

August, Karel Th.
Stellenbosch University

‘Where I become you.’ (A response to Rein Brouwer)

I hereby wish to express my appreciation for the topic of your presentation for this symposium on Covert Violence and Human Dignity. Your topic *‘Where I become you’ – A practical theological reading of Antjie Krog’s concept of interconnectedness*¹ has really challenged me at a deep existential and moral level with regard to matters of citizenship, building a post-colonial society, gender, nation-building and human dignity.

Let me sketch to you at the outset three scenes which might explain my disposition and situatedness in the multiplexed reality of my context:

1. The slave on the colonial estate of whom Darwin² reports, who, when Darwin tried to demonstrate something because of language differences, could not understand what Darwin was trying to explain to him. Darwin then tried by gestures moving up to the slave to explain his intentions. The slave, interpreting Darwin’s gestures as aggressive and that he was about to be hurt, dropped his guard and backed off. In Darwin’s words the slave was nothing more than a ‘vulnerable hurt animal.’ This was the result of colonialism that has reduced the man to this pitiful state – raped him of his human dignity.
2. The second is the scene and position of black women who were discriminated against in terms of gender, politically and culturally in comparison with white women. How can white women equate themselves with black women in post-apartheid South Africa (The context of my irritation is the fact that white women in the post-apartheid democratic South African society take in their place along-side previously disadvantaged black women in the process of restitution, while in the colonial and apartheid dispensation they were always very comfortably the ‘missies and noi,’ who enjoyed all the privileges and advantages of the system).
3. The third scenario is the pathetic white Afrikaner beggar at the traffic lights in Cape Town, stripped of his superiority and baasskap. He is being looked upon by his own kind as despicable and a shame.

The first scene fills me with the deepest sadness, disgust and intense hatred at all colonizers; the second image with resentment and anger and the third with mixed feelings of empathy and retribution; I am normally shocked at my deep resentment. I ask with the words of Cynthia Ngewu in her testimony to the TRC as quoted by Krog³; ‘This thing called reconciliation ... if I understand it correctly ... if it means this perpetrator, this man who has killed my son, if it means he becomes human again. This man. So that I, so that all of us, get our humanity back, ... then I agree, then I support it all.’

Krog is a respected and acknowledged white Afrikaner academic woman in her quest for a dignified life in a post-colonial South African society. Was it not Krog that said towards the end of the year in 2009 that the biggest stumbling block in the process of reconciliation and peace/nation-building in South Africa is the white man’s arrogance?! And from that position I worked my way back to your description of Krog’s personal experience of violence in Kroonstad – having to make moral decisions in an immoral context like the apartheid system at the cost of her sense

1 Krog, Antjie 2009 *Begging to be black*. Cape Town: Rondon House Struik

2 Darwin, Charles 1872 *The Expressions of the Emotions in Man and Animals*. Londen: John Murray.

3 Krog, Antjie 2000 *Country of my Skull*. Cape Town: RandomHouse

of fairness and her comfort. I also went to read her life history, Kritzinger's review and Max Du Preez's⁴ criticism of her after *Begging to be Black*.

By the way colleague, I see you write apartheid with a capital 'A', which I will never do even though linguistically it may be correct, that would be giving too much credit to a draconic, evil system that systematically stripped the indigenous people of their dignity and possessions.

To come back to the topic of violence and the covert nature of it – I cannot agree more that violence in South Africa was and is such an integral part of society that, to use your metaphor, '... it can not be removed surgically without cutting away vital organs ...' Everyone is morally an accomplice. Albert Nolan⁵ speaks of apartheid and its social and generational impact as of original sin. Having read your practical theological explanation I understand why you are convinced that Krog's *Begging to be Black* might be a contribution to this conference for two reasons:

One, because of her analysis of the violence the characters in the book are exposed too and Krog's attempt to find a construct in our violent society to assist to build community by means of interconnectedness despite the many differences, which hit on the theme of this conference of Covert (concealed) Violence and Human Dignity.

Two, because you consider Krog's exposition strategy as familiar with the hermeneutical process of Practical Theology according to Osmer, the four dimensions within a cyclical process of discerning: description, interpretation, normativity, strategy of that situation and context which she so ably analyses.

In this way you demonstrated how Krog describes reality, followed by how she interprets it and how she reflects on the interpretation with a normative edge to it, with a final note on some practical, strategic suggestions is convincing with regard to the Practical Theological approach to assist us in understanding covert violence and dignity.

It is of paramount interest that you point out that the book is a dialogue between different narratives, or what is called a 'long conversation' aimed at understanding the contexts of cultures that produce the historical and cultural texts we read and live in, especially in South Africa. This laid the basic premise for her book: *Understanding differences is the first step to recognizing our fundamental interconnectedness*. Krog is determined to put into words an African philosophy of interconnectedness. And yet she is not naïve about some sort of African or black essentialism. In practicing a multiple partiality she finds it the only way to do justice to the complexity of reality – by bringing two worlds together: through her concept of interconnectedness. I am not surprised at her naivety in glorifying the world of Berlin (she reflects her primordial longing for her European centre: her identity crisis) so much by contrasting the 'coherence' and efficiency of everything in Berlin with the 'incoherency' of South Africa. While lamenting the context in South Africa she *reflects on South African society in all its complexity*: we cannot pronounce each other's names, and our public events exclude more than include: 'No part of our history is without its exclusion and destruction of some part of the population' (:125); 'On our national holidays ... we realize that we have nothing in common – not what we read, not what we speak, not what we write, not what we sing, nor whom we honour. Nothing binds us' (:125). In her view it is particularly Afrikaners, who 'so easily appropriated the land and the continent' whose lives are disrupted or 'splintered' (:126) by a gradually self-asserting black majority, now that the 'coherency' created for whites by three centuries of colonialism and fifty years of apartheid has been undone.

At times I found her assessment of South Africa unnecessarily negative – 'We have nothing in

4 Max Du Preez, *Rapport* 18 November 2009 in his main argument about the theme, "Begging to be Black" characterizes Krog's conviction as "identity suicide."

5 Nolan, Albert 1988 *God in South Africa Cape*. Town: David Phillips

common' (:125); 'every single thing in our country already portrays injustice' (:159) – but *she is keenly aware of the brokenness of our society. Perhaps this negativity flows from a deep-seated feature of many Afrikaners of her generation: a South African nationalism that shows itself in the desire to be proud of your country, and therefore a sharp disappointment when things go wrong.* Afrikaners like her who had identified with the struggle for justice and democracy long before the release of Nelson Mandela in 1991, feel particularly disappointed that our 'miraculous' transition to democracy in 1994 is going awry.

When you mention the two quotations from Krog of transforming the borders dividing us into seams, by metaphorically stitching together enduring seams from different South African societal material in order to have a safe nurturing society; and that we always have to question the standard of our 'reconstructing and nation-building work' I realize how vital these transforming acts are to make life possible in South Africa. Krog is right: We constantly need to invent new forms of life and different modes of existence in order to survive as a democratic nation. Even though she contrasts the realities, she intentionally demonstrates that her approach to life is non-dichotomous, not to compartmentalize the material and spiritual and to be more fluid to mankind as a community. Interconnectedness points to something more spiritual, more whole, more towards the potential power of everything. It is a sobering argument that the complexity of reality contributes to our confusion and disarray, but that we need it to be attentive to the people involved. It is true that amidst this complexity multiple constructions of life are possible depending on our social positions. Rendering justice to the complexity of life and faith as it is lived, implores us to be multipartial, multilingual, and multicultural.

It is interesting and sobering to learn that Krog's search for a perspective that grasps the essence of African identity is highly influenced by the Comaroff's analysis of the symbolic struggle in South Africa⁶. According to this interpretive framework the colonizers, including the missionaries, gained control over the material and semantic practices through which their subjects produce and reproduce their existence. Against this background Krog argues emphatically for a uniquely African worldview, because she is convinced that 'we from Africa have not yet properly managed to articulate it succinctly.'

One may differ with her choice of interlocutors, and the nature of her encounters with them, but we are going to have to do this kind of thing – all of us – if we want to make sense of our existence in South Africa. Not a single one of our 'inherited' identities has remained intact through the transformations that have taken place since 1994. We need to continuously renegotiate who we are, through intense dialogue with one another, if we do not want to break apart into mutually recriminating factions that create more and more destructive incoherence in ourselves and our society. I wonder about the possibility of the destructive incoherence that these recriminating factions might create with respect to claiming our ethnic heritage. It does appear as if Boesak⁷ does not agree with or wants to make room for the first people's movement

6 Comaroff, Jean and Caomarrow, John L 2006 *Law and Disorder in the Postcolony*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press

7 Allen Boesak in various writings and discussion is cautious of promoting the First Nation Movement in South Africa for understandable reasons. Within the context of nation-building it might seem that the ethnic emphasis goes against the rainbow-nation idea. But this is far from the truth, people in the RSA after years of colonization and oppression need to rediscover their own African identity that is intrinsically bound up with the land between L'Agulas and the great Gariieb for the sake of human dignity; and to proudly experience that to be first and foremost Khoi or San is their (our) cultural heritage. This necessary cultural transformation and anthropological revolution will enhance nation-building and will provide the constitutive cultural undergirding that is mystically connected with this soil for thousand s of years BCE. The lie of the RSA is still that the true and original people of the land are not politically and constitutionally acknowledged as such.

in South Africa which is gaining prominence in our society.

You are of course right when you in addressing the Normative reflective aspect of the interpretative schema of Practical Theology point out that description and interpretation of situations and practices raise normative questions about the adequacy and truthfulness of life and the way faith is lived. Krog, in her search for a fresh input from African history and tradition into the long conversation, defines the concept of interconnectedness as a normative reflection on white colonialism and National Party politics. Her acknowledgement that through her experience of being with black people, she feels more human is very courageous and honest. From cultivating individualism, she is now trying to become other, plural, interconnected-towards-caringness.

The fact that you find this concept of interconnectedness in the hermeneutics of Krog key for a Practical theological contribution to this academic interdisciplinary conversation on the topic of covert violence and human dignity 'in the hope that it will resonate with *koinonia* ...' is of special importance for our discussion.

This is made clear in the way Krog engages in these honest, transformative conversations. And as I read Klippiess Kritzingers⁸ on this aspect I discover that Antjie Krog does not only *write about* 'interconnectedness', which is the central concept of her book, but also *embodies* it. She shows us that in a complex society like South Africa we have a long conversation ahead of us: a long multi-dimensional conversation. Her commitment to interconnectedness does not allow her to let go of her mother, of the French missionaries, of Moshoeshoe, or any of her other interlocutors. One could call this the spirituality that permeates her book: a commitment to inclusion and embrace. It is also a spirituality of becoming: She writes about 'becoming-black' (:93): 'I need to know whether it is possible for somebody like me to become like the majority, to become 'blacker?' and live as a full and at-ease component of the South African society. This long conversation, proceeding from her interconnectedness with this wide (and in a way unlikely) variety of interlocutors, leads her to embody a hybrid identity: a post-colonial personhood-in-community.

What she models to us in this book is the way into a possible future for South Africa: engaging in deep-level conversations with one another, with our past, and with ourselves. She listens, explores, experiments and argues, with a disarming honesty and (at times) vulnerability.

It might surprise you that I want to turn to an issue like ethnicity in Krog's understanding of blackness. For me as a South African it is an existentially human dignity issue. During the middle years (60s-80s) we had to employ the construct of blackness under the leadership of Biko to find a positive element in ourselves. We refused to refer to ourselves as a non- entity or to define ourselves by white colonial frameworks. We became political and social rebels and we demonstrated our *résistance* against the enforced socio-political order. We grew our hair into afros as signs of our pride and bulging our fists, raised our arm in the black power sign. We would wear 'Black is beautiful t-shirts' in defiance of the establishment of baasskap ...

A surprising aspect of her context analysis (and choice of interlocutors) is her use of the term 'black'. No single term describing identity is innocent or uncontested in South Africa, but I have two remarks about her use of 'black': One cannot reflect on blackness in South Africa without engaging the thought of Steve Biko and other Black Consciousness thinkers. One cannot use black and African simply as synonyms, as she seems to do. Perhaps I am still too much influenced by the Black Consciousness and Black Theology of the 1970s and 1980s, but 'becoming black' cannot anymore do the same for me today as part of my political jargon. The ANC government has persisted in continuing with the ethnic classification of black, coloured and white in the post-apartheid era with the declared purpose of transformation and restitution in mind. Do you

8 Kritzingers 2010 "Begging to be Black? In dialogue with Antjie Krog."

realize how degrading it is to be regarded, first not as white enough and now not black enough? Must I as a descendent from the first people named Khoi-Khoi regard this as a new Verwoerdian kind of attempt at social engineering? This classification or categorization for whatever purpose I regard as covert violence. Therefore, for the sake of human dignity I would opt for Africanness and African – in Afrikaans I applaud the humane and sensitive attempt to name the inhabitants with the term Afrikaanses.

In this I take the queue from Kritzinger⁹ that I should work honestly and creatively with ‘colouredness’ and not this ‘baas-designed bruin mense’, i.e., the way in which my identity was structurally and culturally racialised in South Africa, (without my consent and against my will). In the case of the whites, the system granted them nevertheless huge privileges. I am challenged to work on ways to overcome that oppressive racialisation by becoming more credibly and recognizably African, together with black (and other) Africans. For me blackness and whiteness are dialectical concepts that need to be transcended in a synthesis of a shared Africanness. Instead of ‘becoming black’ would whites therefore work for acknowledging whiteness and the privilege it gave/gives them, and to work in an anti-racist way to gradually de-racialise their personal identity, as well as the structures of society, in order to become more African, by developing a consciously hybrid identity that I would call Euro-African should they want to retain their link with Europe?

Then there is the question of the relationship between the African and Christian dimensions of African Christianity. On p.212 she says that African interconnectedness ‘forms the interpretive foundation of southern African Christianity’.

Perhaps Krog romanticises and essentialises African ‘interconnectedness’ to some extent, in her legitimate concern to present the unique contribution that Africa can make to the world. Her frustration at the standard response of ‘Westerners’ to her view on African interconnectedness is understandable: ‘You don’t hear us through our own voice. You keep on hearing us only through *your* voice’ (:156).

What we need is indeed a long conversation, but also a long *celebration* and a long *collaboration*. I agree with Kritzinger¹⁰ that this is where the role of Christianity (and other religious communities) is particularly important: rational discussion alone will not get us there; we need to worship together, sing each other’s songs, participate in each other’s rituals (on this ritual-loving continent), and work together for the good of society if we want to build sufficient trust to become genuinely interconnected.

You would agree with me that for our search for human dignity amidst covert violence Krog’s ‘Speaking with’ provides us with alternatives to violence as Postcolonial strategies and actions. What are the kinds of actions Krog undertakes (and proposes) in this book? Towards the end of the book, when she discredits imagination as ‘overrated’, she says: ‘I stay with non-fiction, listening, engaging, observing, translating,’ (:268). This is exemplary, and we will do well to follow her lead here. The postcolonial theorist, Gayatri Spivak (1999)¹¹, has identified three ways in which former colonizers interact with formerly colonized people: a) speaking for; b) listening to (selectively and patronisingly); and c) speaking *with*. For most of the book, Krog succeeds in ‘speaking with’, but unfortunately there are times when she slips into ‘speaking for’ black South Africans (for example, her explanations of xenophobia on pp.235f).

In a sense the whole book struggles with an ethical dilemma: How can a white democrat, who is committed to justice and reconciliation in South Africa, come to terms with the fact that black (or African) communities seem to have an ethic according to which evil is understood primarily

9 Kritzinger, 2009 “Begging to be Black? In Dialogue with Antjie Krog.”

10 Kritzinger, 2009 “Begging to be Black? In Dialogue with Antjie Krog.”

11 Spivak, 1999 *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*.

as what harms community and good as what builds or fosters community. To mention only three examples, this is the central issue in her description of the Kroonstad murder at the beginning of the book, in her assessment of the misunderstandings and tensions between Moshoeshoe and the French missionaries, and in her reflection on the experience of the character of Petrus in the Coetzee's novel *Disgrace*¹². In this respect she has put her finger on a raw nerve in South African public life: We have a 'progressive' human rights constitution and legal system, but many South Africans seem not to have adopted the 'logic' of this ethical and legal system. The kind of 'un-hearing' that happened between the French missionaries and Moshoeshoe seem to be playing itself out again around us in the relationship between democracy/human-rights/rule of law and an African communal ethic. For political morality and the 'moral fabric' of South African society this is an extremely serious issue to explore. We need to thank Antjie Krog for raising it in this pertinent way. What does this mean for human dignity?

Another aspect of her strategy has to do with language. I want to point out that language, the dominance of English and even Afrikaans in the apartheid years also reveals a tendency to language domination as covert violence to all other Africans which impact negatively on human dignity. On the one hand I fully agree that the various African languages (including Afrikaans) must be affirmed as mediums in which we should tell our stories, not in opposition to, but alongside of English as a dominant international language. We are not going to redefine the terms of our engagement with each other unless we change the nature of the playing field. The kind of interaction – 'Don't call me baas'; 'Thank you, baas, I understand, baas' – can only be overcome if we begin to greet and interact in African languages. We will not effectively decolonize our relationships if 'they' must always 'become like us'. In spite of all our protestations to the contrary, most of the Afrikaners embody a 'settler colonial' mindset, since we cannot speak an African language – and do not seem to regard that as an anomaly or a problem – 200 or 300 years after arriving on these shores. On the other hand I do not agree that the 'relentless interpretive gaze' and the 'prison bars' that hold Petrus captive (:102) are *inherently* 'Christian-based'. It is the individualist Christianity of the North, which got married to modernist rationalism, racism and scientism, which aids and abets that relentless colonial gaze, not the communal, liberating message of the man of Nazareth.

It is important for me to understand the 'Begging' in the title, *Begging to be black*.

Two features reveal interesting aspects of the personal 'agency' of its author.

In the light of the content of the book itself, 'Begging' can be seen as a pathetic act, since it expresses poverty and dependence. It is certainly not an exercise of power, unless the beggar manipulates passers-by through showing off her/his wounds in order to get sympathy. In this book, Antjie Krog does not manipulate or look for sympathy. I experience her as a seeker, exploring and discovering – through interacting with her interlocutors. Perhaps her 'begging' is more like that of Buddhist monks, who go around with begging bowls to express the fact that they are radically dependent on – and interdependent with – the rest of humankind. It doesn't seem that she is *begging someone* to 'make' or 'declare' her black. She seems to mean that she has adopted a subversive strategy of begging *in order to become black*: she has taken the posture of a beggar (as in Russian folklore), going around from one interlocutor to another, asking for advice, wisdom and guidance and listening carefully to every conversation. This is like Raskolnikov's wilful impoverishment as a test of his strength, a probe to determine just how much he can endure in preparation for the feat (accomplishment) of freeing the oppressed from the likes of a vicious pawnbroker.¹³ Another interpretation is also possible: While at the conscious level, Raskolnikov rejects the image of himself as beggar, his option for destruction

12 Coetzee JM, 1999 *Disgrace*.

13 This is the main character in the Russian author, Dostoyevsky's novel, *Crime and Punishment*.

like his attraction to social outcasts, may signal subconscious identification with the suffering of those who are beggars for alms. In Krog's case, this is a startling reversal of roles: a white person admitting poverty in public and going around like a beggar to find help! This is a provocative and challenging image that deliberately shatters racial stereotypes and that many white South Africans clearly experience as demeaning, perhaps even as expressing white self-hatred. It is certainly light years removed from a macho or militarist approach to 'solving the problems' of South Africa (cf. Die Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging). Interpreting 'begging' in this way, I regard this as an attempt to embody Spivak's post-colonial approach of 'speaking with' – and therefore see her basic approach as one that the rest of South Africa population would do well to emulate.

Finally I find the fact that Antjie Krog dedicates her book to Petrus¹⁴ a liberating and empowering act. Perhaps this is also where the fact that Antjie Krog is a woman plays an explicit role in the book. As a white woman, asking herself: What do I need to do in order to 'stay on' in South Africa, in a society where irresponsible young black men rape women? Where do I find a 'Petrus' to protect me and bring me into the safety net of a local African community? If this is what Krog meant by dedicating her book to Petrus, it reveals once more her 'poverty' and vulnerability in relation to her African interlocutors, 'begging' to find wisdom and guidance for the future. However, it may be that she doesn't identify herself so closely with the Lucy-figure, and if this is what Krog meant by the dedication to Petrus is a general act of respect for the communal ethic that he is trying to assert over against the 'individual and Christian-based' ethic by which he is 'being held captive' (:102).

Throughout this book Antjie Krog tries to hear the story of 'Petrus', without 'framing' or interpreting it from within the terms laid down by the English language, which 'imposes a particular framework in which what Petrus is saying about himself cannot be heard' (:101).

Krog's search for a framework of understanding within which a deeper connectedness can begin to take place is highly commendable. So is her search for an ethical framework for this postcolonial situation in which we find ourselves, for a morality beyond a narrow individualist ethic informed by evangelical Christianity as propagated by 19th century missionaries and many 20th century churches. In one heated conversation with her husband she perhaps says most clearly what she tries to do in her life (and in this book): 'I am trying to live a grounded life on this continent and the Africanness I understand encompasses ... *alles*, seen and unseen, known and unknown, that is breathing upon me' (:260).

Whether we agree with her conclusions or not, I am convinced that we should be engaged in this 'long conversation' for the rest of our lives, so that all of us may live grounded lives in human dignity on this continent and in our world amidst the violence, covert or otherwise.

Maybe my colleague if we listen more closely, the North in a global interconnectedness of the local could also take up her normative begging cry and embodiment of the beggar. We for the sake of South Africa and Africa; you for the sake of the developing world and the world at large: Where I can become You!

In connectedness for the sake of human dignity.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Comaroff, Jean and Comaroff John L 2006. *Law and Disorder in the Postcolony*. Chicago: University of Chicago
- Coetzee, JM 1999. *Disgrace*. London: Vintage
- Darwin, Charles 1872. *The Expressions of the Emotions in Man and Animals*. London: John Murray.
- Dostoyevsky, Fyodor (transl. by Constance Garnett) 1956. *Crime and Punishment*. New York: Random House.

14 Krog refers here to the character in Coetzee's book *Disgrace*.

- Du Preez, Max. Review of Antjie Krog *Begging to be Black* in *Rapport* 18 November 2009
- Kritzinger, JNJ (Klippias) 2010. Begging to be black? In dialogue with Antjie Krog. Centre for Public Theology. University of Pretoria 4 May 2010.
- Krog, Antjie 2009. *Begging to be black*. Cape Town: Random House
- Krog, Antjie 1998. *Country of my skull*. Cape Town: Random House
- Nolan, Albert 1988. *God in South Africa*. Cape Town: David Phillip
- Spivak, Gayatri C 1999. *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*. Harvard: Harvard Press

Contact details:

Prof Karel August

Professor and Chair of the Discipline Group of Practical Theology and Missiology

Stellenbosch University

kta@sun.ac.za