

The ‘recidivist tongue’: Embracing an embodied language of trauma

ABSTRACT *This article analyses selected excerpts from the writing of Antjie Krog and Yvonne Vera in order to theorise strategies for overcoming the disjuncture between the mind and the body that tends to result from violence. Both authors repeatedly return to the bodies of their characters and they insist that psychic and physical pain and trauma reside in the bodies of survivors as much as in their psyches. Acknowledging this corporeal reality of violence circumvents any opportunity to deny the totality of the impact that violence has on the lives of survivors. This has implications for survivors as well as for those who read or hear about violence. By developing an embodied language of violence and trauma, these authors offer new and more comprehensive ways of dealing with traumatic violations. When survivors reclaim their bodies, they are also able to utilise their bodies’ capacity for healing and comfort. When readers, and society at large, are unable to deny the harm that violence does to bodies, they are compelled to recognise the reality of survivors’ suffering. The article illustrates that the body can speak and that we ignore its voice at our peril.*

KEYWORDS: Body; violence; rape; trauma; fluidity; touch

Introduction

‘I felt that I was outside my body, watching this whole thing, that it wasn’t happening to me, it was happening to somebody else’ (cited in Russell, 2003, p. 19).

The epigraph with which I begin this article is taken from an anonymous rape survivor's narrative, yet the sense that women disassociate from their bodies during rape is a common thread that repeatedly crops up when they relate their experiences of rape. While this can partly be read as a coping mechanism to deal with an overwhelmingly traumatic event, one cannot get away from the fact that 'reality is experienced bodily' (Winkler, 1994, p. 250). Any attempt to deal with rape must thus be an integrated effort that recognises the crime as an assault on both the body and the mind.

South Africa continues to have some of the highest rape and murder rates in the world (Kapp, 2006, p. 719). Statistics also reveal that a mere 14% of rapists are sentenced and even this figure is bolstered by the relatively higher rate of conviction of child rapists (p. 719). In the case of adult women, the conviction rate is as low as 3% (p. 719). While these figures clearly suggest the urgency of wide-ranging legal and broader socio-economic interventions, the reality remains that most rape survivors deal with their traumatic experience in arenas that are independent of the courts. The recent public reaction to the woman who accused the now president of the ANC, Jacob Zuma, of rape, further casts doubt on the amount of support that rape victims can realistically expect to receive from society at large (Peacock & Khumalo, 2007).

In both South Africa and Zimbabwe there has been an upsurge in fictional and semi-autobiographical literature that addresses the experience of rape and other types of violence. I argue that the South African author Antjie Krog and the Zimbabwean author Yvonne Vera represent violence in very specific ways in terms of their engagement with the bodies of their characters. I further suggest

that a rigorous feminist analysis and theorisation of the strategies they employ can offer valuable guidance for women who have survived rape while also influencing public discourses of rape.

Tanner (1994, p. 6) makes the following important point about representations of violence:

While semiotic systems are based on the function of signs as vehicles of intellectual mediation, violence thrusts its victims into the status of uncontestable embodiment [...] Representations of violation, then, emerge at the intersection of linguistic and material worlds, between which the readerly subject negotiates.

Tanner (1994, p.6) attempts 'to find language that speaks to a bodily epistemology of knowledge, that invokes the urgency of embodied experience even as it interrogates the categories within which we understand that experience'. This article will argue that Krog and Vera are engaged in a similar project in their writing. Their continuous return to bodies as the loci of both psychic and physical pain constitutes part of their attempt to overcome the difficulties of writing about pain, trauma and violence. They interrogate and dissect the experience of bodily distress and deal with different kinds of bodies in many forms of pain, rather than simply 'the body in pain'. I will argue that the affective impact of their work can be traced back to their refusal to let the reader forget either the bodies of their characters or their own bodies. The emphasis on the corporeal presence of these bodies or, in other words, the very 'thereness' of bodies, becomes a kind of weight that anchors the consciousness of the reader in the material reality of the characters' pain¹.

The article will begin with a discussion of the challenges feminist theorists face when they try to reclaim the importance of bodies. This will be followed by a close textual analysis of key excerpts from both Krog's and Vera's work to illustrate how they negotiate these hurdles and how they manage to represent violence in ways that integrate its physical and psychic dimensions and are therefore able to speak to the totality of the traumatic event.

Feminist negotiations with the re-emerging material body

The restitution of 'the body'² is a subject that has long been the focus of feminist theorists.³ Elizabeth Grosz (1994, p. 6) pinpoints René Descartes as the pivotal figure who cemented the mind/body split and relegated the body to the realm of the inferior. She argues that it was Descartes who 'succeeded in linking the mind/body opposition to the foundations of knowledge itself, a link which places the mind in a position of hierarchical superiority over and above nature, including the nature of the body'. The extent to which the mind/body opposition is a gendered dualism is particularly important. This dualism is an instance of the central organising tenet of the Western epistemological tradition, namely that of thinking in terms of binary oppositions. Felman (1975, p. 8) describes Western thought as shaped by 'the metaphysical logic of dichotomous oppositions'. Whenever one is confronted with a binary opposition, hierarchisation is inevitable and one term is thus privileged while the other is marginalised. Felman points out that, when two terms are regarded as polar opposites, the privileged term is linked to the masculine while the marginalised binary tends to be associated with the feminine. Traditional dualisms such as mind/body, white/black, culture/nature, reason/emotion and

European/African are all characterised by a 'subtle mechanism of hierarchisation which assures the unique valorisation of the positive [masculine] pole' (p.7) while perpetuating the inferiority of the 'negative' (feminine) term.

Irigaray (2004, p. 74) emphasises the concrete consequences of the mind/body division:

[T]his leads, on the social and cultural level, to important empirical and transcendental effects: with *discourse* and *thought* being the privileges of a *male* producer. And that remains the 'norm'. Even today, bodily tasks remain the obligation or the duty of a female subject.

Since the rest of the article will return to Irigaray's theories, the academic allegations of essentialism against her will be addressed here. Criticism of Irigaray's alleged essentialism was at its most prominent in the 1970s and 1980s and tended to focus on *This Sex Which is Not One*, and particularly on the final essay in the collection, 'When our lips speak together' with its emphasis on the way in which the female body (especially the vaginal lips) enables a uniquely female kind of autoeroticism⁴. Alison Stone (2004, p. 8) defines essentialism as 'the view that there are properties that are essential to women, in that any woman must necessarily have those properties to be a woman at all' and she traces the charges of essentialism against Irigaray to the fact that she 'seems to assert that women are constituted as women by their unique anatomy (their labia)'. A complete rejection of essentialism does, however, present feminist politics with

a problem, for as Stone (p. 10) explains, ‘if women shared no common characteristics, they could not readily be expected to mobilize around any sense of concern at a common predicament, or around any shared political identity or sense of allegiance’. Denise Riley (1988, p. 112) thus suggests a strategic form of essentialism whereby she argues that ‘it is compatible to suggest that “women” don’t exist – while maintaining a politics of “as if they existed” – since the world behaves as if they unambiguously did’⁵. Stone (p. 10) emphasises that ‘this strategic form of essentialism is *non-realist*’. In other words, it does not claim that women actually have essential attributes. Rather, it holds that ‘many traditions and practices (falsely) insist that they do’ and these traditions ‘can be challenged only through the strategic reaffirmation of precisely those essential characteristics on which they insist’ (p. 11)⁶.

In a widely circulated South African newspaper Amanda Gouws (2006, p. 2) also comments on the mind/body split in a column addressing the public outrage that followed the publication of Krog’s latest volume of poetry, *Body Bereft*. The controversy surrounded the cover photograph which depicts the naked upper body of an older white woman. Gouws (p. 2) argues that the denial of ‘the body’ is typical of liberalism, which advocates the equality of people as rational beings. However, she notes that the history of apartheid has made it clear that the colour and sex of ‘the body’ matter a great deal. She contends that somatophobia⁷ contributes to the conviction that rights, as guaranteed by the Bill of Rights, will ensure equality, yet the focus on rights, which are abstract, prevents South Africans from finding solutions to the very concrete problem of violence.⁸

Any attempt to assert the importance of ‘the body’ must, however, be handled with caution, as the exclusive association of ‘the body’ with the female has, as discussed

above, led to the exclusion and subjugation of women⁹. Grosz (1994, p. 22) addresses this danger by arguing that ‘corporeality must no longer be associated with one sex (or race), which then takes on the burden of the other’s corporeality for it’. Krog’s and Vera’s texts counter this difficulty of reclaiming the centrality of ‘the body’ without conceptualising ‘the body’ as necessarily female by also focusing on the bodies of men. Tanner (2006, p. 3) reminds us that any project to ‘reverse classical hierarchies of body and mind’ only serves to ‘reserve their dichotomous placement in culture’. Their work displays a determination to liberate women from confinement to their bodies while simultaneously refusing to disavow the female body. In this regard their work can be considered as an exploration of the Irigarayan imperative to ‘guard and keep our bodies and at the same time make them emerge from silence and subjugation’ (Irigaray, 1991, p. 42). Their reclamation of the power of the female body is signalled in their frequent titular emphases on bodies and its constituent parts (in *Country of My Skull*, *A Change of Tongue*, *Down to My Last Skin* and *Body Bereft* in Krog’s case and *Under the Tongue* in Vera’s case) and developed throughout their texts by the characters’ negotiation with the materiality of their own bodies.

The embodiment of psychic trauma in Krog’s work

In Krog’s *A Change of Tongue* there is a scene in which the central narrator is comforting her cousin who is recalling his experiences as a soldier in the border wars conducted by the apartheid government. Peet is clearly suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder¹⁰, but rather than psychologising his pain, the narrator expresses it by focusing on the physicality of his body: ‘He hides his face again, his body shivering

feverishly. I hold him. He feels as if he's made only of sad, heavy flesh' (Krog, 2003, p. 214). The psychic pain is expressed in the flesh of the victim. Krog uses the notion of heaviness to articulate the victim's sense of being overwhelmed by the force of the trauma from which he is suffering¹¹. The idea of heaviness also functions to emphasise the corporeal presence of the body. The 'urgent and overwhelming presence of the body' (Tanner, 1994, p. 37) of the person in pain in these texts constantly works to undermine the reader's sense 'of bodiless invulnerability and distanced perspective' (p. 38). It is important to note that, while Tanner is referring to physical pain, Krog's work also confronts the challenge of representing psychic pain by returning to her characters' bodies.

The importance of 'the body' as the space where psychic trauma plays out is asserted by the fact that two of Krog's characters in *A Change of Tongue* suffer strokes when the psychic pain they are experiencing becomes overwhelming. After the central narrator's hard drive containing her only copies of, among other things, her work on Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) testimonies and her translation into Afrikaans of Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom* is wiped out, she goes back to writing on her computer but experiences the following:

I force it [her hand] down to the keyboard and aim for the 'a' – but my whole hand collapses on the keys. I try again, but my third, fourth and fifth fingers are hanging like dead lumps The next morning when I wake up, I realize that something is terribly wrong. The blood is thundering in my veins. My left hand cannot help me to make coffee, and

in the shower my face feels as if it is in both cold and hot water. My tongue recognises no taste (Krog, 2003, p. 93).

She later learns that she has had a stroke. The trauma that brought on this physical collapse is not merely the stress caused by the computer failure. Rather, it is the preceding experience of going back to her hometown and being confronted with the pain apartheid caused, particularly due to the complicity of members of her immediate family. The sense of collective responsibility seems to be manifesting in her body. Later in the novel her father also suffers a stroke after realising that they will have to sell the family farm for financial reasons. Like Krog, Vera continuously returns to the body in her attempts to deal with 'all the different shades pain takes on' (Krog, 2003, p. 260).

The embodiment of psychic and physical trauma in Vera's work

In *Under the Tongue*, Vera uses the tongue as the central, privileged metaphor for articulating Zhizha's suffering. In the first two paragraphs of the novel Vera consistently reminds the reader that pain, both in the sense of physical hurt and psychic trauma, resides in the body of the victim:

A tongue which no longer lives, no longer weeps. It is buried
beneath rock.

My tongue is a river. I touch my tongue in search of the places

of my growing. My tongue is heavy with sleep. I know a stone is buried in my mouth, carried under my tongue. My voice has forgotten me. Only grandmother's voice remembers me. Her voice says that before I learnt to forget there was a river in my mouth (Vera, 1996, p. 1).

In this novel Zhizha loses her voice and becomes literally unable to speak after the trauma of being raped by her father. Vera is thus engaging with the familiar feminist trope of women being silenced in an abusive, patriarchal society. The power with which she articulates Zhizha's silencing is all the greater because she does so by locating this loss of voice in Zhizha's body in general, and in her tongue in particular. She conveys the feeling of heaviness of this tongue that 'no longer lives'. Zhizha experiences her inability to talk as a disconnection from her tongue and it is her tongue that she touches in her attempt to relocate the 'places of [her] growing'. It is impossible for the reader to forget his or her own body when body parts are repeatedly mentioned, touched and perceived by the characters in the novel.

Throughout this novel, as well as in her other work¹², Vera conveys the experience of trauma as a kind of fragmentation of the body which, in turn, reflects the disintegration of the victim's world. Zhizha, for example, feels her 'bones broken dry like rock so broken' (p. 5) and she watches her 'toes dissolve' (p. 12). The embodiment of trauma is a technique that Vera also uses to striking effect in her portrayal of Mazvita's experience of rape in *Without a Name*. At various stages in the novel Mazvita feels her body turning into a 'lump [that] lay between her ear and her shoulder' (1994a, p. 4) and

she senses how her 'skin peeled off, parting from her body' (p. 4). In *Butterfly Burning* Phephelaphi experiences her 'skin peeling off like rind' (Vera, 1998, p. 128) when she sets herself alight in the final chapter of the novel. According to Jessica Hemmings (2005, p. 176), in both *Without a Name* and *Butterfly Burning* 'skin peels to present the mental and physical traumas in a character's face'.

The following extract is typical of Zhizha's interior monologues throughout the novel: 'I watch my feet which are no longer my feet. They are large, not quite there, not part of me. It is the same with my arms which have discovered their own ability for silence. Only my shoulders say these are my arms' (Vera, 1996, p. 12). It is most likely that Zhizha is not expressing physical pain here. Rather, she seems to be dealing with the psychic trauma of bodily violation by focusing on her body. The silence resulting from the rape is felt on her body and does, in this instance, adhere to her arms. Vera is explicitly pointing to the body's ability to speak as it is Zhizha's shoulders that are saying something and countering the feeling of fragmentation by claiming her arms as part of the body. Zhizha is experiencing severe alienation from her body. According to Cathy Winkler (1994, p. 250), the 'shattering feeling' that results from rape trauma can cause the body to feel like an object that is 'in some ways separate from the mind'. She describes this experience as one in which 'the mind and body act together, but in a manner that feels disjunctive – unlike a healthy situation in which the mind and body act in unison'. This alienation from the body is also revealed in Zhizha's thoughts about her tongue. She asks her grandmother whether she has a 'red tongue' (Vera, 1996, p. 50) and when she then touches her tongue, as if to confirm that it exists in her mouth, she finds that '[i]t feels cold and still' (p. 50). Marina Kopf (2005, p. 248) emphasises that, '[r]ight

from the beginning, Zhizha's first-person narrative is abundant with images of her tongue as an immobile, frozen, and alienated part of her body'.

Vera subverts dichotomous oppositions by bringing language 'into the realm of the female body' (Samuelson, 2002, p. 20). In Vera's work, language, mind and culture do not function as the polar opposites of speech, body and nature. Zhizha's reappropriation of language is closely identified with the physical ability of her body to speak as she watches her 'mouth moving in different directions with the letters' (Vera, 1996, p. 81). The Cartesian duality between mind and body disintegrates as Zhizha claims language with her 'lips', her 'chin', her 'throat' and her 'breath'. When Zhizha feels the last letter of the word 'duck ... scraping at the roof of [her] mouth' (p. 96), it is clear that she regards speaking as a visceral, embodied experience. In the earlier part of the novel Vera chooses to focus on Zhizha's ability to say vowels rather than consonants. The speaking of consonants seems to involve the body to a greater extent and it is only later in the novel that Zhizha repeats the 'kkkkk' (p. 96) sounds that require the tongue to touch the roof of the mouth. Zhizha thus appears to be working towards the ability to speak with her body and towards reaching the space where and 'when [her] lips speak together' (Irigaray, 1985, p. 205).

Vera, however, does not associate Zhizha's speaking with the gendered metaphor of the mother tongue by using this metaphor in a simple or unproblematic way. By challenging the conventional usage of the image of the mother tongue, Vera signals her rejection of the 'symbolic economy' (Boehmer, 1992, p. 233) that equates the mother with land, nation and home. Neither the mother tongue nor the motherland would be appropriate metaphors to employ in the attempt to give Zhizha a voice, since these

metaphors have been constructed and perpetuated by men for the purpose of reducing women to two-dimensional symbols. Rather than simply rejecting the mother tongue metaphor, Vera subverts it. She utilises the tongue as an organ that connects and empowers women. The isolating silence that Zhizha experiences after the rape is overcome when her grandmother ‘touches her forehead with her tongue’ (p. 53) and Zhizha is reminded of her connection with her mother when the name Runyararo ‘falls in drops on [her] tongue like rain in late harvest’ (p. 15).

While the tongue connects and empowers women, Vera explicitly identifies voice with the grandmother’s milk rather than with the mother’s tongue. When Zhizha is ‘crying in [her] sleep’ (p. 72), she is comforted by her grandmother’s voice which ‘is filled with milk’. By associating Zhizha’s recovered voice with milk, Vera links language to the female body even as she invokes the ‘novelty and evocative power of [a newly created] metaphor’ (Tourangeau, 1982, p. 32). She seems to endorse Hélène Cixous’s dictum that women should write in ‘white ink’ (1975, p. 352) since it is to the female body that Vera turns when she needs new metaphors with which to articulate the female experience. Vera explicitly refers to this need for a new language and its connection with women’s reclamation of their bodies in ‘A Woman is a Child’ (1994b, pp. 48-54). After Tariro’s father ‘swallowed parts of her body which a father does not know a daughter possesses’ (p. 53), she reflects: ‘Words are not for forgetting. She has learned a new language with which she tries to forget her loss, words that would free her. She has claimed her body.’ This learning of a new language manifests in a circular and often ambiguous style of writing with plots and meanings that are in a constant state of flux. Both Krog and Vera acknowledge the mutability of meaning and bodies and, in their

rejection of rigidity, they explore healing and speaking strategies that flow from their characters' bodies.

Bodies and fluidity: Reading corporeal testimony in Krog's work

I read Krog's work in terms of Irigaray's (1985, p. 215) argument that 'movements cannot be described as the passage from a beginning to an end. These rivers flow into no single, definitive sea.' In *A Change of Tongue* each chapter begins and ends with a short prose poem written in italics. The first and last of these sections, entitled *rain* and *wing* respectively, both deal with rain and the body. The very different impact that rain has on the body in these two sections, however, illustrates Krog's refusal to force meaning into any single pigeonhole. The novel starts with an emphasis on the destructive potential of rain: '*The rain clutches you tightly. It holds you. It hurts you. As if the rain has snipped the wire that draws your insides together*' (2003, p. 9) [italics in original]. The concluding prose poem conceptualises rain as a healing element:

I take my own blood and mix it with yours, as I have always
wanted to do – to be of your body, to be surged by your
heart, and loved by your skin. I bend over your face. You
open your eyes and I see myself for the first time. As you
widen your eyes, you see yourself there, compellingly
completed.

The rain picks up carefully. The rain has our scent. It

clears our throats. Light sifts through. It encompasses
everything (p. 367)

Coullie (2005, p. 5) argues that the image of rain at the beginning and end of the novel points to the cyclical nature of Krog's writing. I agree with Coullie that Krog's writing does not adhere to a linear narrative structure. However, I question her further assertion that, because the rain 'cleanses and clarifies and brightens' (p. 5) in the last section, it provides 'narrative resolution'. Like *Country of My Skull*, *A Change of Tongue* consists of 'generically hybrid, multi-voiced and dialogic sections' that follow 'neither a coherent chronological line nor plot sequence' (p. 4). Of *A Change of Tongue* Coullie goes on to argue that, 'even with the chronological dislocation, the narrative world is one bounded within the authorial narrator's family's life span, her own consciousness or her imagination' (p. 4) and she thus sees the novel as 'all of one piece, in narrative terms'. While Coullie focuses on the wholeness and resolution in Krog's work, my reading emphasises the dislocations. I further suggest that the dislocated or fragmentary nature of both Krog's prose works is inextricably linked not only to the range of voices she seeks to accommodate, but also to the traumatic material that she explores in these works.

Even as the authorial narrator in *Country of My Skull* attempts to articulate the unspeakable she finds that resistance to closure is manifested in the body when she includes the statement that '[t]his inside me ... fights my tongue' (1998, p. 27). She describes the violence of the apartheid regime as a breaking of the human body by providing a snippet of testimony from a TRC witness: 'Before he was blown up, they cut off his hands so that he could not be fingerprinted ... So how do I say this? – this terrible

... I want his hands back' (p. 27). The witness wants the hands of her loved one back so that his body can be whole again. This section of *Country of My Skull* consists of 18 paragraphs of varying lengths that each appear to be an extract of witness testimony. In the Afrikaans poetry anthology *Kleur Kom Nooit Alleen Nie* (Colour Never Comes Alone) Krog takes eight of these paragraphs and, by shortening some and translating others directly into Afrikaans, she turns them into eight stanzas of a poem titled 'dagboeke uit die laaste deel van die twintigste eeu' (diaries from the last part of the twentieth century). The other five stanzas in this poem also resemble pieces of witness testimony that, like the rest of the poem, deal with the physical mutilation of the body. The final stanza contains the lines: 'die liggaam beroof/ die blind gefolterde keel/ die prys van dié land van die dood/ is groot soos 'n hart' ('this body bereft/ this blind tortured throat/ the price of this country of death/ is the size of a heart') (2000b, p. 36).¹³

In *Country of My Skull* Krog's narrator says of writing about the pain of apartheid victims:

No poetry should come from this. May my hand fall off if I write this. So I sit around. Naturally and unnaturally without words. Stunned by the knowledge of the price people have paid for their words. If I write this I exploit and betray. If I don't I die (Krog, 1998, p. 49).

She focuses both on the bodily mutilation of apartheid victims and on the impact this has on her own body: 'My hair is falling out. My teeth are falling out. I have rashes'

(p. 49). The dilemma of how an artist can ethically respond to atrocity is one that, even if it is not solved, is partly answered by the demands of the insistent body. While the narrator feels that her hands should fall off if she turns this suffering into poetry, she seems to be driven by a physical imperative to write *Country of My Skull*. Not writing it would lead to death and the bodily instinct for self-preservation and survival appears to have the final say. The body does, however, seem to drive Krog further and, two years later, she literally turns this testimony into poetry by including it in *Kleur Kom Nooit Alleen Nie* (2000b, pp. 32-36). When she returns to prose and the theme of the pain caused by apartheid she again uses the form of fragmentary writing in *A Change of Tongue*. This choice of literary form can be read as a kind of compromise between the ethical reluctance to make art from pain and the physical necessity of engaging with that pain through writing.

The narrator in *Country of My Skull* focuses on the mutability of the body and ends the text with an acceptance of this change: 'I was scorched/ a new skin./ I am changed forever' (Krog, 1998, p. 279). The trope of fluidity is also the one Krog chooses for the end of *A Change of Tongue* where the body of the narrator flows onto the body of the other through a mixture of the bodily fluid of blood. This ending is thus an embrace of fluidity and openness rather than resolution in the sense of definitive conclusions. The enumeration of parts of the body (heart, skin, face, eyes, throats) ensures that these fragments of the body, rather than the body as a monolithic whole, take centre stage.

The ever changing nature of parts of the body is a theme that Krog returns to in *Body Bereft*. In this anthology the speaker is confronted with the aging of the body as she finds that 'she feels overcome – suddenly her body is simply loose, as if nothing wants to

be firmly tied and trim' (2006, p. 23). It seems that aging has now become the factor that has 'snipped the wire that draws your insides together' (2003, p. 9). In 'Four seasonal observations of Table Mountain' the speaker's fear after a 'mammogram reveals its blackest clot' (p. 92) leads to the following stanza that reveals the centrality of the body (2006, pp. 93-94):

I am not
 I, without my body
 only through my body can I in-
 habit this earth. my soul
 is my body entire. my body
 embodies what I am.
 do not turn against me, oh do not
 ever leave me. do not
 cave in around me, do not plummet
 away from me, do not
 die off on me, do not leave me with-
 out testimony. I
 have a body, therefore I am.

The closing lines of this stanza can be read as an explicit challenge to Descartes's *cogito ergo sum*. It is significant that the speaker associates the loss of the body with the loss of

testimony. In her analysis of *Country of My Skull* Ashleigh Harris (2006, p. 31) argues that

[t]estimony here¹⁴ is, at least partially, a psychological descarification process in which the body is relieved of the duty to archive the traumatic past; a duty that is now passed onto the testimony and, more broadly, onto the TRC itself. It is precisely this transferring of the traumatic past from the individual's body, to his/her speech, and finally to national discourse, that creates the cathartic potential of a nationally validated process such as the TRC.

While I agree with Harris (2006, p. 34) that trauma needs to make the 'move from the corporeal body to the realm of national speech' as the public validation of victims' pain must be part of a national attempt at healing, trauma can never be read without looking back to the body. Even as a 'victim's speech articulates the traumatic past for a listener' (p. 31), the victim's body continues to serve as a 'visual palimpsest of that past'. In addition, the nature of trauma and its resistance to speech mean that it is not possible to remove it from the body to discourse in its entirety without losing some of the meaning of the traumatic event. In an article that 'underlines the experiential reality of the body and explores the connections between touch, trauma and literary form'¹⁵, Santanu Das (2005, p. 241) argues that 'acute body memories and body knowledge' (p. 257) can serve to 'establish a *physical continuum, a bodily bridge, as it were, over an ontological*

impossibility: touch becomes the ground of both testimony and trauma' (p. 257)

[emphasis in original]. Das (2005, p. 24) provides a description of touch that highlights its similarities to trauma in the sense that both are '[i]mpervious to representation' (p. 240): 'Unlike vision or sounds which can be preserved through photography or the phonograph, touch cannot be represented directly, losing its essence in the passage from signified to signifier.'

The healing touch

The ability of touch to reinforce the centrality of the body is also addressed by Elizabeth Harvey (2003, p. 2), who notes that '[w]here hearing, sight, and smell extend the body beyond its own boundaries, touch insists on the corporeal because it relies on contiguity or proximity for its operations'. Das's (2005, p. 252) notion of 'articulate flesh' corresponds to my own reading of Krog's work as an attempt to allow the body to speak.

Irigaray (2004, p. 155) also argues for an emphasis on the bodily sense of touch:

Before orality comes to be, touch is already in existence. No nourishment can compensate for the grace or work of touching. Touch makes it possible to wait, to gather strength, so that the other will return to caress and reshape, from within and from without, a flesh that is given back to itself in the gesture of love.¹⁶

In the final prose poem in *A Change of Tongue* the image of merging with the other through a mixture of blood is preceded by a series of touches:

I buff your shoulders until they gleam like tamboti¹⁷. I kiss your wrists over and over until the aggressive bulges disappear from your knuckles. I comfort your elbows. I dress your bleeding legs. I soften your thighs and let them rest. Your burdened, beautiful back I caress, vertebra by vertebra, from my deepest memory (Krog, 2003, p. 367).

The speaker's actions in this section are reminiscent of Irigaray's (2004, p. 155) notion of '[a]pproaching and speaking' to the other with the hands. In a chapter entitled 'The fecundity of the caress' (p. 154) Irigaray argues that the 'most elemental gesture, or deed' (p. 155) of love 'remains the caress'. The speaker also seems to regard the caress as somehow elemental in that she associates it with her 'deepest memory'. This '[m]emory of the flesh' (Irigaray, 2004, p. 178) is something Irigaray also describes as 'archives of the flesh' (p. 141). In *The Stone Virgins* Vera explores the difference between conventional archives and remembering through the body. Cephas's work is to 'file documents, in an archive' (Vera, 2002, p. 139) and Nonceba finds that she 'believes but mistrusts him' (p. 140). She reflects that '[h]e has put her name in a file. Stored her. Pinned her down' (p. 140). Thenjiwe and Nonceba, however, have a connection and a memory of each other that reside in the body. Nonceba is so much a part of Thenjiwe, that she feels as if her sister 'had already been holding her hand quietly and forever'

(p. 42). Thenjiwe experiences Nonceba's breath as 'her own breath flowing into her body' (p. 42). This sense of closeness is also part of Nonceba as she asserts, even as she sees Thenjiwe's decapitated body, that she 'is part of her' and they 'are one' (p. 65). Vera seems to be postulating a specific kind of connection that exists between women and that manifests itself through the body. In *Under the Tongue* this connection is asserted by Grandmother and associated with touch when she tells Zhizha that they, together with Zhizha's mother, 'belong together in an ancient caress of the earth' (1996, p. 11).

Conclusion

Krog and Vera can be read as engaging in a project of '[i]nscribing embodiedness everywhere' (Smith, 1993, p. 140) in a way that 'challenges the notion of an individuality [...] distinct from a specific body'.¹⁸ Through the disintegration of the mind/body duality, their writing manages to testify to the totality of their characters' pain because they recognise that pain is both a physical and a psychic phenomenon. The body's capacity for remembering and speaking is a central focus of their work. The bodies of the characters as well as the meanings that are attached to various body parts are mutable and multiple. While these bodies are constantly changing they do constitute palimpsests that contain memory and history. In Krog's 'Four seasonal observations of Table Mountain' the narrator describes her tongue as 'recidivist' (2006, p. 88). Recidivism means the act of returning to previous states or patterns of behaviour. While the term usually has a negative connotation of relapsing to criminal behaviour, I do not read Krog's use of the word as necessarily negative. Rather, the body as having a memory of its past is seen as

inevitable and the body's ability to speak those memories, in all their various forms, is posited as potentially healing.

Krog's and Vera's work exemplifies the fearless claiming of the bruised and battered body that must occur before healing is possible. Like the survivor whose story opened this article, society at large might prefer to distance itself from the bloody bodily reality of violence. The body, however, refuses to be silenced and testifies to its pain in whatever way it can. The excerpts that were analysed in this article illustrate some of the ways in which the survivor's body can express itself, such as post-traumatic stress disorder and strokes. While recognising the difficulties involved in reclaiming bodies, my reading of Krog's and Vera's texts has exposed the dangers of denying bodily experiences. At the same time I argue for acknowledging the power inherent in the reclamation of bodies, regardless of how violated those bodies might be. Rather than relegating violence to the realm of the abstract and cognitive, I have shown that, by also listening to how one's body expresses the violent encounter, it becomes possible to live with its aftermath as a mind *in* a body that retains the ability to connect with the bodies of others. The insistence on the centrality of bodies and on the continued capacity of damaged bodies to experience comfort through touch provides both readers and feminist theorists with valuable lessons in the ongoing struggle against rape and violence.

¹ Krog and Vera also write about the capacity of their characters' bodies to experience pleasure and to be a source of joy and comfort. For example, even as Krog explores the difficulties that accompany the aging of the speaker's body in *Body Bereft*, she notes 'the absolutely awesome comfort of my breasts' (2006, p. 98) and, after fearing that she might have breast cancer, the speaker enjoys the sensual experience of 'the word "benign"/ that makes my skin slip like a gorgeous/ silk scarf around my body' (p. 94). In *The Stone Virgins*

Vera describes Thenjiwe who is left ‘breathless’ (2002, p. 34) after ‘one touch of her tongue tip’ and wants to ‘sink’ into the feeling of ‘sweetness’ when she is with Cephas. However, the focus of this article is the bodily encounter with pain, violence and trauma.

² In her discussion of South African literature after apartheid, Bethlehem (2006, p. xv) considers the ‘re-emergence of the material body’ in South African narratives. She notes: ‘My refusal to relinquish that body goes hand in hand with a desire to relinquish the definite article: not “the body” but his body, her body’ (p. xvi). I follow her and focus my analysis on the particular bodies of specified characters in Krog’s and Vera’s texts. In the overview of theoretical arguments that opens this article, I thus place ‘the body’ in quotation marks to signal my awareness that any meaningful use of the term requires the specification of possessive adjectives.

³ See for example, Susan Bordo (1986), Rosi Braidotti (1994), Judith Butler (1990), Jane Flax (1992), Susan Hekman (1990), Linda Nicholson (1990) and Lynne Pearce (2004).

⁴ Examples of these critiques can be found in Toril Moi (1985, pp. 139-47), Monique Plaza (1978) and Janet Sayers (1986, pp. 42-7).

⁵ The concept of ‘strategic’ essentialism was first used by Gayatri Spivak in ‘Feminism, Criticism and the Institution’ in *Thesis Eleven* 10/11 (1984-1985, pp. 175-187) in reference to subaltern studies.

⁶ Further arguments in favour of seeing Irigaray’s alleged essentialism as a political strategy can be found in Margaret Whitford (1991, pp. 16-25), Grosz (1989, p. 110) and Jacobus (1986, p. 62ff).

⁷ Kirby (1997, p. 73) also identifies somatophobia as that which ‘underpins the legacy of phallocentrism’s mind/body split’.

⁸ This argument reflects similar sentiments as Milan Kundera’s assertion that ‘when we ignore the body, we are most easily victimised by it’ (1985, p. 39).

⁹ For more on the challenges involved in authors’ engagement with bodies, see Pearce (2004, especially pp. 123-146).

¹⁰ While I recognise that post-traumatic stress disorder is a concept that lacks a critically agreed upon definition, I take as a starting point the fact that ‘most descriptions generally agree that there is a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviours stemming from the event, along with numbing that may

have begun during or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event' (Caruth, 1995, p. 4). In this scene in *A Change of Tongue* the memory of the traumatic event is, for Peet, triggered by the sound of a computer game that reminds him of the war.

¹¹ Vera also uses heaviness as indicative of characters' pain. While Zhizha (in *Under the Tongue*) experiences the heaviness in her tongue, Nonceba (in *The Stone Virgins*) feels that her 'forehead is heavy' (2002, p. 113). Both Nonceba and Zhizha are survivors of rape. In *Nehanda* the eponymous main character notices heaviness in her entire body when she finds herself 'moving slowly as though her body aches or is too heavy for her' (1993, p. 60).

¹² In *The Stone Virgins* Vera describes an event where fighters in Zimbabwe's liberation war forced a woman who was suspected of disloyalty to kill her husband with an axe. This scene takes place in a part of the novel that spans the period from 1981-1986 and the woman appears to be one of the many civilians who were caught up in the civil war between ZANU-PF and ZAPU-PF. The soldiers gave this woman the option of killing her husband or watching her two sons die. The woman is in the same hospital as Nonceba and Nonceba imagines what the woman went through when faced with this choice. She imagines the woman's pain in terms of bodily distortion as she sees that the woman's 'arms are longer than her entire body' (2002, p. 81). Sibaso, the dissident soldier who raped Nonceba and murdered Thenjiwe, also experiences his body as fragments rather than a whole when he reflects: 'I held my left arm in my right hand like something I had picked up from the ground, a discarded object' (p. 89). In *Nehanda*, a young boy watches his mother, aunt and sisters being killed from a hiding place in a tree. When the massacre is over and the boy tries to climb down he feels that 'he is without hands' (1993, p. 99) and he is surprised when 'he wakes to find that he does have hands, and that a dog is licking his hand. Still, so many other parts of him are missing that he does not bother to try to get up.'

¹³ This translation is taken from Krog herself as she takes these four lines and incorporates them, in translated form, into a poem called 'Country of Grief and Grace' (2000a, p. 99) in *Down to My Last Skin*. Although 'groot soos 'n hart' is more accurately translated as 'big as a heart' I follow Krog's translation. The phrase 'body bereft' also becomes the title of her 2006 anthology.

¹⁴ Harris (2006, p. 31) is here specifically referring to the testimony of Lucas Baba Sikwepere contained in *Country of My Skull*. Sikwepere is asked how he feels about telling his story at the TRC and he responds as

follows: ‘I feel what – what has brought my sight back, my eyesight back is to come back here and tell the story. But I feel what has been making me sick all the time is the fact that I couldn’t tell my story. But now I – it feels like I got my sight back by coming here and telling you the story’ (cited in Krog, 1998, p. 31).

¹⁵ In this article Das (2005, pp. 239-262) analyses the narratives of the young women who served as nurses during the First World War.

¹⁶ The primacy of touch is echoed in Margaret Atwood’s contemporary novel *The Blind Assassin* (2001) when a character states: ‘Touch comes before sight, before speech. It is the first language and the last, and it always tells the truth’ (p. 256).

¹⁷ Tamboti is a kind of tree that is found in South Africa and Swaziland. It yields a hard and lustrous black wood. Krog’s choice of this black wood in the same prose poem where she refers to the mixing of blood can be read as a reference and challenge to the apartheid laws that criminalised miscegenation. See the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act (1949) and the Immorality Act (1950).

¹⁸ Smith (1993, p. 140) makes these observations about Cherríe Moraga’s *Loving in the War Years*. She goes on to say: ‘Lips, breasts, thighs, legs, knees, eyes, cunts, backs, skin. Parts of the body are named, described. Movements of the body are mapped.’

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