessional collection, populated by images of healing snakes. It is the writing of *carrying the fire*, with its transformative "artistic praxis" which enables Metelerkamp to "grow [her] hands back ... [f]rom the suicide veins" and thus to regenerate herself from the devastation of her maternal legacy of suicide (*carrying* 111).²⁵

The themes of ageing, matrilineal suicide, erotic rejuvenation and healing are knotted together in the final stanzas of the first part of the cycle:

Chateau de Lavigny
 you have brought me a dream,
 like that flash of my mother laughing,

 shedding my middle-aged body
 in your arms I am twenty
 immortal again and lovely. (*carrying* 19)

Through the erotic relationship with her lover at the Chateau de Lavigny and the creation of poetry from this relationship and location,²⁶ Metelerkamp is able to shed her age and mortal weariness, letting go of the preponderant weight of her mother's

²⁴ Refer to the Old Testament book of Numbers (21:8-9) for a description of Moses' bronze snake of healing, and, in Greek mythology (Homer, Ovid), the Rod of Asclepius, god of healing. Perhaps non-coincidentally, Moses' bronze snake was "put on a pole", or wrapped around his staff, just like Asclepius' rod: a snake coiled around a staff. This snake-encoiled staff is still used to symbolise healing today, for example on MedicAlert bracelets, on the World Health Organisation's flag and on the logo of the South African Medical Association.

²⁵ My MA traces the transformative practice of Metelerkamp's artistic praxis at work in *carrying the fire* and *Requiem* in greater depth. See Weyer 127-9.

²⁶ Interestingly, as snakes are normally understood to retreat to a safe location to moult, Metelerkamp's stay at the Swiss writer's retreat of Chateau de Lavigny, where work on *carrying the fire*, and its process of regeneration, began, seems to function analogously.

(and grandmother's) suicides through receiving a vision of her laughter, in order to become young and immortal again.

In this context of rejuvenation, the symbolic value of her lover's literary work – “he is writing the story of Sara – / the old woman, the new life” – is also significant (*carrying* 13). The Old Testament character of Sara (later renamed Sarah), the aged wife of the aged Abram (later renamed Abraham), is told that, despite decades of infertility, she will “bear a child at the age of ninety” (Genesis 17:17). Despite Sarah being indubitably “past the age of childbearing” (Genesis 18:11), in accordance with this prophesy she gives birth to a son, Isaac (Genesis 21:1-7). By referencing this Biblical, and *grotesque*,²⁷ story of new life from old, it becomes a mirror of Metelerkamp's own striving for rejuvenation. And by positioning the Russian lover as author of this story, the importance of eroticism in affecting this transformation is emphasised, but so too is the transformative power of writing itself. In response to the lines, “he is writing the story of Sara – / the old woman, the new life”, the next line of *carrying the fire* envisions Metelerkamp rising phoenix-like, but from ink, not flames, thereby emphasising poetry's power of resurrection: “I, bodies, rising out of the ink” (13).²⁸

Similarly purposive in the collection are the images of Easter (*carrying* 63-7). Telling the story of Christ's death and resurrection, and linking with the symbolism of (Rabelaisian, grotesque) spring carnivals that celebrate the coming of the new life of spring out of the dead land of winter,²⁹ the annual, cyclical celebration of Easter is the western, Christian world's supreme narrative of transformation. In this cycle, on Easter “Sunday”, the ex-boyfriend whom Metelerkamp has recently started an online relationship with is imagined as a newly-resurrected Christ (*carrying* 65). He instructs her to “*put your hand in here, like in at my side*” (*carrying* 66; emphasis in original),

²⁷ This Biblical story is reminiscent of Bakhtin's description of the “figurines of senile pregnant hags” in the “famous Kerch terracotta collection” (25).

²⁸ As discussed in the second chapter, the plural disputes the idea of a single, stable identity at the same time as asserting embodied existence.

²⁹ The evocation of the start of TS Eliot's “The Waste Land”, with its cynical revision of the opening of Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* (“Whan that April with his showres soote / The droughte of March hath perced to the roote” [79]) is deliberate here, signalling the painful “exhausti[on]” Metelerkamp feels in her attempt “to tug out the new life to be born” anew and so resurrect herself (*carrying* 94): “April is the cruelest month, breeding / Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing / Memory and desire, stirring / Dull roots with spring rain” (2511).

just as Jesus instructed Thomas to “put [your hand] into my side”, where he was wounded by a soldier’s spear, in order to convince the doubting disciple of his true identity and resurrection (John 20:27). But more pervasively, through the re-establishment of their relationship, Metelerkamp herself is the resurrected Christ. For the “twenty nine years” since they had last communicated (*carrying* 50) she has been “fraying, unravelling”, it is “as if [she] had been deaf, / for twenty nine years”, but now she is “stirring, to the sound / of [his] voice” and angelic deliverance from death in a sealed tomb is imminent: “and like a boulder / heaving, and heaving –” (*carrying* 63-4). This resurrection is reiterated on “Monday – family day” when Metelerkamp notes that “only a month ago / ... / [she] might have been dead” but now she “wake[s] again” (*carrying* 66-7). Rather ironically, though, on “Sunday”, when she is described as “com[ing] down to earth”, this is not depicted as a joyful resurrection, but a return to a world of worries and woe that she had briefly managed to escape by “riding high / on the e waves” of her online relationship (*carrying* 63):

Sunday :
 come down to earth nagging
 like the grief of a child knowing
 Christmas will never come –

I have woken
 to worry about money,
 tasks undone,
 what I am in the world,

old grief, old self-destruction, old disbelief – (*carrying* 65-6).

Although Metelerkamp is looking for a resurrection that is a rejuvenation, for “the new life” (*carrying* 94), the “old grief” is too heavy to be easily cast aside.

The grotesque cyclical rejuvenation of Easter is further emphasised in *carrying the fire* through its linkage to menstrual bleeding: “Good Friday, / bleeding,”; “By Saturday the bleeding abated” (64-5). Menstruation, often reviled as symbolic of women’s shame, is here revived through its association with Easter: women’s monthly shedding of blood is seen as similar to the blood that Christ shed on the cross, with both signifying the embodiment of life-through-death.³⁰ However, this “bleeding” is described as “more than an ordinary month more like a miscarriage”

³⁰ See discussion of this in the second chapter

(*carrying* 64). In doing so, not only is an understanding of menstruation as a failure of procreation asserted, but also an understanding of her online relationship as flawed and infertile: despite its seeming promise of resurrection (menstruation as fertility) it is unable to deliver on this promise (menstruation as miscarriage).

Despite the difficulties of delivering new life, the evocation of Easter, as with that of Sara, reiterates the transformative project of *carrying the fire*, and Metelerkamp's personal quest for resurrection: her desire, as stated at the conclusion of *Requiem*, is unequivocally to "resurrect" herself (62). The use of "quest" here is deliberate to signal the Grail Quest, the attempts, described primarily in Medieval literature but continuing to the present day, to locate the chalice, bowl or plate either used by Christ during the Last Supper or used to collect his blood during the crucifixion. This mythical object is imbued with great symbolic power as an earthly remnant of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection, and thus of the conflation of his mortality and immortality. In this Easter section, Metelerkamp deliberately uses the word "grail" to refer to her transformative project: "[my husband] said I have been chasing a dream / he said what did I want what grail what crock of ideal / what shit he said (*carrying* 65). Understandably, due to the manner of Metelerkamp's pursuit of her grail of resurrection – through having an extra-marital affair and re-establishing communication with an ex-boyfriend – her husband does not sympathise with this attempt to resurrect herself after her mother's suicide.

Ageing in *carrying the fire* therefore seems to signify two things for Metelerkamp: firstly, it's a sign of her human mortality, and more importantly, it's a sign of her specific suicidal legacy starting to close in on her. The latter is entrenched by the fact that there is a physical resemblance between herself, her mother and her maternal grandmother: the "frown / on [the grandmother's] forehead" is the same as the one "between my mother's brows / between mine" (*Stone* 2). As she ages, this physical resemblance becomes more pronounced as the "weathering" of her body – to use Krog's phrase (*Body* 14) – writes her into the matrilineal script:

all lines, all the old threads
binding me to the face, that photo
of my mother (*carrying* 45).

Just as she is bound to her mother's face, she feels bound to her mother's fate. It is the imprisoning lines that her lover, and his symbolic configuration as the angel of eros, is depicted as erasing:

all the shreds of old skin
all you peeled away like a cocoon
all you blazed away (*carrying* 45).

In keeping with this transformative theme, at a climactic moment in *carrying the fire* she and her lover are described as “naked as newborns” (27). Through grotesquely opening herself to eros, and through the confessional writing thereof, Metelerkamp is born anew, regenerated, her naked newborn skin free of its fatalistic weathering. But this sensation of “being born” and “[b]egin[ning] again” (*carrying* 78) is, of course, only momentary, transitory: all the old skin and inherited lines that were “blazed away [are] / wound and wound around again like swelling / like poultice of leaves like bandaging” (*carrying* 45). While her suicidal legacy is irremovable, a weight that she must carry, and one that is gaining momentum as she ages, its depiction as a “poultice” or “bandaging” implies that her living of this legacy is itself an attempt to heal the inherited wound, though perhaps, if this is unsuccessful, the winding bandages could also be seen to signify a process of mummification: a preservation of the matrilineal legacy.

Through this discussion it can be seen that Krog and Metelerkamp both centralise the erotic in their poetry of the ageing body. The manner in which they do so is, however, dissimilar. Krog's *Body Bereft* responds to the asexualisation of the ageing body in sociological and literary narratives, by explicitly examining the eroticism of ageing bodies, particularly within a decades-old marriage. Her examinations explore how eroticism is altered, but not absented, by the processes of bodily ageing and greater relational intimacy. In contrast, Metelerkamp's *carrying the fire* engages the erotic as a way to escape from ageing. For Metelerkamp, ageing is intricately linked to her matrilineal legacy of suicide, and thus, in order to extricate herself from this accursed position in the familial narrative, she emphasises the transformative potential of the erotic. It is particularly through her investment in grotesque eroticism that she seeks to do this – by emphasising openness and cyclical rejuvenation she tries to find a way to resurrect herself.

Conclusion

This thesis has explored the confessional, embodied poetry of Antjie Krog and Joan Metelerkamp. It has positioned them as confessional poets and, by examining the attacks on this genre's ethics, has explained how this mode is ethical through its assertion of relational subjectivity and its enabling of empathy. It has examined the relationship between poetry and the body, established Krog and Metelerkamp as poets of embodiment, and their poems as bodies that seek to enter into an ethical relationship with the reader. Through the reading of their poetry of the maternal body, it has demonstrated how their work revises and responds to mythical and medicalised depictions of motherhood by offering confessional, experiential accounts of being a mother. It also discussed how they can be seen as writing from the maternal body and the ethics facilitated by this. The reading of their poetry of the erotic body explored the strange ambiguity of the erotic, particularly for women in a patriarchal society, and discussed the ethics of the erotic encounter, especially when rendered in a grotesque mode. It additionally examined the ethics of reading a poem that is an erotic body and situates the reader as a lover. Finally, Krog's confessional explorations of ageing were seen to create revisionary narratives for ageing women, particularly in their depiction of the eroticism of ageing, while Metelerkamp used the erotic to attempt to escape an ageing process that is entrenching her within a familial narrative of matrilineal suicide.

Through this argument, I have indicated the value of Metelerkamp's and Krog's (English language) poetry, and the particular valence of confessional poetry and poetry of the body. This thesis thus asserted the importance of poetry as a genre that, though still widely practiced, is being read less and less, especially in academia.

Metelerkamp, as established in the introduction to this thesis, is perceived and positioned as a minor South African poet, whose work rarely receives academic and literary-critical attention. Through my detailed and lengthy engagement with her work, I have desired to contribute towards changing that status. This thesis has demonstrated the depth, complexity and nuance of her poetry, which opens up richly ambiguous spaces for productive literary analysis. Her practice and theory of writing

poetry from the maternal body, and her construction of the poem as a grotesque erotic body, which draws the reader into participating in an erotic encounter, were found especially provocative. This thesis has also demonstrated the aesthetic and sensual appeal of her poetry, which calls to the body as well as engaging the mind.

Through my engagement with Krog's poetry in its English translations – which only rarely makes recourse to the Afrikaans originals, and usually does so in setting up the context of the poem's initial construction and reception – I have demonstrated that these English translations have academic and artistic value in and of themselves. Krog's translations of her poetry can be can be productively investigated from various literary theoretical perspectives – including ones related to confession, embodiment and ethics – and not just from that of translation theory. Her ambiguous renderings of the erotic body, and her revisionary explorations of ageing and its relationship with eroticism, provided rich and fertile grounds for the development of this argument.

By positioning Metelerkamp and Krog alongside each other in this thesis, each poet's work is also re-evaluated by association. The minor Metelerkamp is seen to hold her own against Krog, who is the major figure in contemporary South African poetry. Krog's English translations, which have garnered little detailed attention but some heated criticism, are not found deficient next to Metelerkamp's English compositions.

Through grounding this study of the ethics of poetic embodiment in the genre of confessional poetry, this study has re-evaluated the status on this genre. While it is typically maligned for being narcissistic and solipsistic, characterised by its 'bad ethics', this thesis has demonstrated its notable ethical capacities and potential. It has also demonstrated the complex, ambiguous relationships confessional poetry has with the concepts of truth, language and the self, which are not always recognised in traditional definitions of this genre. In doing so, it has emphasised the capacity of this poetic mode to enrich poststructuralist understandings of the relationships between language, self and world, rather than being deemed irrelevant or dismantled as a no-longer identifiable genre. It has additionally noted the increasing academic interest in surface reading (as opposed to symptomatic forms of literary analysis), which is ideally suited to confessional poetry and its practices of self-exposure and troubling of the boundaries of privacy, and thus may foster a literary critical climate in which the

reading of confessional poetry may (once again) become legitimate and laudable field of study.

Poetry of the body is also typically disregarded as an area of serious literary engagement, perhaps because it is most often poetry of women's bodies, which traditionally have no place in the academe. Through exploring the ethics of embodiment, and the ethical function of the body, this thesis has asserted the value of embodied poetry. While there is a danger when discussing poems, as with many other topics, to allow the body to slip into a metaphor and erase the experiencing, en fleshed body, this thesis has, through its focus on confessional poetry of particular bodily experiences, tried to avoid doing so. The central assertion that a poem is a body should not be read as a disembodied metaphor, but a statement that emphasises an awareness of the way in which a poem functions ethically as a body because of their ontological and epistemological similarities: it is an attempt to show the bodiliness of a poem, not the poetic qualities of the word 'body'.

In making this argument about the ethical potential of poetry, I am thus also re-evaluating the status of poetry in the current academic and literary-critical climate. While not advocating a return to prescribing aesthetically and morally 'good' poetry (as defined by the current hegemonic ideology) as a way to preserve and refine the moral fibre of society (and its current system of privilege and privation), I am asserting the ethical potential of a fully-embodied and engaged reading of poetry: of opening yourself up to the voice and body of the poem, of tasting another life and allowing that taste to transform your way of being in the world. Contemporary South Africa, with its shockingly high statistics of rape and other violent crimes, is a society that seems defined by its lack of empathy and responsibility towards the other (it attends more heavily to our constitutionally-enshrined individual rights). Rather than finding absolute moral laws, a responsive reading of poetry can model the ethical responsibility towards the other that should inform our behaviour in daily life. Specifically, the reading of confessional poetry, that which is most human, most personal and thus also most universal, which demonstrates how people are situated in their contexts and formed, constrained or liberated by their relationships, is an exemplary genre for an ethical engagement with the (textual) other.

In reflecting on the coherence of the argument throughout this thesis, I am aware that while the last four chapters are clearly unified through their attention to embodiment, in general and in particular forms, the first seems possibly isolated with its unique focus on confession. However, the insights of this chapter not only inform the rest of the argument, but also enable it.

The school of confessional poets in the 1950s and 1960s in the United States of America worked to open up the close confines of the appropriately poetic “Important Themes in Literature” to the full gambit of human experience (Krog, *Body* 20). It therefore enabled poems that discuss such ‘unpoetic’ subjects as “childbirth”, “menopause” and grotesque, rather than idealised, eroticism to be written (Krog, *Body* 20). Without confessional poetry, the forms of embodiment this thesis examines would not be present in poetry. The subject matter of this thesis, poetry of embodied experience, is thus dependent on the transgressive practices of confessional poetry.

The theory of the grotesque body, introduced in the second chapter and woven through the next three chapters, as a body that transgresses its own boundaries and thus stands in contrast to the bounded subjectivity that is formed by the processes of abjection, is thus also implicated in the discussion of confessional poetry. The oeuvre or body of confessional poetry, identifiable by its transgressions of the boundaries of acceptable subject matter, is a grotesque body. It invites that which is typically abjected from the traditional, pre-confessional poetic canon into itself.

Metelkamp’s explicit, but also Krog’s implicit, aim in writing confessional poetry is to take the quotidian and transform it into poetry, to show how the poetic exists inside the quotidian. This emphasises the transformative power of the grotesque body, but also its ambivalent status, signalled by Bakhtin’s previously quoted image of the “senile pregnant hags”: there is life in death, poetic in the unpoetic, the epiphanic in the quotidian (25).

The non-traditional reading of the ‘I’ in confessional poetry in the first chapter as unstable, ambiguous, incoherent (rather than stable, unitary, coherent), also informs, and is informed by, the idea of the grotesque body. Confessional poetry, rather than presenting a reified monument to the autonomous, complete self, as some theories of

this genre have argued, shows the self as permanently under construction, in a state of becoming, of transformation. This is also asserted in the attention paid to the historical context as catalysing and constructing a confessional culture, demonstrating how culture is continually being constructed by different socio-economic and political factors.

Furthermore, the usage of the 'I' whose referent slips between poet, speaker and reader asserts the idea of the ambiguous self, but also emphasises relational identity. The collective nature of confessional identity, not to appropriate another's experiences or perspectives, but to show how deeply we are implicated in each other's lives, was used by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's confessional mode and draws on the philosophy of *ubuntu*. Confessional poetry has the same ability: boundaries between the private and public, the individual and the communal, are broken down, and in doing so, the 'I' of confessional poetry has political and ethical valence.

This is particularly emphasised by the process of empathetic identification that confessional poetry facilitates, and even insists upon, through the speaker/reader slippage of the 'I'. It is also enabled by the dialogic structure of confession that constructs a relationship between poem and reader that is central to the Levinasian form of ethics engaged with throughout this thesis. It is the dialogic nature of confessional poetry that first insists on a relationship between poem and reader, even before the implications of reading a poem as a body transform that relationship into an ethical face-to-face encounter.

While after its initial visibility in the first chapter, the concept of confession flows through the thesis like a subterranean river, whose presence sustains and shapes the surface argument, but only breaks through it and springs into visibility at certain strategic points, the concept of embodiment is observable working throughout the final four chapters (though it is, of course, implicated in the discussion of confession as discussed earlier). The concept of embodiment informs what was read and how it was read; it knots together key ideas of relational and unbounded subjectivities and the ethics thereof, and the centrality of ambiguity, which are emphasised through the discussion of the grotesque body in each of these chapters. The way in which the

grotesque body is open to and enters into the bodies of others, asserting collectivity and communality, is then used to transform the face-to-face encounter of Levinasian ethics into a more grotesque cycle of interpenetration.

The choice of the three forms of embodiment in this thesis was predicated on how extensively and intricately they were examined in both poets' oeuvres and how common these forms are socio-culturally. But what more specifically connects the maternal, erotic and ageing body is the way in which each of them emphasises corporeal existence, or make us aware as the body as a body, not a tool or house of the self, and thus entrenches the idea of embodied existence. Furthermore, they are all examples of grotesque bodies – ambiguous, transgressive bodies that thus explore the relationship between self and other, self and world.

In this thesis, discussion of confession and embodiment constantly pushes towards the topic of ethics. While in the first chapter this is structured as a response to pre-existing constructions of confessional poetry as unethical, as the thesis progresses the question of ethics appears without any such provocation. Levinas's statement that "the incarnation of human subjectivity guarantees its spirituality" (*Ethics* 97) – which insists on embodiment as the precondition for ethics and is thus radically different from the disembodied, ahistorical, absolute laws that moral philosophy has so often produced or debated – is the banner under which this thesis was written. I sought to explore the potential of this argument by reading the most fully human, fully embodied poetry that I knew: confessional poetry of the body. To return to the spatial or geographical metaphor adopted earlier: if confession is the subterranean river and embodiment the ground, then ethics is the overarching sunlit sky. While the focus on my argument is only aimed directly at the sun and sky at key moments, the intention was to examine the concepts of confession and embodiment from a perspective of, or in the light of, ethics. The intention was to construct an ethical reading of the intersection between confessional poetry and poetry of the body. I would thus like to conclude by exploring how this thesis can be seen as presenting an ethics of reading confessional embodied poetry, by showing how my argument attempted to become such a reading practice.

In comparison with other PhD literary studies dissertations, there is a possibly an unusual amount of quoting and close reading. While this does evidence a methodological preference for textual analysis, it is more specifically a desire to engage with the bodies of the texts. The aim is for the thesis to become an example of an ethical face-to-face encounter that is possible between the body of the reader and that of the poem. Through the quotes, I therefore attempted to bring the bodies of the poems into the dissertation.

Focusing on these poems as bodies, and remembering that it is their embodiment that our ethical relationship requires, they are not primarily mined for their deeper meanings – using a symptomatic reading style that focuses on the disembodied analysis of symbols – but interacted with as bodies. I therefore attempt to build an argument that engages with the surface of the poem, the way it looks and sounds, the way it feels in my utterance of it. In doing so, the thesis is underpinned by an awareness of my bodily response to the poem's body: in terms of purely physiological responses and those linked to emotions and attitudes (breathing, heart rate, clenching muscles, smiling, nodding, frowning). Through my inclusion of these fragments of poetic bodies, I hope to enable the reader to engage in their own process of embodied response to the poems, being able to participate in the relationship, not being excluded from it.

By quoting long extracts from the poems within my own argument, the convention of indentation helped to show the division between self and other. A relationship between self and other is created, a responsibility of the self to the other is asserted, but the other is not subsumed within the self; its experiences and perspectives are not appropriated. As paraphrasing the poems would do so, by collapsing the textual and visual distinctions between self and other, I tried to avoid engaging with the poems in that manner. I therefore attempted whenever possible not to distort or deform the bodies of the poems by my argumentative usage of them.

However, to show the grotesque mutual penetrability of the poetic body and the (more metaphorical) body of my argument, there is also a frequent usage of short, fully integrated quotes. The bodies of the poems are not closed off from me and, due to their dialogic nature (or the argument that the poem is like a musical score) one could

argue that they are incomplete or in a perpetual state of becoming: my interaction with the poem affects the poem, it transforms it in the moment of reading. Conversely, my argument is open to the poetry and exists in a state of becoming – it is penetrated by the poems and constantly transformed by them. This constructs both Krog's and Metelerkamp's writing of embodied confessional poetry and my embodied reading of it as being in a state of transformation and becoming, they are both transformed by the interaction with the other. This asserts their relational, collective identities, but yet, with the retention of distinguishing quotation marks, also their alterity. This grotesque technique of integrating short quotations thus works to transgress the boundaries between argument and poem, self and other, and indicates how these boundaries are themselves permeable and shifting, not absolute, but also not absent.

This ambiguous view of boundaries is also visible in the structure delineations. While they seem to set up clearly separate fields of enquiry, there are also areas of overlap. Ethical questions are addressed in all five chapters, not pursued in a single, autonomous chapter, showing how the idea of ethics producing and produced by this thesis is relational, not an absolute set of moral laws, it is embodied, not abstract and capable of being abstracted. Similarly, the discussion of the grotesque body is not contained in a single chapter. An earlier version of this thesis attempted to enclose it within the chapter on the erotic body, but the grotesque body is excessive and transgressive. The structure of my thesis needed to not only accurately reflect and represent that, but also embody that. The form of my thesis can thus be read as a struggle against the process of abjection: each chapter aims at boundary purity and a unified, coherent identity, and seeks to abject anything that threatens the stability of its boundaries, but these aims would abject the argument itself and prevent it from accessing "creative juices" (Weiss 46). Therefore the process of abjection is rejected in favour of an embrace of productive grotesque ambiguity.

The way in which this thesis itself is in a state of becoming can be seen in the transformation of the idea of ethics during the thesis. While it is always a relational and embodied concept, the first chapter is focused on an ethics of empathetic identification. The next chapter presents the idea of the face-to-face encounter as the basis of ethics. This idea, which emphasises the alterity between self and other, and is focused on the idea of responsiveness and responsibility towards the other, is used

prominently throughout the thesis. However, this is then complicated by the introduction of the concept of the grotesque body. In the grotesque body, the boundaries between self and other are made permeable, as they are in empathy, and alterity shifts to ambiguity. While selves do not dissolve into each other, the ambiguity existent in such states as pregnancy – when one is simultaneously ‘I’ and ‘not I’ – is emphasised to question radical alterity and explore the way identity is relational, collective and mutually transforming.

The issue of how to ethically read embodied, confessional poetry was particularly pertinent for me in the final chapter, when discussing Metelerkamp’s matrilineal legacy of suicide. The poems that discuss her mother’s and grandmother’s suicides, especially in *requiem in carrying the fire*, are beautiful public works of art *and* private expressions of tragic suffering. As a reader, I felt (and still feel) solicited and called by these poems to engage with them. With my grotesque-based ethics, this engagement could not be a cold critical reading, maintaining the boundaries between self and poem, but required opening myself up to these poems and their pain, enabling these poems to become a part of my own body and way of being in the world. However, in doing so, I needed to guard against appropriating her suffering in my empathetic response to them.

I also needed to guard against appropriating her suffering in my academic usage of this poetry. I wanted to acknowledge and engage with these poems and the experiences and emotions rendered therein, not other the poems by positioning them as outside the scope of literary analysis. However, I did not want to callously build the foundation of my academic career on the back of Metelerkamp’s suffering – and my ability to empathise with it. I did not want to dismantle or deconstruct this poetry of pain to use as the mortar for the cornerstone of my professional edifice, or to reduce it to pulp from which to construct my calling card to academia.

To conclude, through the construction of this dissertation I have worked not only to present an argument about the ethics of confessional poetry of the body, but to embody this argument within its structure and style. Therefore, whilst asserting that the reading of confessional embodied poetry can model ethical responsiveness to the other, I have simultaneously tried to demonstrate this reading style through my own

engagement with the confessional poetry of the body of Antjie Krog and Joan Metelerkamp.

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