

# The National Question in Antjie Krog's "Transformation Trilogy"\*

**Jacomien van Niekerk**

Department of Afrikaans, University of Pretoria  
jacomien.vanniekerk@up.ac.za

## Summary

This article explores the claim that the South African writer Antjie Krog is in essence asking the National Question in what I have termed her "transformation trilogy": *Country of My Skull* (1998); *A Change of Tongue* (2003); and *Begging to Be Black* (2009). In writing about issues like "race", identity and belonging in these texts, Krog is asking, "[t]o whom does the South African nation belong?" – a question that was central to debates about the National Question by liberation movements during apartheid. Although the "new" South Africa arguably is very different from the new "nation" that had been imagined, the National Question remains of importance. A post-colonial reading of the transformation trilogy encourages a focus on the National Question and the factors that complicate it. Existing studies about the theme of nationhood in Krog's work do not draw any connections with older discourses on nation and nationalism in South Africa.

## Opsomming

Hierdie artikel ondersoek die stelling dat Antjie Krog in wese besig is met die Nasionale Vraagstuk in haar "transformasie-trilogie": *Country of My Skull* (1998); *A Change of Tongue* (2003); en *Begging to Be Black* (2009). In haar verkenning van kwessies soos "ras", identiteit en om te behoort in dié tekste, is Krog besig om te vra, "aan wie behoort die Suid-Afrikaanse nasie?" – 'n vraag wat sentraal gestaan het tot beredenering oor die Nasionale Vraagstuk deur bevrydingsorganisasies tydens apartheid. Hoewel die situasie in die "nuwe" Suid-Afrika stellig baie anders daar uitsien as hoe die nuwe "nasie" verbeel is, is die Nasionale Vraagstuk van blywende belang. 'n Postkoloniale benadering tot die transformasie-trilogie moedig 'n ondersoek na die Nasionale Vraagstuk aan, asook die faktore wat dit kompliseer. Bestaande studies oor die tema van nasieskap in die tekste van die trilogie slaan nie 'n verband tussen Krog se werk en ouer diskoerse oor nasie en nasionalisme in Suid-Afrika nie.

## Introduction

The acclaimed South African poet and writer, Antjie Krog, has written three nonfiction books over the course of eleven years that have come to be regarded as a trilogy: *Country of My Skull* (1998); *A Change of Tongue* (2003); and *Begging to Be Black* (2009).<sup>1</sup> Duncan Brown refers to it as the “*Country of My Skull* trilogy” (Brown & Krog 2011: 58). I call it the “transformation trilogy” since the concept of transformation underlies the way the trilogy charts developments in the “new South Africa” since 1994. Krog’s interrogation in this trilogy of political and personal transformation, of “race”, and of personal and collective identity, among other themes, is fairly complex. For instance, Krog’s subjectivity as a “white”, Afrikaans-speaking woman is central to her preoccupations in the trilogy, but her engagement with “black” South Africans (on numerous levels) and her own struggle credentials are arguably equally prominent. Alongside the multiple constructions of identity which Krog explores, questions around nationhood and belonging emerge. In this article, I argue that Krog is essentially asking the “National Question” in her trilogy.

The National Question is an issue that formed part of political deliberations decades before democratisation in South Africa. One could argue that it is a debate which has lost its relevancy since 1994, and indeed the phrase has not been extremely prominent in political discourse in the past twenty years. I argue, however, that the National Question remains important and that Krog’s trilogy is proof of this: even though she never once uses the term “the National Question”, her work probes the very matters articulated by political thinkers who considered the nature of the post-liberation South African society.

In this article, I first briefly sketch my point of departure regarding “race” and non-racialism. I then provide an overview of the transformation trilogy and of the National Question before going on to discuss nationhood in the work of Antjie Krog. I demonstrate that reading the trilogy within the context of the National Question opens up new perspectives on the ways in which Krog writes about “race”, identity and belonging in South Africa. The fact that Krog addresses the National Question is an important gesture, but not an unproblematic one.

## Terminology: “Race” and Non-racialism

As long ago as 1942, Ashley Montagu published the seminal work *Man’s Most Dangerous Myth: the Fallacy of Race* (the sixth edition was published in 1997). I follow thinkers as varied as Montagu, the South African Neville

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1. Viewing the three texts as a trilogy is admittedly a construction that has not been actively pursued by Krog herself; rather, by her publishers. However, I believe there to be many motivating factors for reading the three texts in conjunction with each other.

Alexander and the British Paul Gilroy in putting the word “race” in inverted commas, and I do the same with descriptors like “black” and “white” in order to show that “race” is a construct that has convincingly been debunked.<sup>2</sup> Although this may appear clumsy, I believe that it is imperative for researchers to not further solidify the so-called matter-of-factness of these terms, but to challenge the very “illusion of ordinariness” of race thinking” (Bundy 2007: 93), this “relatively recent and absolutely modern invention” (Gilroy 2004: 31).

The fact that I have chosen to problematise the concept of “race” perhaps further complicates an already complex argument revolving around Krog’s reasons for remaining focused on “race” and the way this influences her views on nationhood. Nevertheless, I will cautiously proceed to explore these concepts further below.

## The Transformation Trilogy

After writing poetry in Afrikaans for more than two decades, Antjie Krog gained worldwide recognition for her first nonfiction book published in English, *Country of My Skull*, an account of her experiences as a radio journalist during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) hearings from 1996 to 1998. Apart from the many harrowing testimonies of victims and perpetrators of apartheid crimes it contains, *Country of My Skull* is a complex text which asks important questions about the possibility of reconciliation between “black” and “white” after apartheid.

In *A Change of Tongue*, the hybrid mix of genres and voices already found in *Country of My Skull* is taken several steps further in a text which contains narratives written in the first, third and second person, frequently making chronological leaps and employing poetic techniques (Polatinsky 2009) alongside characteristics of journalism, history, the essay (Burger 2011) and other genres. The text is seen by many scholars as having at least two axes: firstly Krog’s interrogation of the “new” South Africa, and secondly the broadening that takes place when Krog also feels allegiance to the African continent (Coullie 2005: 9). This happens particularly in the section about Krog’s participation in a poetry caravan that travelled from Senegal to Mali which marks to an extent Krog’s transformation from “Afrikaner to African” (Strauss 2006: 185, 186). Krog’s “whiteness” has been the very specific focus of studies by Carli Coetzee, Georgina Horrell, Mary West and others.

*Begging to Be Black* contains a number of parallel narratives: the account of a murder that happened in the early 1990s in which Krog became involved; the nineteenth century history of King Moshoeshe I of the Basotho; and Krog’s sojourn as a research fellow at the Wissenschaftskolleg in Berlin in 2007 and 2008, which includes letters to her mother in South

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2. More recent corroboration of the non-existence of “race” can be found in the work of anthropologists like Templeton (1998).

Africa as well as discussions between Krog and an Australian professor of philosophy. The texts alternate between these narratives, but in a clearly structured, linear way. Scott (2012: 186) sees the language in the third book as “pared down” and posits that “by working through the poetic in *Country of My Skull* and *A Change of Tongue*, Krog has found the language through which to engage with these slippery issues in a more nuanced way in *Begging to be Black*”.

Although especially prominent in *Begging to Be Black*, a postcolonial perspective on all three texts of the trilogy is possible. Pieterse (2007: 174) and Viljoen (2009: 80, 91) touch briefly on the theme of postcolonialism in *Country of My Skull*, and Motha (2010: 287, 300) argues for the emergence of “postcolonial becoming” for Krog in *Begging to Be Black*. Scott (2012) reads both the first and third texts of the trilogy in the context of postcoloniality, while Rodrigues (2014) studies all three texts as an “autobiography of postcolonial becoming”. When seeing the trilogy through a postcolonial lens, it becomes clear that the many theoretical issues are difficult to separate from each other. The colonial legacy of South Africa cannot be separated from its apartheid legacy, and in her efforts to deal with this legacy, Krog repeatedly confronts the issue of “race”, which in turn is connected to her conceptions of identity and belonging, matters that play a central role in the National Question.

This article places Krog’s conceptions of identity within the framework of the National Question. Walker and Unterhalter (2004: 281) survey the “identity work” done by the narratives with regard to the TRC but also with regard to Krog herself. Other studies go further and analyse the matter of national identity alongside personal identity (Viljoen 2009: 92) in Krog’s work. Lieskounig, for instance, finds it to be a “conspicuous thematic constant” in *A Change of Tongue* that Krog feels a “deep desire as well as determination” to “legitimately [...] belong to [South Africa] and its native (i.e. black) population” (2011: 133-134).

Even as I claim that conceptions of nationhood and belonging are central to the trilogy, I also believe it to be congruent with other examples of “post-transition” literature in South Africa. As creative nonfiction, the trilogy “both bleeds into and draws its sustenance from transitional concerns and apartheid struggles, while re-circuiting these concerns into new engagements” (Samuelson 2010: 113).

## **Nationalism and the “National Question”**

There is a vast body of scholarship on the concept of “nations” and nationalism that I do not wish to replicate here. Coullie engages with the famous essay, “What is a Nation?”, first delivered by Ernest Renan in 1882 (Renan 1996) and demonstrates how all the elements that Renan finds necessary for the existence of a nation are brought forward by Krog in *Country of My Skull* (Coullie 2007: 131, 132, 134, 137). She also draws on the work of David Blight who sees emotionalism as central to collective memory. In

Coullie's interpretation, emotionalism "ensures that individuals will, hypothetically or in reality, die for their country" (2007: 134). This is what happens in *Country of My Skull*, where Krog eventually "reaches a climactic apotheosis of nationalist commitment" (Coullie 2007: 134).

Rather than attempt to summarise the work done from Renan to Benedict Anderson and beyond, I approach the concept of the "nation" through the somewhat distilled format of the Marxist concept of the National Question. When surveying the body of knowledge on nationhood, it emerges that there is truly nothing new under the sun. Many scholars echo each other knowingly or not, and the same essential questions have been asked time and time again.

The phrase "the National Question", with or without capitalisation, is a socialist concept that was first formulated in the nineteenth century (Alexander 1986: 65). Joseph Stalin (1935) wrote a number of essays and speeches on the National Question (or sometimes "National Problem") of which the first essay dates from 1913: "Marxism and the National Question". Stalin sees the emergence of nations as linked to capitalism: "The process of elimination of feudalism and development of capitalism was at the same time a process of amalgamation of people into nations" (Stalin 1935: 13). The struggle of various people to group themselves into independent nations is viewed by Stalin as an essentially bourgeois enterprise that "[glosses] over the class interests of the proletariat" (1935: 17).

At the time when Stalin was writing, the Communist Party in the Soviet Union "had paid little attention to political circumstances in the colonial territories" (Chipkin 2007: 74). Only in the 1920s did Moscow start feeling "increasingly threatened by British attempts to isolate it diplomatically [...]" The Soviet Union was now attempting to subvert these efforts by organising liberation movements throughout the British Empire, including South Africa [...]" (Chipkin 2007: 74). This led to a "keener interest in the 'national question'" (Chipkin 2007: 74) in these territories: "national struggles, even if bourgeois in their specifically local form, when seen from the perspective of world capitalism, were revolutionary" (2007: 75). A terminological shift took place in which "[n]ational struggles in the colonies were no longer to be constructed as 'bourgeois-democratic', but as 'national revolutionary'" (Bunting 1975 quoted in Chipkin 2007: 75).

After the Second World War the National Question had to be approached somewhat differently in countries outside of Europe, and writings took the form of a response to and elaboration on the theories of Stalin and his predecessors. South African Marxists debated the topic during the liberation struggle. Neville Alexander briefly defines it as centring on the question of

national unity or national independence or both matters (Alexander 1986: 66). Pallo Jordan writes that the National Question was historically concerned with the oppression of majorities or minorities, with colonial oppression and with "the unification of the disparate parts of potential nations" (Jordan 1988: 110). Maria van Diepen points out that in the defini-

tion of the National Question, South Africa was classified as a case of “colonialism of a special type” (1988: 4). Critically, the National Question involved the definition of the South African nation. During apartheid, Afrikaner nationalists obviously succeeded in restricting the definition of the nation to “white” people. Struggle leaders had to visualise a new South African society after apartheid, and had to ask, “[t]o whom does the country belong?” (Asmal 1988: 134). The Freedom Charter of the ANC states that “South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white” (Congress of the People 1955), but among liberation movements different theories emerged pertaining to the different “races” in South Africa.

There was, for instance, the “four nations” thesis formulated by the ANC Youth League under Anton Lembede, according to which South Africa consists of four “nationalities”: Africans, Indians, Coloureds and Europeans or “whites”. This position amounted to the fact that Africans form the “nation” whereas the other three could merely be called “national groups” (Alexander 1986: 77-78).

One of the popular variations on the “four nations” thesis was the “two nations” thesis, which states that South Africa consists of two nations: “an oppressing white and an oppressed black nation” (Alexander 1986: 80). This thesis is a natural extension of the “colonialism of a special type” thesis (Alexander 1986: 82). The “two nations” thesis prophesied that after liberation “white” people would either not be willing to be part of a new South Africa governed by “black” people, and they would emigrate, or, they would stay, identify with the “black” government and cease to belong to the “white” nation (Alexander 1986: 81).

In contrast to these Africanist views, Alexander, one of the seminal thinkers on the subject of the National Question in South Africa, was a prominent proponent of non-racialism. He was involved in the Unity Movement, the only liberation movement according to him that rejected “race” as a “defining characteristic of the nation” (Sizwe 1979: 59). However, Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni points out that a non-racial approach to the National Question had considerable influence in the ANC, the SACP and other liberation movements (2009: 64).

After 1994, South Africa did not become a socialist state as had been imagined by Marxists in the struggle, and the National Question was never satisfactorily resolved. I believe it to be one of the “scripts” that Njabulo Ndebele (1994: 1) refers to that were written long ago and opened after the advent of democracy. Colin Bundy (2007: 79) finds it to be a particularly salient issue in post-apartheid South Africa: “What is the post-apartheid nation? Who belongs or is excluded, and on what basis?”

Bundy (2007: 80) identifies three “discursive projects” that followed on each other after 1994: “the rainbow nation (or ‘unity and diversity’),” “the African Renaissance,” and “ethnic particularism (or the assertion of sub-national identities as primary)”. The Rainbow Nation was clearly an attempt to propose the possibility of a harmonious collective identity even as that identity would consist of different “colours”, i.e. “races” or cultural groups

(Bundy 2007: 80). In contrast, Bundy sees the African Renaissance discourse as essentially “a rallying cry for advancement, solidarity and Africanism” in the midst of a multicultural society (2007: 82), while “ethnic particularism” has involved the re-assertion of older African nationalist sentiments.

Bundy comes to the conclusion that none of the discourses identified by him have managed to come up with a “National Answer” and that all of them deal with the legacy of racial thinking and inequality on the basis of “race” in an unsatisfactory manner (2007: 93). Any approach to the National Question which upholds the importance of “race” categories is fatally flawed.

The background sketched above shows that the National Question has indeed not been answered or resolved in any meaningful way in South Africa. In my analysis of Krog’s trilogy, I will show that Krog has been profoundly influenced by the “two nations” thesis and that this has had particular consequences for her writing.

I further believe that this article’s enquiry can be supplemented by the views of Mahmood Mamdani in his influential 1998 essay, “When does a Settler become a Native?” will show that Krog asks Mamdani’s question in her trilogy, but that she has perhaps not taken proper cognisance of the answer he gives to his own question.

## Conceptions of the “Nation” in Krog’s Trilogy

To my knowledge, no-one has as yet linked Antjie Krog’s trilogy explicitly to the National Question. I also have not found evidence that the concept has been incorporated into research around South African literature in general.<sup>3</sup> Though no existing studies on Krog refer to the National Question, a great deal has been written about her nonfiction and the concept of nationhood. More precisely, many aspects of the post-1994 rhetoric abound, so that one

reads about Krog’s contribution to “nation building” and the “new” South African nation. Spearey (2000: 65), for instance, refers to the way in which *Country of My Skull* “is replete with figurative translations between the domain of the body and the domains of landscape and nationhood”.

Many scholars make some reference to nation, nationhood and Krog because of the intimate way in which *Country of My Skull* is bound up with the TRC, which is viewed as a nation building tool by for instance Walker and Unterhalter (2004: 287) and Coullie (2007: 138): “The focus of the TRC and its desired outcomes were profoundly political (though not party-

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3. Michael Chapman twice uses the vague phrase “the national question of apartheid” (2009: 10; 2011: 63). Leon de Kock (2009: 38) expresses his gratitude that the judges of literary competitions do not find it an important criterion that literature touches on the National Question.

political) and intended to bring all South Africans into the national fold”. Garman (2006: 328) summarises the work of the TRC as a process where victims as well as perpetrators were able to enter a “newly constituted nation of ethically responsible citizens”.

Many writers point out the way in which the individual testimonies recorded by Krog are emblematic of the testimonies not recorded by her, and also those not heard by the Commission. These “individual testimonies” are distilled into “national allegories” (Moss 2006: 85). There is tension in *Country of My Skull* between individual and collective identity. Ashleigh Harris (2006: 38), for instance, finds Krog’s project paradoxical: the multiplicity of her text seems to celebrate “the essential differences between different national narratives”, while “validating the significance of her own personal truths”, but she also attempts to “quilt these narratives together as part of a new national discourse” and to suggest that her “personal truths represent, somehow, national truths”. Viljoen (2009: 92) finds it less problematic to interpret *Country of My Skull* as a text that sees the TRC as an important factor in the establishment of a national identity that unifies South Africans while acknowledging their diversity – a phrase that echoes the post-1994 rhetoric of “unity in diversity”. This tension between collective and individual identity is also important for the interpretation of the trilogy within the context of the National Question.

As shown above, Coullie convincingly demonstrates the ways in which Krog, in *Country of My Skull*, shows how a new South African nation was birthed by way of the TRC. It is clear that Coullie covers one aspect of the National Question, namely that of national unity as identified by scholars like Alexander (1986: 66), but she doesn’t situate her findings within the context of the National Question.

With regard to *A Change of Tongue*, scholars point out that different conceptions of “nation” play a role in the text, for example Scott (2009: 41): “Krog is interested in how one lives as a South African within a nation that is still in the process of becoming”.

Because of Krog’s confrontation in her trilogy with her Afrikaner heritage, “nationalism” is a term that is also used rather frequently, but again, without linking it to the National Question. It is not fully clear whether Jessica Murray refers to Afrikaner nationalism or African nationalism or both when she talks about “the racist and misogynist discourses of *South African nationalism*” (2011: 84, my italics) but in any event, she suggests that Antjie Krog transcends these discourses by exploring “the intricate and meaningful relationships between individual protagonists and the landscapes they imaginatively inhabit”. I contend that Krog not only transcends discourses about nationalism and who may belong to the nation, but also participates in the debate and makes a contribution to the National Question.

Some scholars actively investigate Krog’s interaction with discourses on nationhood. Helene Strauss mentions three “popular tropes of the new nation”: the “rainbow nation” metaphor, the ubiquitous “Simunye: We Are One” slogan first introduced by the South African Broadcasting



Corporation, and President Thabo Mbeki's notion of the African Renaissance (2006: 179-180). These tropes echo the discourses identified by Bundy above, but Strauss does not specify that these tropes represent particular approaches to the National Question. She demonstrates, however, that against the backdrop of these "tropes", Antjie Krog joins the ranks of "cult-ural workers [who] have been trying to craft new vocabularies with which to rewrite old identity narratives and make sense of already revised ones" by enlarging this vocabulary in *A Change of Tongue* (Strauss 2006: 180).

Coullie (2007: 124) asks, "how does memory – individual and communal – function in the shaping of nationhood?" She points out that in distancing herself from what Afrikaner identity meant under apartheid, Krog is having to "negotiate her way out of one kind of nation into another" (2007: 130).

Of the few existing studies that have been done on *Begging to Be Black*, none explicitly analyse conceptions of "nation" in this third book of the trilogy. However, as I will demonstrate in the following two sections, *Begging to Be Black* is an integral part of Krog's arguments around the National Question. If one accepts that Krog is not disingenuous when she asks "[t]o whom does the country belong?", it is valuable to explore her implicit interaction with the National Question.

## **Identity, "Race" and Belonging**

Even as I contend that Krog asks the National Question in her trilogy and thereby interrogates the place of "white" people in South Africa, her enquiry is not limited to the borders of South Africa. Krog has a deep awareness of South Africa as an African country and her redefinition of her identity therefore involves tentatively adopting an African identity – or asking whether a "white" person can call herself an African. Coullie (2007: 132) emphasises the "Africanness" of the new South African nation in *A Change of Tongue* and states that during her travels in West Africa, Krog "sheds her narrow identification with South Africa" (2005: 19). I find Krog's desire to adopt an African identity to be compatible with the fact that she asks the National Question, since her exploration of what it means to be an African boils down to "race" categories in the same way as the National Question (see also my incorporation of Mamdani).

Krog's experiences in Timbuktu are seen as truly pivotal by many scholars. Jürgen Lieskounig (2011: 134) finds Krog's exploration (in conversation with "white" and "black" interlocutors) of the many shortcomings of the new South Africa at odds with her later identification with Africa in Timbuktu, whereas West finds Krog's idealisation of and identification with Africa to be "mere gesture" (2009: 97), a gesture which is contradicted by her intense personal discomfort experienced during the poetry caravan.

I disagree with the cynical stance taken by scholars like Lieskounig and West. I believe their views are informed by the assumption that Krog is a conservative “white” Afrikaner woman who conforms to all the preconceptions and prejudices held about such Afrikaners. They consequently find that this “white” Afrikaner woman presumes a great deal when she dares to proclaim allegiance to the African continent, since in their opinion, “her explorations reflect a continued, though perhaps increasingly uncomfortable, hegemonic white privilege in her responses to post-apartheid South Africa” (West 2009: 101-102). Lieskounig is outraged when Krog enacts a kind of *toyitoyi* in Timbuktu, claiming that her dancing is an “involuntary mockery” (2011: 139). He chooses to repeatedly ignore Krog’s anti-apartheid history which is very prominent throughout her trilogy, including mention of protests she participated in. Krog is also not alone among numerous “white” women, Afrikaans and English speaking, who were anti-apartheid activists during the struggle, which was quite strongly non-racial in character.

I do find West’s remark that Krog’s identification with Africa in Timbuktu is a “gesture” quite apt; not in the sense of a meaningless gesture as West implies, but as a very significant gesture among many such important gestures in her trilogy. I want to echo Michael Wessels who finds with regard to *Begging to Be Black*, “[i]t might be more apposite to examine Krog’s rhetorical strategies” (2012: 195) than to get bogged down in the finer details of her arguments; I believe that with regard to the entire transformation trilogy, the questions Krog poses are more important than her provisional answers. Wessels finds we should be grateful for the questions she asks because “they are crucial questions to consider” (2012: 195). Krog seldom comes to foregone conclusions, but rather asks questions, makes gestures, and in other ways opens up space for debate.

I furthermore do not find that Krog’s enquiries into the state of the “new” South Africa amount to a hidden racism and the fear that her “white” privilege is in jeopardy. These enquiries are rather based in her intense desire to understand a “black” or African worldview. Sometimes this worldview is linked by her to African philosophy in general, sometimes to the South African phenomenon of Ubuntu in particular, and in *Begging to Be Black* Krog also opts for the phrase “interconnectedness”: “I do know that, living in a South Africa properly imbedded in its continent, I need to understand this world view or philosophy of interconnectedness fully” (Krog 2009: 155). It is beyond the scope of this article to fully analyse Krog’s exploration of this “African worldview”; I can only briefly demonstrate the links between “race”, identity and belonging in her trilogy as a whole while reiterating that this “desire to understand” plays a powerful role in Krog’s gestures.

## The National Question in the Transformation Trilogy

In *Country of My Skull* (2000: 375), Krog quotes Thabo Mbeki's "two nations speech" in parliament, and her trilogy as a whole is evidence of the ways in which she has been powerfully influenced by the two nations thesis. She confesses to be "fixated on skin" (Krog 2003: 121) and scholars have noted her "preoccupation with race" (West 2009: 89).

In *Begging to Be Black*, Krog remarks in a letter to her mother that the kind of memorialisation that takes place in Berlin, Germany, would not be practicable in South Africa where "every single thing in our country already portrays injustice [...] One need not pull it out of the past through plaques and memorials; it is walking around, mortally wounded, poor or corrupted, the perpetrators and the victims. The shame belongs to a colour – that colour is the reminder" (2009: 159).

This quote establishes a direct link between *Begging to Be Black* and the first book in the trilogy, *Country of My Skull*, and reminds the reader anew of the TRC's efforts to identify "perpetrators" and "victims". The fact that the victims of apartheid can (largely) be identified as "black" and those who benefited from apartheid as "white" haunts Krog to such an extent that she replicates apartheid's obsession with skin colour in her trilogy.

In addition, Krog seems to have different approaches to the National Question at different moments. In *Country of My Skull* she echoes the words of the Freedom Charter of the ANC when she writes: "The land belongs to the voices of those who live in it. My own bleak voice among them" (2000: 277). This implies that Krog's project of writing *Country of My Skull* gives her as a "bleak" person (i.e. a "white", if one extrapolates and directly translates from Afrikaans [*bleek*], as Krog sometimes does when she writes in English) a "sense of belonging" (cf. Harris 2006: 43). In *A Change of Tongue*, Krog recognises that some "black" people choose to judge her on the fact of her "white" skin alone, and that they act as self-appointed gatekeepers to South Africanness and Africanness. She is aware of being excluded from the "nation" as a "white" person, and wants to "belong", but finds it impossible to even utter these words to "black" people (2003: 275). The issue seems to find some closure at the end of the text when Krog is able to find a sense of being part of Africa while performing her poetry in Timbuktu (2003: 300) as discussed above.

In *Begging to Be Black*, however, the question of whether a "white" person can be a legitimate part of the South African nation once again seems open and different narratives seem to contradict each other. Krog's experiences in Berlin lead her to focus on the phenomenon of "coherency". Compared to a nation like Germany where people experience coherency due to a shared language, literature, history, and so forth, Krog finds that South African society is deeply divided. No street or place name can be pronounced correctly by all the citizens of South Africa, and not all members of the public know the people memorialised in the form of statues or by having something named after them. She writes: "On our national holidays [...] we

realize we have nothing in common – not what we read, not what we speak, not what we write, not what we sing, not whom we honour. Nothing binds us. Our daily Third World lives are broken into hundreds of shards of unrooted, incoherent experiences” (2009: 125).

In other parts of the text, however, Krog explores the possibility that a “black”, African worldview is in many ways superior to a Western worldview, *and* she explores the Deleuzian concept of “becoming minor”. She subtly seems to be asking whether it would be possible for her as a “white” person to shed her Western framework and understand more about an African worldview, the worldview of the “black” majority governing South Africa. There is the implication that this would allow coherency to return to South African society. Finally, she rejects European nationhood, because of the high casualty rate of Western efficiency, and because she does not “want to live in a country that only [...] protects the human rights of its citizens; [she] want[s] to live in a place where people care” (2009: 248) – she wants to “become others, plural, interconnected-towards-caringness” (2009: 200).

This deep desire of Krog to transcend her “whiteness” and “become other” suggests that she is fulfilling the prophecy of the two nations thesis in which white people who choose to stay in the new South Africa cease to belong to the “white nation” and identify fully with the “black nation” (Alexander 1986: 81). In this vein, Krog has been accused by Max du Preez (2009: 29) of trying to commit identity suicide.

I believe the matter to be more complex than this. The final sections of *Begging to Be Black* seem to suggest that Krog realises the possibilities of a hybrid in-betweenness and identity-as-becoming in which she can be both “from Africa” and “from Europe” without being fragmented. These possibilities point towards fruitful interpretations and re-interpretations of her trilogy that regrettably cannot be undertaken here.

I noted before that Mahmood Mamdani has also in effect formulated the National Question, albeit in a slightly different context, by asking, “When does a Settler become a Native?” I believe that due to her analysis of the mechanisms and legacy of colonialism, this is precisely the question asked by Krog: Can she as a “white” settler ever become a native African? She asks this question numerous times in ways that are truly important. However, Krog never seems to take proper note of Mamdani’s answer:

So, when does a settler become a native? [...] From the point of view of ethnic citizenship [...] the answer is: NEVER. So long as the distinction between settler and native is written into the structure of the state, the settler can become a citizen, but not a native. To say that is to say that the settler can become a member of the civic space, now de-racialized, but not the customary space, still ethnicized.

(Mamdani 1998: 7)

Mamdani’s answer seems to indicate that, to some extent, Krog has persisted in asking the wrong questions in her trilogy. Even though she briefly

challenges the unrelenting focus by some on “race” in *A Change of Tongue* by asking “[w]hy has race become the only debate?” (2003: 274), Krog never seriously challenges the existence of “race” and racial categories.

I have indicated reasons why Antjie Krog’s transformation trilogy demonstrates a consistent preoccupation with “race”. Her preoccupation mirrors the apartheid preoccupation with racial categories; it echoes the two nations thesis that views the “white” nation as privileged and the “black” nation as exploited; and it re-enacts many of the testimonies heard by the TRC in which “black” people are the victims of violent crimes perpetrated by “white” people.

The National Question itself is preoccupied with “race”, “racial categories” and specific definitions of “nation”. For that reason, it is probably a question that will become less and less relevant as the validity of “race” is increasingly questioned internationally. Krog chooses, for various reasons, to not seize upon non-racialism as a solution to the anguishing issues she raises in her trilogy. Mamdani suggests that the only workable solution for a country like South Africa is a new conception of citizenship, “one that would transcend the political divide between settlers and natives, between civic and ethnic citizenship, and forge a single citizenship for all” (Mamdani 1998: 13-14) – however, for the time being, Krog does not explore this option.

I find Krog’s engagement with the National Question, however flawed, nonetheless subtle. She does not arrogantly demand the right to be a South African and an African as certain “white” intellectuals have done, but neither does she gratefully seize upon a sense of belonging to Africa in simplistic ignorance of the larger historical implications as critics like Lieskounig have claimed. Rather, she takes the history of the National Question seriously and pays great attention to many facets of it – to such an extent that her texts only vaguely point towards the non-racialism and cosmopolitanism that Krog possibly espouses.

## Conclusion

This article has attempted to bring together a number of theoretical issues that are prominent in Krog’s transformation trilogy while asserting that these issues (“race”, identity, “nation”, postcoloniality, et cetera) form a central part of the National Question. In essence, Krog is asking in her trilogy, “[t]o whom does the country belong?” Existing studies that have noted Krog’s contribution to (re)definitions of the South African nation do not link this phenomenon to the National Question.

The reason why Krog asks the National Question is because she wants to know whether she, as a “white” person, can belong to the South African nation and be at home in post-apartheid South Africa. Krog comes to the careful conclusion that “white” people *can* belong to the South African nation, but she increasingly seems to suggest that “white” people need to shed their Western frameworks and adopt an African worldview in order to fully belong in South Africa. For the time being, Krog chooses to adhere to

the two nations thesis and to see things “in black and white”, which is a significant gesture in itself.

\* This article is based on sections of my DLitt thesis, *Om te hoort: aspekte van identiteit in Antjie Krog se transformasie-trilogie*, completed in 2014 under supervision of Prof H.S.S. Willemse (University of Pretoria).

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