Postcolonial Plumbing:
Reading for Wastewater in Antjie Krog's *A Change of Tongue*

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Abstract

Antjie Krog's *A Change of Tongue* is a book about political transition, the new South Africa, and the challenges of transformation, but it is also a book about sewage. Toilets, outhouses and worms feature prominently, as do sewerage systems and wastewater treatment facilities particularly in small towns and rural areas. Scatological themes are a staple of postcolonial fiction, presenting a vision of "excremental postcolonialism". Krog's work both underlines that vision through vivid corporeality, while also presenting plumbing as a response to the entropy of the postcolony. The first part of this paper demonstrates the ways in which the book, while explicitly concerned with land, is implicitly just as concerned with water. The second part shows how the depiction of sewage links the local and ecological to the national and continental; highlights questions of service delivery and, presciently, contemporary protest; and evokes the paradox of wastewater, between vital element and excess waste.

Keywords: wastewater; excremental postcolonialism; sewage; Antjie Krog; South Africa; transformation

Introduction: "this morbid scatological interest"

Antjie Krog's *A Change of Tongue* is about the "new South Africa", in contrast to the more well-known *Country of my Skull* which looks backwards to Apartheid atrocities via the narratives of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Like *Country of my Skull, A Change of Tongue* is generically complicated, a mix of memoir, journalism, interview, poetry, history, essay—in a novelistic narrativization, with a narrator who maps closely but not perfectly onto Krog herself. It is a book about small towns, focused on Krog's native Kroonstad; about whiteness and Afrikaner identity; about translation across the country's various languages as much as its cultural codes; and about the love of land. These are important, well-worn themes of postcolonial and postapartheid literature; but it is also very much a book about sewage.

Several of these themes come together in one characteristic anecdote, which touches on the place of the rural and small towns in the new dispensation, the state of municipal service provision, and indigenizing of place names:

> Oom Johnnie Malan, a former treasurer of a town in the southern Free State who earns double his previous salary as the Special Government Budget Advisor to municipal councils, testifies to the improvement in municipal systems, based on amalgamation and regulation. The wider area into which Kroonstad has been absorbed is called, "… man, I'd rather not say it, because if you can't click your tongue on the 'q', it sounds like a swear word. Moqhaka. And that is exactly what the whites think of the new dispensation here in Kroonstad: a bucket of Moqhaka". (50)[1]

This is of course partly comedy, but it is also interlinked with the central question of the book: the question of transformation, and what is necessarily discarded in the process of change. As the narrator later tells her husband, "For some reason I've been seized by this morbid scatological interest here in Kroonstad" (121). When he asks her to explain the meaning of the word "scatological," she describes it as a "[p]reoccupation with excrement. How we deal with what the body has purged, the rubbish cast aside after transformation, the outward signs of internal change, or something to that effect" (121). The scatological interest is both morbid and metamorphic, an obsession with waste and decomposition (Haraway 2016, 97) as much as with change and becoming.

Scatological themes have been widely recognized as a feature of postcolonial and particularly African literature, from Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautyful Ones are Not Yet Born* (1988) and Wole Soyinka's *The Interpreters (*1965) onwards. The intertextual

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[1] All page references are to Antjie Krog, *A Change of Tongue,* Johannesburg: Random House (2003).

thematic has been memorably described by Joshua Esty as “excremental postcolonialism” (1999), and theorized as constitutive of the postcolony by Achille Mbembe (2001) and as Jean-François Bayart’s “politics of the belly” (1993). Unlike former US president Donald Trump’s simply racist reference to Africa, Haiti and El Salvador as “shithole countries” (*Al Jazeera* 2018), Esty points to “shit’s function not just as a naturalistic detail but as a governing trope in postcolonial literature” (1999, 23). In South Africa, scatology is associated with post-apartheid political disillusionment and affective disappointment, as Bridget Grogan (2021) argues with reference to Niq Mhlongo’s *Dog Eat Dog* (2012). These works are for the most part allegorical, the corruption of the postcolonial or postapartheid nation portrayed as digestive malfunction. In partial contrast, Krog’s work features a combination of metaphor and materiality, an emphasis on sewage disposal histories and wastewater treatment facilities along with more familiar metaphors of the fluidity of water. Rather than allegories of corruption, wastewater provides a focus on the prior undermining of the postcolonial nation not just by inequality and undereducation, but by plumbing. Plumbing, however, is also posed as an urgent response to the entropy of the postcolony, in practical as well as writerly terms.

This essay proceeds by first describing the wider metaphorics of water in Krog’s book, a theme which infuses both the journalistic and the interleaved lyrical sections. The hinterland she centralizes in the memoir is run through with water: hinterland, hinterwater. This reading for water sets up the reading for wastewater, focusing on toilets, sewers and biodegrading worms as companion species. It shows how land and water, on the one hand, and water and wastewater, on the other, are juxtaposed throughout, in the collage style of the book as well as in its explicit content.

Wider waters

Water is central to the *A Change of Tongue*'s politics and poetics of place, which is portrayed as at least partly a politics and poetics of water. While the book is explicitly concerned with land—with land claims and redistribution, with histories and challenges of farming, and with questions of black and white land ownership—it is implicitly shot through with water. The narrator notes early on that "old Afrikaans literature is full of poetry and novels about land and landscape" but asks "is ownership of land all that can name one? All that links one to this breathtaking earth?" (76). Earth and land are linked but distinct: land demarcated by fence lines, and earth a composite of moist soil, underlying groundwater, rock and rivers. The book anticipates work by Lesley Green (2020) and Donna Haraway (2016) on the inextricable links between land and soil, on the one hand, and soil and water, on the other. Rather than land, or as central as land, is water.

The narrator's reflections on Afrikaans literary and economic attachments to land soon open out on to the very similar attachments of different cultural and linguistic groups in the region, including deeper spiritual links to ancestral land. The passage appears after a description of the narrator's conversation with Petrus Sithole, a former farm manager and new black farm owner. Petrus was granted a loan from the Land Bank after the transition. When he took ownership of his farm he slaughtered a cow, spilling its blood to show gratitude in accordance with "our beliefs": "That night we left the cow there for the ancestors to come and eat during the night – the land had been returned – and the next day we feasted" (73). However, the exigencies of farming have left him in a state of constant anxiety, caught in spiraling debt, and isolated from the neighbors that once joined him for the feast. The narrator wonders what the changes in the country are worth if they cannot offer a black farmer like Petrus an "opportunity to

shoot upwards from generations of meagreness and deprivation, from years of backbreaking labour, to breathe in peace, in the name of the ancestors?" (75). Another farmer, Joep, explains that there is little chance for a new black farmer to achieve success without the former Apartheid farming subsidies, and in a context of rising fuel and fertilizer prices, when even more established and wealthier white farmers are going bankrupt (35, 75). Yet for both Joep and Petrus, white and black, land "has become a mythical ideal representing the ultimate of freedom, the ultimate of independence, the ultimate of being human" (76). The narrator sums up the link between land and identity via the Cartesian phrase, "I have land, therefore I am" (76).

However, despite these pronouncements, the memoir is at least as preoccupied with water—linking "human with humus" (Green 2020). The argumentative sections about land and politics are written in clear, journalistic prose, divided into chapters titled with capital letters. "CHAPTER SIX" and "CHAPTER SEVEN." These, which outline the debates about land and farming, are broken up by shorter, more lyrical sections marked by lower-case "chapter six" and "chapter seven", which recount memories of the narrator's childhood. These lyrical chapters are written in the third person, and the memories they record are largely of water. The narrator in these smaller, lower-case chapters melts "into blue" when meeting her future husband as a teenager (33), builds a god from rocks beside a pool to worship the earth and water (59), transfigures into a tree beside the farm dam which is portrayed as, for her, the central point of the farm (49). The chapters numerically linked to the Petrus sections (which appear in CHAPTER SIX and CHAPTER SEVEN) are "chapter six", set in a "bright sandstone pool," "'the place of a god,' she thinks" (58), and "chapter seven," where "[s]he lies on her back in the water. Her long hair floats heavily around her. She is offered up to the pool" (59).

The small river which runs through the farm and pools in golden sandstone is a tributary of the larger Vals River which flows through the centre of the town of Kroonstad, which is itself a tributary of the great Vaal River. It is referred to first by its Dutch name, the Valschrivier, on the banks of which Krog's forbears settled six generations before (34), the name a direct translation from the indigenous 'Nta or Entaap meaning "false or treacherous" (Raper, Moller, and du Plessis 2014). In addition to the formal interleaving of land and water, the river is described as central to the imagining of earth, portrayed almost as a protagonist in the narrative. It is also one of the ways in which, like the love for land, the love for water is described as shared across racial and other divides. Late in the book, after Krog has covered the summit of the Non-Aligned Movement and the second democratic elections, and has voted to sell the family farm due to mounting debt, she retreats to the semi-desert region of the Richtersveld to try to recover her poetry. At first she is stifled by the landscape, "nothing but stone in its ugliest, stoniest stone" (251). But indigenous interlocutors turn her eyes to the river and mist.

> "'The thing here is the river," says Oom Jacobus de Wet, and although he has been talking for days, she hears him for the first time. 'We don't call him "the Gariep," we don't call him "the Orange", for us here, he is "the River". (251)

Similarly, the book portrays an abiding love for the Vals River in Kroonstad, a love for which is surprisingly shared by various black exiled writers Krog meets at a workshop in Victoria Falls, whose longing for the Vals river "[pleases] her and her ancestors" ().

The effect is an overlay of public with private history, the intimate and embodied experience of water bodies alongside the body politic (see also Neimanis 2017). When the narrator is first returning to Kroonstad at the start of the book, she describes her attachment to the town as inextricable from her attachment to the river:

> The closer to Kroonstad, the more my eyes fall into place. I have come to accept that there is earth that never leaves one's soul. My ancestors were one of the first six Boer families who settled along the Valschrivier long before the Great Trek. For eight generations my story has run with this town and this river…. On the banks of this river, I was made. (34)

While it is earth that never leaves her soul, it is the river that has made her; her ancestral fortunes, differently imagined that those of Petrus Sithole, are nonetheless similarly linked to both land and water, town and river.

The hold of the land is imagined, in fact, as a function of its waters. Later, the narrator describes her mother as a believer in the "Kroonstad myth: once you put your feet in the waters of the Valsch River, among the willows, you fall under its spell. You will never be released again:"

> Wherever you go in the world after that, wherever you roam or take root, a nameless longing will always slender through your thoughts. And that longing will only abate when you stand once again on the riverbank and hear the sound of the babblers and the doves, see the blond sandbanks lying like ribbons around the reed, the finches flashing like jewels in the tender green interweave of willow, when you wade into the water, with its warm surface and cold undercurrent, and breath the fragrance of bark and earth. (44)

Here the river is given material heft by its vivid and detailed description, which touches on almost every aspect of its sensory qualities: temperature, scent, palette, shape, biodiversity. This longing for the river has since been complicated, however, just like the love of land, by political, environmental and other factors. When the narrator first arrives in town, she gives credence to her mother's beliefs by pulling in to "greet the river" before going home, and discovers fallen willows, litter and "plundered toilets" where "on the front steps people have obviously been shitting at arm's length from one another" (34-5). Both the "longing and loss" are described as deeply embodied,

sensorily overdetermined whether by delight or disgust (35).

The river connects the various kinds of writing in the book, acting both as the focus of scholarly enquiry into sewage outflow into its waters and the recurring subject of the prose poetry which constitutes the book's framing sections. Each of the book's sections begins with an italicized prose poem, which frame and complicate the narrative. The first one, which begins the book, is about rain; others are about the river, a willow, a flood. "*moon*" follows the river's curves and ripples (161), while "*willow*" is an ode to a weeping willow on the river's banks, planted at the town's founding and torn down during a vividly described flood (263). The first poem, titled "*rain*", sets the tone for the book as a whole.

> It is as if the rain picks you up carefully. As if the rain has got your scent. As if you're holding on to fleeces of mist, as if the rain clears your throat and lightly rumbles down your thighs… Things of vapour and deluge drift and shift across one another. (9)

The timeless storm being described produces an elemental experience of water, overwhelming, erotic and dissolving. The rain pursues, carries, is held; but also becomes the second person "you," clears "your" throat in a transcorporeal merging (Alaimo 2010). The speaker's identity is temporarily lost in "*the foaming whirl of water*" and lines between land and water, as much as between human and element, are blurred:

> *Water trails down the scars of highlands and rocks, and swirls together and gushes over, swirls together, gushes over, backs off, flows through, fills up, streams away. Becomes river. Sluiced in basalt and granite, ridged and haltered by snatches of sandstone, limestone, shale, veiled through with sediment, edged in soft silver drifts of sand.* (9)

Water makes and marks the landscape, just as in turn land frames and forms the

waterscape. Sediments link rock and water at the molecular level, their flowing together and mutual erosion a form of "becoming-with" (Haraway 2016).

Addressing the immediate sensations of falling rain along with the erosive effects of turbulence over eons, "*rain*" produces the disorienting multiscalar effects of what Sarah Nuttall describes as "pluvial time" (Nuttall 2019; 2020). Pluviality is again addressed in the longer poem preceding Part Five, "*the river*". The section is addressed to the river in the second person, who/which emerges from "fault-line and follow-rift" in primordial time, drawing "a constellation of water from the dark" (281).

> *A stone shelf embraces you in rock, then lets you loose to downwards, unwilling yet light, in carefree spray and exuberant purls. A pool opens itself up and ah! escapes from you. A valley of water slips so silently into you that you melt together into lake or delta. And then another river runs you through! And so you flow. For millions of years.* (281)

Imagining the river's experience, the sentence structure follows its flows and stops: the damming up in a pool as an interjection and exclamation mark, flow as alliteration and sibilance. Soon, however, the geologic time of the river's past is interrupted by anthropogenic destruction, figured as a disruption which exhausts the anthropomorphized river, which is "worn down to the deepest myths of your being" (281).

> *Your body bleary, the underground water lumpy with dregs, without clarity. As if it remembered nothing, as if it was filled with a sediment of hopeless fatigue. Or sadness. Now even the water from mountains, from cliffs seems ashamed to be water... Your body has become the catchment for an entire landscape of despondency.* (281)

The materiality of sediments, runoff and catchment are turned to metaphoric use, not simply pollution but shame, fatigue and despondency—recognizable postcolonial,

postapartheid sentiments (see Van der Vlies 2017). At this point, the polluted, metaphorized river presents a problem of address: "*How can I talk to you? You with your surface as warm as skin and your icy undertones? Do I need a special language? A new tongue?*" (282). The transformation of the river requires a bodily and linguistic transformation, which is at the heart of the book as a whole: how to effect that necessary, metamorphic change of tongue?

After this reference to the title of the book, and the lofty questions of translation and transformation, the passage turns abruptly to toilets: "On the wall of the toilets across the river somebody has written in spray-paint: Kroonstad suck ckock" (282). The bathetic ending is characteristic of the consistent pairing or shadowing in the book, of the material and metaphoric, molecular water and general fluidity, glittering river waters at the surface and sewerage pipes that criss-cross beneath. The passage, and the book as a whole, turns on the paradox of "wastewater"—water as vital element; water as discarded, toxic refuse. Precious water wasted; water itself as excess, as waste. There is no water without wastewater, the memoir vividly suggests.

Excremental postcolonialism meets postcolonial plumbing

Following wastewater across *A Change of Tongue* means traversing a wide range of narrative and political scales, from private to public, across individual, familial, local, provincial and national levels. The book begins with public toilets at a newly integrated school athletics tournament, and ends with a sewage treatment facility. These sanitation stories form part of the overall focus on local government and service provision—public toilets, sports facilities or public libraries—in relation to national government and its capacity to transform the infrastructural afterlives of Apartheid policy. This has turned out to be prescient for South African political debate and protest from 2004 onwards, which has turned on service delivery (Alexander 2010). The protests themselves, in

turn, have been characterized by “throwing shit” (Kozain 2014). The scatological shift in the objects and forms of protest is not merely puerile. As Krog’s book suggests, questions of how to deal with waste point to central tension in national transformation, of what needs to be discarded in the process of change. At the end of the book the narrator presents these questions in the starkest terms: “What does sewage control say about a nation?” (357); and, zooming in from the national and political to the local and ecological, “what about the Valsch River?” (357).

Throughout, and perhaps unexpectedly, the narrator’s individual and familial history is traced in a personal history of toilets. The book is partly a memorial to the poet’s mother, Dot Serfontein, a remarkable woman who wrote for magazines, published several collections of essays, and, importantly for Krog’s narrative, wrote a history of Kroonstad. Researching an article about “food and reconciliation,” the narrator pages through this bible-thick history of the town. As she does so, she comes upon “more information about sewage than food” (43). Serfontein records the town’s sanitation history, from its reliance on the “pit latrine system” onwards, and adds her own reflections on its meanings. For instance, she recounts that when disease broke out during the South African war, the General of the British army commanded that the town create a “night soil” system, in which buckets were carried outside of town and their contents dumped in 1.8m trenches (43). “’Night soil,’” (43) her mother muses, pointing to the problems of unthinkability and outsideness posed by waste in general (see for instance Clark 2008), “’is such a nice term in my opinion, as if it is something produced by owls. As if when day comes, the soil disappears’” (43). In the present of the narrative, Serfontein tells her daughter that “the way people deal with each other’s toilet habits will perhaps tell you more about reconciliation than food” (44).

In this book-within-a-book, the private is inextricable from the public. The history of Kroonstad includes "my mother's own sewage story" (51). In it Serfontein recounts her childhood terror of large hairy worms which fell from an infested tree into the corrugated-iron outhouse, and the white, wriggling worms which she had once seen when a cousin dropped a torch into the pit and that remind her of the worms that could be seen "rising up like dough from a dead animal" (51). Her fear finally drove her father to build a "water closet" (52). Worms elicit disgust, but the anecdote also highlights their transformative function. As Haraway writes, "critters" are "at stake in each other in every mixing and turning of the terran compost pile. We are compost, not posthuman; we inhabit the humusities, not the humanities" (2016, 97). The narrative invokes worms as a kind of horror companion species, which epitomize the life that emerges from death in a perpetual "becoming-with" (Haraway 2003). Serfontein concludes, in agreement with this prioritizing of critter-worms, "the youth of today would have a great respect for life and fear of judgement in the hereafter if they saw more worms" (51).

The personal history of toilets recounted here also mirrors what the editors of a special issue of *Postcolonial Studies* on, in fact, toilets, consider to be an alternative history of modernity. This alternative history shifts the Benjaminian emphasis on glass, which brings the outside in, to follow the movement of the toilet from public outhouse outside to private water closet inside. The toilet in the proposed view acts as "the 'limit' of modernity, that which is occluded, repressed, displaced by the onward march of modernity" (Dutton, Seth, and Gandhi 2002, 138). What toilets also expose, in their non-transparency, is the link between modernity and postcoloniality, a kind of denial of coevalness that situations the postcolony outside of modernity's limits. In the narrator's treatment, "[m]y mother's own sewage story" (51) is inextricable from the town's

history of race-based infrastructural inequality, which is in turn metonymic of the country and continent.

At the end of the book, the narrator travels as one of ten African poets to Dakar, Senegal, for an event called “La Caravane de la Poésie,” a poetry caravan to Timbuktu, Mali, convened by Breyten Breytenbach. The journey is enriching as a result of the poetic conversations, yet harrowing as a result of inescapable poverty, disease and discomfort—much of which has to do with visible sewage and unusable toilets. After more than a week of travelling through Senegal and Mali, the caravan arrives in Djenne, hailed in tourist brochures as the twin city of Timbuktu. By this time the narrator is in “survival mode,” neither eating nor really sleeping.

> She tries to go for a walk, but the streets are full of large holes filled with dead water in which mosquitoes and gigantic gnats gather. She hears a noise above her and stands aside just in time to avoid a slag of excrement that comes splattering down into the street from a kind of gutter overhead. (310)

Excrement falls from the sky in a shower, airborne wastewater that makes a mockery of pluvial flows, while the water gathered in the literal gaps in service provision—the potholes mentioned as chronotopic in the “Introduction” to this issue—corral dead water. Wastewater above and below, and yet the narrator is struck too by the beautiful clothing and bearing of the people she sees on the street. After a series of anecdotes about filthy bathrooms, overflowing toilets, sewage-filled streets, the narrator asks a difficult, perhaps offensive question: “How is it possible that people can produce such sophisticated architecture, such beautiful lines, let such colours bloom beneath their hands, yet are unable to deal effectively with their own excreta?” (310).

The question about African continental neglect leads inevitably to a slew of other question, including questions of race: “Is the clearing away of shit important to her because she is white?” she asks, but immediately answers, “Cannot be” (310);

culture: “Is dealing with excrement a matter of culture then?”; and regional development: “who is to explain the lack of a sewage system on behalf of the whole of West Africa?” (310). There is a confessional aspect to this rhetorical outpouring, which draws even the narrator’s own stereotyping assumptions into the light. The most sensitive of these questions is that of race, which is addressed directly at the end of the book. Racialised sanitation disparities are stark in the Southern African context with its colonial and apartheid history, but not unique to this context. Catherine Coleman Flowers’s book *Waste,* for instance, describes the breakdowns in sanitation facilities for the rural poor of the United States which disproportionately affect African-American populations (2020).

At the end of Krog’s memoir, the narrator visits “Kroonstad’s sewage farm”, a wastewater facility that serves both the town and the neighboring township. Her uncle, Oom Pieta, works for the municipality and takes her on a tour. He describes the process of treatment, and emphatically disentangles the question of sewage disposal from both culture and race. The narrator asks him baldly whether there is any difference “between the excrement of white people and the excrement of black people?” (356), based on racist myths that had circulated in her childhood. He is indignant: “Sewage is a science, for God’s sake” (356). The only difference, he asserts, is economic: the sewage from the township is more solid and from the town more liquid, because the white people have better access to bathing and washing up facilities (256). He also explains that “in all cultures there are ways of dealing with sewage that have developed organically from the region and the way of life” (357). These “dry” and “wet” methods reveal more continuity than difference over the variety of human communities as well as over time.

However, the questions of infrastructure, national wealth and the future remain pressing, in the book and of course in contemporary South Africa. Oom Pieta describes

the beginnings of a gradual breakdown in the Kroonstad wastewater treatment facility—only two of the pump rooms are functional, the giant copper impeller has been stolen, a cash-strapped town council is attempting to save money and so failing to purchase crucial treatment chemicals (356). As a result, untreated effluent has begun to flow into the Vals River. Oom Pieta's dire predictions of systemic breakdown are being borne out: the non-governmental organization SAVE (which stands for Save the Vaal Environment), for instance, has recently published a statement on the failure of 26 wastewater treatment plants whose effluent is pumped untreated into the Vaal river (SAVE 2020). This is part of a systemic breakdown in which over half of national sewage treatment plants are failing or in a critical condition, creating "rivers of sewage" (Kretzmann et al. 2021). Sewage is being pumped directly into the ocean surrounding the blue flag beaches of Cape Town, a point of decades-old controversy even in that city's fraught history of water (see Overy 2020).

Faced with the impasse of spiraling logistical, political and public health crises, Krog's narrator is stumped, and *A Change of Tongue* ends on an ambivalent note. Toilet problems are brought to light, complicating apparent modernity, but solutions to the compounding predicament remain elusive. Several critiques of the book have focused on its corporeal emphasis, the ways in which it employs vivid descriptions of bodies to make a (limited) claim to belonging (Visagie and Coullie 2014; Lieskounig 2011; Upton 2016). While productively complicated, particularly of racial difference, they point out the ineffectiveness of the claims of white belonging that seem to follow. The critiques focus largely on the book's themes of skin, fat, hair, dress, and so on, rather than the physiological and bodily functions which are addressed via its history of toilets. Yet the book itself is even more interested in systemic causes of and infrastructural solutions to the problem of postcolonial waste. In other words, it turns at key points

from sewage—the waste matter and wastewater that flow inexorably from human settlement—to sewerage—the toilets, pipes and treatment facilities through which sewage flows and by which it is properly managed.

In this respect, Krog's experimental memoir brings to mind a work of literary fiction which proposes a kind of solution in a twist at the end of novel. In Zanzibari-British writer Abulrazak Gurnah's *Admiring Silence* (1996) the overall emphasis on the vulgar, sewage-ridden postcolony is similar, but the novel ends on a similarly proactive note: the protagonist signs up on a plumbing course. There is a brief moment of similar pragmatic hopefulness in *A Change of Tongue.* Oom Pieta mentions, at the end of the book, a rarely-remarked innovation in South African sanitation, which had simultaneously developed advanced techniques for recovering water from sewage:

> 'Then, during the heavy boycotts in the Apartheid years, our sewage experts had to find their own way to sewage salvation. But it wasn't something they boasted about. It was only with the advent of the New South Africa that we realized how much pioneering work had been done in the field of dessicating sewage.' (357)

This provides the reader with a reminder of the potential not only for water's soiling, becoming waste, but also for transformations from wastewater back to water.

The material transformation signaled by the piping, flow and infrastructure of sewerage is underscored by the appearance of another companion species. The cover of the South African edition of *A Change of Tongue* is an image of a flat fish, reproduced from a chromolithograph that appears in "Volume 6 of P. Bleeker's *Atlas Ichthyologique des Indes Orientales Néérlandaises,* published between 1866 and 1872, accessed in the South African Museum in Cape Town". The flatfish is first mentioned in a pages-long exploration on the meaning of "transformation," its relationship to metamorphosis and change (less and more), from the fields of organizational psychology, linguistics, and so on (125). The characteristics of flatfish like sole, she is

told, is that juveniles are born with normal bilateral bodies and need to undergo a series of transformations during which one flank becomes the underside; the eye of one side migrates to the flank that will become the upper side. This companion species references histories of "passing," similar to the ways in which, for instance, artist Bianca Baldi's exhibition employs the colour-changing cuttlefish (2019). But in this case, the emphasis is rather on the material reality than the appearance, the ability to literally change one's skin mapping onto the capacity for transformation: a change of skin, a change of tongue.

Conclusion: Writing as digging in sewers

In each of these stories of wastewater, the nation and the river, the polity and the planet are at stake; but writing and genre are too. In *A Change of Tongue,* when the narrator is young her mother calls her to come and read a new book of poetry together, *die ysterkoei moet sweet* by Breyten Breytenbach. Her mother exclaims at its beauty, and reads "the very first poem":

> let the sly bitter ducks shit on my grave
> in the rain (98)

Both mother and daughter are exhilarated. It is "the first time they have seen the word 'shit' printed on paper. *kak.* In a volume of poetry in which there are no capital letters" (98). At the end of the memoir, at her father's funeral, Krog's brother Andries recounts asking their mother why she moved from fiction to essays. He had heard a lecturer say that "writers who only dig around in the sewers are lacking in imaginative power" (362), but this turns out to be what she finds most important about it. Serfontein says that while fiction is meant to "free you to go to a different place", this "other world" is in fact so present that "intimacy with your own world is the one thing that enables you

to survive this ever-present other world” (362). Writing as digging around in sewers is, it turns out, precisely the task at hand.

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