

**THE CHALLENGE OF THE LYRICAL VOICE IN ‘UNLYRICAL’ TIMES:  
A STUDY OF INGRID DE KOK’S POETRY**

by

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## DECLARATION

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of **Masters in English Studies** , in the Graduate Programme in Durban, University of KwaZulu-Natal,  
South Africa.

I declare that this dissertation is my own unaided work. All citations, references and borrowed ideas have been duly acknowledged. I confirm that an external editor was not used. It is being submitted for the degree of **Masters in English Studies** in the Faculty of Humanities, Development and Social Sciences, University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. None of the present work has been submitted previously for any degree or examination in any other University.

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study places the poetry of Ingrid de Kok in a critical context that is strongly influenced by the political climate.

Unlike political rhetoric, the nature of the lyrical poem is personal and complex, arguably rendering it defunct in a democracy that seeks to serve majority interests. De Kok's challenge is to be a lyrical poet in the public sphere, to contain and represent the public interest within the personal form. I will examine how she rises to the historical occasion and extends her medium to incorporate the public event.

At the same time, if she is to retain her voice as a lyrical poet, she must guard the privacy of its expression and the intimate spaces it seeks to delineate. In this way she asserts the validity of every-day concerns and of spaces traditionally designated as female.

By interrogating the categories of personal and public I hope to project a complex vision of the possibilities of the lyric within contemporary South Africa.

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## INTRODUCTION

Ingrid de Kok's first anthology *Familiar Ground* appeared in 1988 at the height of apartheid. At this time, a need for solidarity polarized literary and political debates. De Kok explains:

It's impossible to write poetry in South African without confronting the experience people have had of language: the expectations they therefore have of the word and of writers, whose ambiguous function is to undo the word while using the word. (Fiske [De Kok] 1989: 74)

Whereas the rhetorical voice of the politician elides specificity and complexity, the lyrical poet depends on these elements in her work. The questions to which I must attend are whether the lyrical poet rises to meet the historical occasion, and how she adapts her very private form to suit the intrusion of the public concern. The poems which have received the most attention are those that deal with explicitly political themes, such as "Our Sharpeville" (1988: 13), or those that express 'woman's concerns' such as "Mending" (1997: 35). De Kok's collections which appeared subsequently to *Familiar Ground*, *Transfer* (1997), *Terrestrial Things* (2002) and *Seasonal Fires* (2006), contain poems that confront other national concerns such as the TRC and HIV/AIDS. All her work, whether public or private in its subject matter, is intensely personal; the grief expressed in "Threnody" (2006: 134), for instance – an elegy for children dying presumably of an AIDS-related illness – is expressed with the same depth and sensitivity to suffering as that in "My father would not show us" (1988: 18), a poem about the speaker's own father. I hope to show that De Kok's acutely personal expressions of 'national' issues collapse the public/private, political/aesthetic binaries that have so often categorised poetry from politically demanding societies.

First, in the remainder of this Introduction I wish to sketch the context of the art/politics debate, or polemic, in South Africa. Towards the end of the Introduction I shall link the debate to the equally contentious, and related, issue of gender politics. Such is the climate which has influenced De Kok's literary voice. The Introduction serves, therefore, to prepare us in Chapters 1 and 2 to examine Ingrid de Kok's 'lyrical' contribution to 'unlyrical' times.

## Poetry/Politics

Looking at the wider debate around the role of poetry in South Africa in the last two decades, specifically with respect to the shift from political poetry of the resistance movement towards what some have identified as a new aesthetics of post-apartheid poetry, I shall provide a context in which Ingrid de Kok's work can be placed. If the challenge *then* was to adapt the private lyric to the needs of national political crises, it would seem that the challenges we face *now* are no less national: in view of, for example, escalating unemployment, HIV/AIDS denialism and President Jacob Zuma's persistent refusal to check his risk-taking behaviour. Whereas gender politics were often subsumed by the racial politics during apartheid, postcolonial feminist criticism has come to show how the different axes of oppression – race, gender, class – are inextricably connected. De Kok's work, being personal in its address and often intimate in its details, has perhaps always been asserting female spaces against a literary tradition that is 'masculine' and public. Twenty years after the pivotal year 1990 in which the liberation movements were unbanned, it is the small spaces that are finally finding the opportunities to emerge in South African poetries.

Given that De Kok's work spans more than two decades, it is prudent to provide in brief, over that time, a context of critical debate in the literary arts. Whilst the politics of representation and the various emerging feminisms over this period provide some insight into critical debate, alongside these concerns are those of the role and responsibility of both artist and critic. The debate hinges on definitions and categorisations: what may be classified as art, what as politics? This has often become a debate between the value of content and that of form by those who perceive the categories as easily divisible. There is also the question of evaluation, whether there exists such a thing as 'poor' or even 'excellent' work in a political climate that demands certain kinds of messages – those of protest, resistance or witness – over and above criteria for aesthetic judgment. What follows is the question of *whose* criteria.

The question of the relative value of aesthetics is not peculiar to South African soil. In his discussion of modern tensions between aestheticism of 'art for art's sake' and art that serves a moral imperative, Michael Hamburger argues that "while he became the first to complain of the 'immense nausea of advertisements'," Baudelaire "knew that – except in its highest Platonic reaches – aestheticism is also materialism, and that it was his own aestheticism that divided him from the crowd" (1972[1969]:

20). The importance of the quote in the South African context is that Baudelaire, the aesthete, felt himself to be separate from the majority, the quotidian reader. The elitism of literary specialists, whether readers or writers, is given political connotations all the more in developing countries where the gap between the literate and the illiterate is more pronounced. The “advertisements” to which Baudelaire refers may be literal or descriptive, but the word is reminiscent of debate about the artistic value of pamphlets, posters and other means of mass protest and communication in South Africa in the 1970s and 1980s (Chapman 1991[1988]).

In his book *The Witness of Poetry*, Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz responds to similar themes by detailing the ways in which national crisis – in his case, the Second World War – affects the production of poetry in a specific time and place. Michael Chapman has shown the relevance of Milosz to the South African context in his chapter, “South African Poetry: A Perspective from the Other Europe” (2006), but it will suffice to say that Milosz details the closing of the gap between the artistic elites and ordinary people in circumstances where poetry becomes a necessity. He writes, “For when an entire community is struck by misfortune, for instance, the Nazi occupation of Poland, the ‘schism between the poet and the great human family’ disappears and poetry becomes as essential as bread” (1983: 31). Like Poland, South Africa produced poetry that described and responded to its crises and transformations – poetry that “is a more reliable witness than journalism” (16). Unlike the situation in Poland, however, the crisis was caused by an even greater schism within the South African community itself. While among black workers, for instance, we found witness poets (and playwrights) who turned language to the service of their necessity, most white poets became increasingly estranged from the great human family (that is, the majority) – some unwittingly, others unwillingly. These include writers, academics, publishers and book-buyers, some of whom insistently retained the neat definitions and categories of ‘art’ and ‘politics’ afforded them by their education and position in society. Many recognised the political demands on poetry whilst eschewing such forms as ‘unartistic’.

Milosz, nearly forty years after the appearance of Polish war poetry, reflects that the “vast majority has documentary value and, at the time, fulfilled an important function; today we would not grant them high artistic rank” (1983: 79). This has echoes of responses in South Africa to art work during and after the political event. In a forum at the 2010 Time of the Writer Festival,<sup>1</sup> Zakes Mda says of his own



theatrical work that it served a function during the resistance movement, but a function that did not last beyond the moment. In the apartheid context, however, a crisis marked by a clash of cultures, classes and language, evaluation of “artistic rank” by the educated elite was often filtered through Eurocentricism. It may be hard for the white critic, educated in the European or North American canon, to discern whether the formal choices of the poem deliberately undermine western traditions, evoking for instance rhythms and repetitions of traditional African poetry, or whether the poem is simply amateurish. In short, aesthetic standards are often inseparable from cultural preferences or biases. The argument pertains particularly to the form of the lyrical voice.

To continue here to delineate the climate in which De Kok came to notice as a poet I shall refer to Chapman’s work which has charted the art/politics debate. In a paper presented in 1990 Chapman reflected upon the consequences of South Africa’s sudden political change for the artistic community, and what this might mean for the role of the critic. He details responses to Albie Sachs’s provocation that the phrase “culture is a weapon of struggle” should be banned. While Sachs meant to enlarge the scope of art, “those (usually white) literary critics who see the days of the emergency as inimical to so-called good, contemplative art have rushed into print with all the old jargon of academic Eurocentricism” (Chapman 1992[1991]: 2).

In advocating the importance of witness poetry and of ‘cultural artefacts’, Chapman has worked to broaden the field of what constitutes “literature” at schools and universities to include work which is significant and valuable for South African education. In a discussion of the work of Mtutuzeli Matshoba, he asks “But am I now mingling literary criticism and cultural analysis? If so, is it an invalid activity? In taking Matshoba seriously, I am trying to locate myself as a critic in South Africa” (1992[1991]: 6). The point is that no student or critic of the arts in South Africa can ignore the importance of our history in shaping texts or informing their reception. In his more recent collection of essays, *Art Talk, Politics Talk*, he writes about “the relationship of the literary work – the poem, the novel – to the cultural act” (2006: 167), that a definition of literature “is a rhetorical activity that seeks to persuade its audience” (2006: 167); in a broad sense, it is a political act. Speaking about literature in Africa and its functions in society, Chapman argues that “the *what* almost wants to supersede the *how*” (2006: 167) – that originality of expression is less important than the occasion and purpose that the message serves. He says, “almost”, because

“Without the *how*, the power of the word, the power of communication, is lost” (2006: 167). In other words, the content depends upon the execution of form, which ensures “a symbiotic relation between art talk and politics talk” (2006: 167). Textual analysis rather than ideological deconstruction leads Chapman to almost the same point as postcolonial feminists or Marxists – that the connection between politics and representation is inevitable, and that the ways in which ‘the people’ choose to represent themselves and their own interests is important in terms of both literature and culture. A politics of representation, therefore, bears particularly acutely, in a country like South Africa, upon poets who subscribe to inherited Western or European forms of expression.

The issue, however, is not unique to South Africa, or even to postcolonies. The relationship between language and power has been much theorised and brutally experienced over the last century. Language has come to be regarded by many with caution, or suspicion: following Saussurean doubt about the reliability of language, writers like George Steiner, Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida are alert to the violent, appropriative and oppressive power of language – that language itself *is* power. Steiner writes about the ‘silence’ in post-war Germany after words had lost their meaning as a result of being (mis)used to build myth: “*Jude, Pole, Russe* came to mean two-legged lice, putrid vermin which good Aryans must squash, as a party manual said.... ‘Final solution’, *endgültige Lösung*, came to signify the death of six million human beings” (1967: 142). Silence, for Steiner, is a metaphor for the lack of truth in the German language after it had been deployed for the purpose of legitimising violence. When name-calling results in Auschwitz or Triomf, the writer, whose sole mandate is to use words, is confronted with a responsibility to do so cautiously.

De Kok explains the power of the word to legitimise violence under apartheid, thus creating

an environment which is often hostile and suspicious of ambiguity. Since this after all is one of the vital resources of the lyric, the poem is subject to deep suspicion: its ambiguity might just be a cover for doublespeak. (Fiske [De Kok] 1989: 74)

She is aware that where people suffer under tyranny, its deeds couched in euphemism, there is a mistrust of language which is not transparent or direct as in the powerful, unambiguous call of “Amandla” to a disempowered crowd. She goes on to write that

in this climate of uncertainty and fear, action is trusted over and above mere words, that poets whose activities are political are seen to be more ‘authentic’. A political performance is therefore invaluable, while the lyrical poem remains to be weighed and tried.

As I have suggested briefly, formal choices are necessarily also political choices: whether European conventions are eschewed in favour of African oral modes of poetry, or whether forms are borrowed in order to be undermined, the choice of form either resists or asserts a political agenda. Similarly – and this is pivotal to an understanding of the challenges to the lyrical poet in South Africa – the choice to make use of a traditional European form is unavoidably a political one: by aligning herself with the language and literature of ‘empire’, the poet risks reinforcing its values. Inherited forms often transmit the values and power relations encoded in their language and reception. Given the obliteration of indigenous cultures by colonisation and apartheid, it remains to be determined whether or not western forms of poetry, such as the lyric, are able to render themselves appropriate to the context of African struggles for equality. What I shall go on to show is how De Kok utilises the resources of the lyric to legitimise its place in South African poetry. Moreover, I hope to show how she transforms and ‘South Africanises’ the traditionally European form.

But let me first raise the issue of complicity not only in terms of race politics, but also in terms of gender politics.

## Poetry, Gender

The question of whether ‘white’ writers have the right to speak about ‘black’ experience is important to both creative and critical endeavour. Given South Africa’s history of ‘white’ domination, it is easy for white writers to assume a position of (authorial) authority and subjectivity (in which a ‘black’ person/people become the object), and so in literature continue to assert a ‘European’ standard. The same issue has applicability to gender debates.

Within the global feminist debate the issue of the complicity of white women in the oppression of black women was tabled by Audre Lorde (1984), who attacked white (American) feminists for their discourse on a common womanhood which elides difference. Lorde writes that “within the women’s movement today, white women focus upon their oppression as women and ignore the differences of race,

sexual preference, class and age. There is a pretense to a homogeneity of experience covered by the word *sisterhood* that does not in fact exist” (1984: 116). This signals a need for greater honesty about difference in white women’s writing. In remarks which are important for both theorists and creative writers in South Africa, Lorde adds, “As white women ignore their built-in privilege of whiteness and define *woman* in terms of their own experience alone, then women of Color become ‘other’, the outsider whose experience and tradition is too ‘alien’ to comprehend” (1984: 117). As a white woman writing about South African concerns, De Kok is faced with the dilemma of either defining black people in terms of her “own experience alone”, thus perpetuating the egocentric mentality of white supremacy (summarised in the phrase ‘non-white’) or excluding black people from her discourse altogether. In her important essay “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses” Chandra Talpade Mohanty makes a similar point to Lorde, but augments the race/gender issue with that of ‘class’, or the economic difference of the imperial relationship. Mohanty shows how western feminism is responsible for a “production of the ‘Third World woman’ as a singular, monolithic subject” (1997[1986]: 255). This reduction of the diversity and experiences of real women to a flat and static ‘type’ is discussed by Mohanty in terms of colonization – a violence of ideological domination. Mohanty argues for feminist studies to locate women in a clear historical, political, cultural and geographical context.

This problematic of ‘First World’ (including white South African) feminist critics and writers erupted in South Africa in 1991 at the first conference on Women and Gender hosted by the (then) University of Natal. Desiree Lewis writes that the event was “marred by insularity and elitism, and epitomised the arrogance that dominates academia in Southern Africa, scholarship on the region and, to a large extent, research on the ‘Third World’ as a whole” (1992: 16). She adds that ideas surrounding the heterogeneous experience of women, such as those detailed by Lorde and Mohanty, were ignored, and “‘political’ issues raised were separate and disruptive ‘grievances’” (1992:16). The idea that ‘feminist’ concerns are not ‘political’ – that gender politics are a separate issue from racial politics or from “the politics of knowledge production” (1992: 16) – is a dangerous one that is derivative of an imagined binary between public and private concerns, where the political arena is dominated by men, and women are ideologically shifted into a supposedly separate private/domestic sphere. The legal exclusion of black South Africans from

universities together with the censorship of many black voices reinforced the idea that knowledge and literature belong to the 'First World'. This mindset is similar to that of white western feminist critics who, for the most part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, betray a sense of superiority, as the postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak says: "the emergent perspective of feminist criticism reproduces the axioms of imperialism" (1985: 243). She demonstrates how the history of western feminism is one in which the female individual identifies herself "in shifting relationship to what is at stake, "the 'native female' as such (*within* discourse, *as* a signifier) is excluded from any share in this emerging norm" (1985: 173). In other words, a victory for the white middle-class feminist writer comes at the cost of the subjugation and of black women within her discourse. Imperialism translated into the South African context comes to be little more than racism – the dominance of one race over another.

Since literature, like scholarship, is responsible for constructing the 'Third-World woman' as other, Spivak's concern pertains to both art and politics. Aware of the precarious nature of her subject position De Kok consciously seeks to confront her own whiteness and is self-reflexive about her relationship to systems, both political and literary, of 'Eurocentric' dominance. In her lyrics her aim is to evoke a sense of individual, private exposure against a public discourse that too often reduces specificity to simplicity, stereotype and polemic. As she has been categorised by some as a 'feminist' poet, it will be interesting to see how successful she is in refusing complicity with the very tradition – Western, male-assertive – out of which the lyrical voice and form proceeds. The challenge for the lyrical voice is to convert itself to the "great human family", or – in Ingrid de Kok's case – to the great South African family.

## Note

1. Discussion hosted by the BAT Centre, 13 March 2010.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Politics and the Lyric

Having outlined the major challenges to the lyrical voice, I shall now show how some of these concerns emerge in De Kok's poetry itself. Through a close reading of her work I shall respond to critical material, showing first the pitfalls of white South African feminisms before moving to a more detailed reading of the work. My own textual analysis will show how De Kok meets the challenge of the public event through the personal form, leading to a discussion on the difficulties and possibilities of truth-telling through the lyrical poem, particularly with respect to the event of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. To illustrate my argument, I have chosen to select poetry thematically rather than chronologically. This is largely possible due to the broad range of themes covered in each of her collections, themes that recur in De Kok's work.

#### Subject Range

The overarching sense of De Kok's first collection, *Familiar Ground* (1988), is that of a harsh, dry terrain strongly associated with home and childhood. The interplay between home and exile, between barriers and separation, is conveyed through strongly visual impressions. There is a pervasive sense of silence, longing and waiting, while poems on gender issues vocalise resistance with a more direct and confrontational speaking voice ("I am not the woman in the train / who pulls your hand between her legs" [1988: 38]).

Unlike the measured tone and almost prosaic verse of *Familiar Ground*, the second half of *Transfer* (1997) moves towards conversational rhythms and cadences. At times, a sense of dialogue replaces the more imagistic language and melodious rhythms of memory-scapes as the poems move inwards from the landscape towards personal relationships, home, and a sense of the present-day ("My mother says it's harder / to love a happy person than a sad one" [1997: 36]). In both the first and second half of the 1997 collection, De Kok explores overtly erotic themes, as well as the body, friendship, birth and ageing – for the most part, themes that would be considered 'female'. The first half of *Transfer* contains a range of De Kok's styles and themes, as recognisable from *Familiar Ground*, although the Cape Town poems paint city-scapes rather than the dusty rural landscapes of *Familiar Ground*; this

exposes for the first time the poverty and economic inequality that emerges as a dominant theme in *Terrestrial Things* (2002) and in the new poems in *Seasonal Fires* (2006). South Africa's 'transfer' from apartheid state to a democratic state since the first general elections in 1994 would appear to be the obvious concern of *Transfer*. The title poem, which alludes directly to this time of political transition, portrays a bleak, almost post-apocalyptic picture of post-apartheid South Africa that concludes only faintly on a note of hope that "the exiles are returning". The poem, "At the commission", begins to ask questions about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, a theme which later, in *Terrestrial Things* (2002), becomes a primary concern.

While the second and fourth sections of *Terrestrial Things* is concerned exclusively with the Truth Commission and HIV/AIDS respectively, this is not to say that the collection is dominated by these concerns; rather, greater critical attention is paid to these topical issues. The first and third sections return to familiar themes of both foreign landscapes – this time set in Italy – and the landscapes of home, childhood and memory. Although death and grief are recurrent themes throughout De Kok's writing, *Terrestrial Things* contains far more poems directly concerned with these issues and, with the exception of the Italian poems in section one, the overall tone is considerably more sombre than previous publications. Whilst this would be expected of the Truth Commission series and the HIV/AIDS poems, it would seem as though there is a correlation between the processing of 'national grief' and of personal grief conveyed in section three.

Poems that draw attention to poetry, language and problems of representation are concentrated in the Truth Commission series and, in 'modernist' juxtaposition, comprise the more fragmented images and rapid, staccato rhythms of De Kok's stylistic spectrum. It is as though the speaker herself is gasping and struggling to find appropriate vocabulary to express the trauma of the event. "The sound engineer" (2002: 33), for instance, expresses the trauma of radio production and reporting on the Truth Commission:

corrupted wells, and shocks, shouts,  
no longer muffled in the cochlea shell.  
...  
edit, pain; connect, pain; broadcast, pain.

Many of these poems are prefaced by a quotation and are clearly written as a response to the public conversation. The new poems in *Seasonal Fires* seem to consolidate the concerns with death, representation of history and re-construction of the past, while retreating into the more private, solitary lyrical mode. In stark contrast with the weighty, stealthy reflections of the poems under the sub-title “Body Maps”, “Sketches from a Summer Notebook” are almost frivolous by comparison. Set against the gravity of South African concerns, the Italian sketches aptly reference Van Gogh’s visual impressionism as they paint a sunny, light and even pastoral retreat from a grim local reality.

### The Lyric Form

The emotional subject matter alone is not a sufficient criterion to categorise De Kok as a lyrical poet. Often she responds to similar themes as her contemporaries, but in a voice that is uniquely lyrical. I discussed in passing how De Kok’s language shifts from the poetical to the colloquial depending on the subject matter and similarly how her form ranges from prosaic narratives to impressionistic sketches. Although a poem such as “When children leave” (2006: 139) is strictly circumscribed by specific formal requirements – in this case, those of a villanelle – the lyric itself is not confined to any set line lengths or rhyme schemes. The rhythm depends on pauses, emphases and pace. This is achieved through line breaks, punctuation, and the sounds of the words themselves: the reader must respond to the length of vowels or hard and soft consonants with sensitivity. The words demand participation and attention, and in this way the pace and metre control the intensity of the reader's experience. The imagery itself carries much of the emotional weight of the content, which typically expresses a felt response to events and circumstances, personal relationships and various physical environments. What characterises the lyrical voice is this strength of feeling conveyed through dense language that complicates the representation of the moment. There is a sense that each poem is the product of careful, thoughtful contemplation and reflection. The first-person voice, through which most of her work is spoken, adds to the sense of interiority of the perceiving consciousness: the lyrical poem is one which allows readers to access deeply personal responses of the speaker or poet.



The above-mentioned lyrical qualities can be illustrated in an analysis of “Small passing” (1988: 61), a poem which draws together many of the themes I have mentioned so far. Published before the end of apartheid in *Familiar Ground*, the poem responds to death and loss incurred as a result of apartheid violence through the lens of what initially appears to be a poem about ‘women’s concerns’. The first section is addressed to a woman whose baby died stillborn:

In this country you may not  
suffer the death of your stillborn,  
remember the last push into shadow and silence,  
the useless wires and cords on your stomach,  
the nurse's face, the walls, the afterbirth in a basin.  
Do not touch your breasts  
still full of purpose.  
Do not circle the house,  
pack, unpack the small clothes.  
Do not lie awake at night hearing  
the doctor say 'It was just as well'  
and 'You can have another.'  
In this country you may not  
mourn small passings.

Although the second-person address appears to take on the register of conversational language, the imagery pulls towards the poetic by virtue of the loaded emotional content that it so acutely conveys. Although the language itself appears simple, the stresses fall on carefully chosen words to emphasise the tragedy of the loss: in line two, for instance, the stresses fall on “suffer” “death” and “stillborn”. As well as the emphasis created by the stresses, the sibilant consonants of “shadow” and “silence” lengthen the pronunciation of the words, slowing the pace. In addition to long vowels (“last”) and plosive consonants (“push”), carefully ascribed line-endings further halt the pace of the poem to fit the sombre mood.

The verse, through repetition of the instructive “you may not” and “do not”, immediately recalls the context of apartheid prohibition, where even the most personal freedoms are subject to the decree of dictatorship. The first and last “not”, placed at line-ends, intensifies the already harsh stop of the definite t-consonant. The subsequent repetitions of ‘not’ are placed beneath one another in a pattern, reinforcing the inexorable pessimism of the speaker. The imagery, however, betrays a compassion that is at odds with the imperative voice, thereby undermining its instruction. With

considerable feeling the speaker attends to the painful details of the mother's loss. The grieving mother's full breasts and the child's small clothes are a vivid reminder of her unfulfilled expectation. The images of the mother mourning are set against the trite recommendations of the doctor who echoes the insensitivity of the command not to mourn. The speaker, who is attuned to the motions of the woman in her home as she grieves, shows a deep awareness of the private pain of the mourning mother. Although this poem is not written from the first-person perspective, as is most of De Kok's poetry, the portrait is an intimate one, in which De Kok carefully negotiates and manages a difficult and sensitive theme. Thus it can be seen how the expression of the lyrical voice is not limited by any formal conventions in particular, but utilises poetic form as a vehicle to carry the personal emotion.

The first stanza establishes an empathetic response to the mother's position which is later complicated by De Kok, as the poem unexpectedly moves into one that is equally concerned with race relations, making a strong point about white complicity in apartheid segregation, as I shall discuss in some detail. This is characteristic of De Kok's lyric where familiar themes such as race and gender politics are dealt with in a manner that defies easy interpretation and avoids simplicity and polemic. Typically, this is achieved through a presentation of thwarted expectations, in which the reader is led through a process of reckoning with an uncomfortable truth, only to be confronted with an unforeseen conclusion that shifts the interpretation of the poem. In Gillian Slovo's words, published on the cover of *Seasonal Fires*, "Hers is a lyrical voice that has the capacity to ambush. She can twist a meaning suddenly and, in so doing, turn our understanding on its head."

We see this as the 'personal' poem encompasses iconic images of suffering women and children, the result of apartheid, before returning to the grieving woman who mourns her own loss. Between the public notification and the very intimate portrait of the grieving woman, there is the intermediate space of the daily lives of black women outside the homes of their white employers:

On the pavements the nannies meet.  
These are legal gatherings.  
They talk about everything, about home,  
while the children play among them,  
their skins like litmus, their bonnets clean.  
...

3

I think these mothers dream  
headstones of the unborn.  
Their mourning rises like a wall  
no vine will cling to.  
They will not tell you your suffering is white.  
They will not say it is just as well.  
They will not compete for the ashes of infants.  
I think they may say to you:  
Come with us to the place of mothers.  
We will stroke your flat empty belly,  
let you weep with us in the dark,  
and arm you with one of our babies  
to carry home on your back.

At this point, the poem suggests something other to what it might have suggested in the first stanza. To return to the concerns of white complicity in racial oppression, as I raised in my Introduction, I shall now use this poem as a springboard to demonstrate how conventional feminist readings often inadvertently perpetuate or avoid uncomfortable race issues.

In her Introduction to *South African Feminisms* (1996) Margaret Daymond writes, “Black women have charged white women academics with exercising proprietorial rights, as experts, over knowledge, and the challenge that academics like me now face is to shed the *habit* of power” (1996: xix). In the discussion of “Small passing” later in her Introduction, Daymond, seeks to find a new vocabulary with which to discuss South African women’s concerns. Like Cecily Lockett in her paper “Feminism(s) and Writing in English in South Africa” (1996[1990]), she attempts to acknowledge white feminisms’ complicity in the problem of knowledge production, but unwittingly retains her own assumption of power. Essentially, both Daymond and Lockett fail fully to acknowledge the connectedness of ‘whiteness’ and patriarchy, or to see how the oppression of black women is inextricably tied up with the self-definition of middle-class white women. Daymond’s reading is a more sensitive response than Lockett’s, but neither acknowledge the complicity of white female roles in black oppression. By diminishing the connection between race, class and gender, Lockett and Daymond inadvertently perpetuate a denial of responsibility.

In Lockett’s overtly feminist Introduction to *Breaking the Silence: A Century of South African Women’s Poetry* (1990) she argues compellingly for an anthology of women’s voices. Women’s poetry had hitherto been virtually ignored, over-looked, or simply elided to make space for men’s poetry. Continuing with this single-mindedly

feminist agenda, in her discussion of Ingrid de Kok's work she erroneously assumes that De Kok "writes of shared female experience" (1990: 37). Lockett's enthusiasm for racial unity perhaps, or the solidarity of women in the struggle against patriarchy, lends to her discussion the promotion of an imagined community or sisterhood – a discourse which, as Lorde shows, risks ignoring difference and of eliding specificity of experience. In Lockett's discussion of "Small passing" she writes that "De Kok knows that black women will share in a community of female sympathy and love" (1990: 38). This, tellingly, reveals that Lockett's imagined female community (of white women?) exists before black women approach from outside, to "share in" – a telling assumption of white hegemony. Whilst Lockett confidently asserts that "De Kok *knows* that black women *will* share" (1990: 38, my own emphasis), in an interview with Erica Kelly De Kok herself is less than certain of this. Kelly's question is couched in terms of "communities of empathy across seemingly unbridgeable divides" (2003: 36), but De Kok responds: "'Small passing' does I suppose project 'communities of empathy' but, I hope, it also is provisional: in detailing the losses of black women and their children, in the cautious claim 'I think' (repeated twice in the last stanza), not 'I know'" (2003: 36). The poet demonstrates a sensitive ambiguity to an issue that the feminist critic opportunistically elides: "De Kok's poem suggests that this female sympathy can transcend barriers of race and class" (1990: 38), concludes Lockett. De Kok, unlike Lockett, offers the hope of possible empathy and without the arrogant assumption of its certainty.

Daymond's analysis of the poem is similar to that of Lockett's in terms of the final section being quoted to exemplify possible connections despite 'difference'. In response to the topic of solidarity at the cost of respect for difference, Daymond's language is more tentative. She differentiates between an assumed solidarity, and a vision for possible connections under "certain very specific circumstances": "this voice expresses a vision, not an actuality. Against the tenderness of these lines, Ingrid de Kok's work is often ruthless in its analysis of the brutal history of oppression which has constructed her subject position" (1996: xxxvi). "Small passing" itself invites such an analysis, but is ruthless not only for forcing the poet into the subject position of 'white' oppressor. De Kok's analysis of oppression is less about her own victimisation – as Daymond's comment suggests it is – than it is about those who suffer. Her work often acknowledges complicity in the system in a way that takes responsibility, rather than shifting blame, as Daymond's 'denialist' reading implies.

In this way, De Kok responds to the necessity for artists to protest against the grave injustices witnessed in the apartheid state, whilst assuming a fittingly modest and self-aware register with which to confront the problem of being a white woman writing.

Her careful and subtle handling of the subject matter attests to her awareness of the difficulties she faces in this regard. Importantly, the speaker in “Small passing” does not actually defend the right of a white woman to mourn her stillborn child; neither does the speaker assert ‘white’ mourning as equally legitimate. Rather, the private loss of the woman is set against other images of national suffering in both section one and section two:

Child shot running,  
boy’s swollen stomach  
full of hungry air.  
Girls carrying babies  
not much smaller than themselves.

This demonstrates the truth of the man’s statement in the epigraph that “*the trials and horrors suffered daily by black women in this country are more significant than the loss of one white child*”. Daymond, in contrast, reads the poem as a rejection of “the male speaker’s punitively transposed guilts” (1996: xxvi), again using her (western) feminist agenda to displace the more pressing issue of white guilt. Daymond does not interrogate the possibility that a white woman may not be entitled to mourn an event – the death of a child – for which, on a national scale, she might indirectly be responsible, or at least, complicit.

The effect of the opening section, that “In this country you may not / mourn small passings”, is a powerful indictment on the state of the country and an acknowledgment of the magnitude of suffering of black women. It is possibly a genuine prohibition towards the woman mourning, or simply a descriptive statement, rather than a sarcastic response to the man’s words in the preamble, as Daymond implies. The small ‘white’ tragedy which in other circumstances deserves to be mourned, may not be mourned; the speaker, by virtue of her inescapably white (read oppressive) subject position, forgoes entitlement to suffering. The images of national suffering are preceded by an instruction to “See” – to become aware of and to understand the plight of others, and to gain perspective and some measure of humility even amidst personal grief. In a country where suffering has been so unquestionably

‘black’, it is too easy to say that suffering knows no race or colour. Aware of this, De Kok turns the subtleties of her form to respond compassionately to the woman mourning without being insensitive to the mothers who “dream / headstones of the unborn” as a result of white oppression. She delicately balances the weight of one woman’s personal grief against the national narrative of death and loss, pitting the one against the other to heighten both and decry the political circumstances that prohibit their resolution.

As a result of being white (and, therefore, complicit in the very inhuman social system), the woman has lost her right to claims on common humanity. The speaker addresses her saying that “these mothers” might comfort and empathise, they might graciously “let you weep”. The speaker possibly refers to the same women described in section one, who, as servants in the homes of white women, meet on pavements in areas where they work rather than in their own homes. Their economic subjugation is connected with their physical displacement. As these women – whose position does not afford them the privacy of their homes – move into the public space, they take the domain of motherhood with them. Their gatherings are “legal” and legitimate; their complaints are justified, and in their community they achieve for one another a kind of justice. Rather than Lockett’s imagined community of white women which black women “will share in”, De Kok recognises an already existing community of black mothers that holds the right to judge, yet might potentially temper justice with mercy. The legal scenario is also a reminder of moral justice that exists outside the legal system of the state, and on a hopeful note De Kok points to possibilities of justice that exist within human community despite the corruption of the system.

The inclusion of the image of ‘the nannies’ and the allusion to the designation of space importantly recognise the power relations between white and black women that impede community and solidarity. De Kok acknowledges the very real reasons that may prohibit white women from being allowed into the community of mourning mothers. She does not write to show how suffering unites women, as feminists like Lockett might hope; rather, she imagines that despite injustice, humans can still be capable of understanding and mercy.

Ironically, male critics who are not tempted to sweep white scrutiny under the carpet of feminist indignation might be in a better position to interpret the poem. In a review of her first collection (writing just before Lockett and Daymond), Michael Chapman shows how De Kok balances the issues of white South African woman’s

emancipation from patriarchy with those of complicity in black oppression; that her struggle is a complex one which is not resolved within the poem. Looking first at the landscape in “Sun, Aloe, Rain” and then at “Our Sharpeville”, Chapman argues that De Kok, as

a recipient of middle-class opportunities and values, ... first has to write herself out of white patriarchal expectations of the woman as decorous object / submissive wife. She then has to write herself back into a new South Africa where, as a woman, she can begin to experience a transformation of consciousness. (1989: 117)

Chapman draws attention to the complexities of this emancipation and re-configuration of identity: De Kok “has to reject her own liberal inclination to play the charitable missus” (1989: 118) while remaining sympathetic in whatever capacity she can. He thus recognises the conundrum of the white South African woman (writer), without deflecting blame. Instead, he acknowledges the tension in her work between emancipation and complicity. He adds that “she has to define her own sense of self... while stretching beyond the burglar guarded neighbourhoods to feel kinship with the majority of South African women, who happen to be black” (1989: 119). What Chapman perceives is that the grieving woman in “Small passing” cannot find connection or community with the majority of South Africans until she leaves the safety and luxury of her position as ‘white’. It is this important aspect of the poem that Lockett and Daymond have failed to address.

Chapman argues that in a context of a new language of resistance poetry, she is “alert to the indivisibility in South Africa today of private and public worlds. For... Ingrid de Kok, the truth of poetry is, in several ways, simultaneously the truth of history” (1989: 115). He recognises that De Kok’s ‘feminist’ poems, or those expressing ‘woman’s concerns’, cannot be easily separated from the racial and political climate in which she writes. So, in a literary context where the private lyric differs radically from the poetic forms of the resistance movement at large, the private experience is nevertheless informed by experience within the external world: history enters even the most personal expression so that the value of the poem as artistic artefact is inseparable from its value as historical artefact. Given that the very personal form is in many ways unsuited to the needs of the majority – as I have indicated in my Introduction – I would like to demonstrate how, in other poems besides “Small passing”, De Kok takes cognisance of history, and transforms the private lyric into one that incorporates public concerns.

“William Kamanga” (2002: 50), like “Small passing”, is an elegiac lyric. It appears in *Terrestrial Things* but echoes the concerns with race, home, childhood and memory that are the subject focus of *Familiar Ground*. As in ‘Small passing’, this poem utilises a very personalised and focussed rendering of the past in order to exemplify the complex and sometimes ambiguous nature of race relations, complicating rather than simplifying white complicity. The lyrical mode enables her to expose and contain these tensions without becoming didactic about the point-of-view she expresses. William Kamanga, like the woman who lost her child, is presented as a particular and historical person rather than a universal symbol or an abstract analogy. The lyrical voice, now in the first-person address, portrays the specificities of the individual man, rather than attempting to represent the supposedly homogenous, general experience of the majority.

Today William Kamanga died,  
he whom I loved and who maybe loved me.  
A last picture eight months old:  
wife and daughter holding a man  
crumpled on a bench after a stroke.  
...  
Short men with hands behind their backs  
make me think of him.  
Silvo and Nugget smell of his apron,  
thousands of spoons and shoes polished  
outside the kitchen in the afternoon sun.

That his name is given in the title and repeated in the first and second stanzas emphasises his singularity and personalises the narrative of death and grief. It is therefore intimate; the reader participates in the mourning of a man for whom, from the first two lines, the speaker clearly feels the depth of an emotional attachment. His image is constructed through careful attention to personal detail, such as the smell of his apron, so that he is compellingly believable as an historical person.

Moreover, he is a man who has a family, the descriptions of which serve to deepen the sense of his humanity and significance. Upon the arrival of the speaker to his family home, it becomes clear that he had not received her message, and is not there to receive her:

... no one knew what to do with my sorrow.  
Three grandchildren stood shyly in the shade  
while in the kitchen Mary served tea



in my gran's teacups, on my sister's cross-stitch cloth,  
while other familiars – Rhodesian copper vase,  
ball-and-claw chair, old calendars on the dresser –  
watched over us like Jesus and the ancestors.  
And weeping for everything that had and hadn't happened,

we opened an album of photographs –  
on one page William's high-domed head, paterfamilias,  
on the next my mother's seventieth birthday smile  
rearing like a sunflower in a field of cassava,  
home from home.

The feeling of proximity created by these descriptions is intensified by the detail with which the interior of Kamanga's private spaces are described: in particular, the household furnishings and decorations. That these objects are familiar to the speaker serves to deepen the sense of affinity. Finally, "an album of photographs" connects the two families: the appearance of the speaker's own mother establishes the space as "home from home", in an adept re-invention of the cliché, further personalising the scene for both speaker and reader.

From this point, the telling signs of inequality that emerge are held in an uncomfortable tension with the speaker's respect and affection. It is this tension that makes the poem so interesting, made possible only by the lyrical form's ability to carry subtlety and contradiction. Unlike "Small passing", which responds specifically to the event of apartheid, the public dimension in "William Kamanga" is more 'all pervasive'; De Kok conveys the *sense* of these tensions, which continue to exist for many white South Africans, while illustrating how larger racial politics play out in daily life. The difficulty of negotiating affection amidst an unequal power relation is evident in the speaker's uncertainty about reciprocity. That he "maybe" loved her is explained in the second stanza, where it becomes clear that he was a servant in the home of the speaker:

William Kamanga served at our table  
for thirty years before he retired.  
Then each month my mother sent money and news.  
Colonial circuits of care and demand,  
love to hire and then to lose?

His care is paid for – bought – by his wealthier employers who continue to ‘care’ for him after retirement. The speaker’s question here reveals uncertainty as to whether she can make claims on the affection of a paid servant. The direct confrontation of the colonial relationship brings to mind the concern of Spivak, in which the emancipation of the white middle-class feminist is shown to be achieved through the creation of a servant class, a relationship that reproduces patriarchal oppression in terms of race and land, rather than gender. The poem tracks a physical journey in which the speaker leaves the home space – the site of the colonial race/class/gender hierarchy – and moves out towards the public space, then finally establishes a new home space, one in which the power relation shifts towards equilibrium.

The colonial objects inside this black servant’s home signify the alarming circularity of the colonial relationship; whether through dominance or love, the speaker’s family objects – symbols of white colonialism like “teacups” and Edwardian furniture – infiltrate the private space of William Kamanga’s own home. Although on one hand they are a reminder of the ways indigenous southern African cultures have been obliterated, these objects simultaneously connote relationship, affection and intimacy. This uneasy relationship is neither justified nor glorified, but remains ambiguous and slightly disturbing. Together with the others, the speaker weeps “for everything that had and hadn’t happened”, presumably for what William Kamanga had suffered and for the opportunities and justice that he had been denied in his lifetime. The poem nevertheless closes with the speaker’s discovery of an instance of reciprocity, that in a reversal of William’s journey to her family, the speaker’s mother had made her way into his home and family memory symbolised by the photograph album. The tenderness of the scene intensifies the tragedy of the inequalities that separate their families, highlighting the complexity of a relationship fraught with contradictions.

Although the poem acknowledges and grieves for “everything that had and hadn’t happened” – that still hadn’t happened by the time of his death – the problematic colonial relationship remains largely unresolved. The inequalities outlined within the poem are not rectified in the course of its narrative. The personal story serves emotionally to heighten and personalise insidious problems that are pervasive to the country. Workers may no longer be required to carry pass books and may enjoy freedom of movement, but the tension of difference (or distance) and proximity between white and black South Africans has not disappeared.

The poem begins with the death of William Kamanga, but the second part is set a year previously, when the speaker journeys to Chinteche, “having no fathers or uncles left, / no old man to show the way”. This implies the death of the speaker’s own male relatives, and that her decision to leave the physical territory of her home and seek William Kamanga is provoked by her own loss. The poem details the ways in which, in the colonial tradition, William Kamanga inhabits her family’s space: the relationship is on their terms. The decision to reciprocate habitation of space, to be a dependent and visitor at the mercy of his benevolence, is deeply symbolic, and perhaps is the result of necessity: it seems that only when she has lost all the men in her family is she compelled to cross the colonial threshold towards a relationship with William in which she becomes a dependent, and he becomes a patriarch rather than a servant. Her loss, and perhaps her grief, urges her outward from the privacy of her home into the greater South African landscape. Only after she leaves the safety of her familiar environs and confronts the ‘external’ or public world does she find that her hosts are gracious enough to accept her into their home. As the poem moves from the privacy of domestic space to the outside world and back to privacy, the speaker momentarily reverses a pivotal imbalance in the apartheid social economy.

In similar vein, most of the other poems in the third section of *Terrestrial Things* have a strong sense of the autobiographical, in which the direction moves from the privacy of ‘home’ to an awareness of the public dimension that invades it. A poem in the second section, “A room full of questions”, however, moves in the opposite direction. Like De Kok’s apartheid poems we have here a personalised angle on a specific public event: in this case, the Truth Commission. In the remainder of this chapter I shall examine the question of whether the lyric can successfully respond to such a painful public spectacle. I shall suggest that its unique qualities might offer a truth of representation that is denied by more public discourse and media. De Kok writes extensively on the theme of grief, and at times this concern of both the challenges and capacities of the form emerges from the poetry itself.

“What everyone should know about grief” (1997: 21) is one such poem. It challenges public discourses on grief and the simplicity of mass media representations, by advocating in contrast the legitimacy of its own form, whilst self-consciously recognising its own limitations. The speaker in the first three stanzas is derisive about the public medium – the magazine article – which is so trite as to be comical:

'What everyone should know about grief'  
is why I buy the magazine.  
Between aerobic virtue on one page  
and the thrills of Machu Picchu on another  
grief finds its marketable stage.

The living tell their chronicles  
of hurt and lost and dead.  
In syncopated copy they rehearse  
'the cost of rage', 'the comfort of belief',  
In words and captioned movements of the head.

The story proffers help:  
advises talking as the healing cure,  
commends long walks, and therapies,  
assures the grieving that they will endure,  
and then it gently cautions: let go, move on.

The artificial and contrived discussion of grief in mass media, where the living "rehearse" their stories like players on stage, is juxtaposed against De Kok's own art which strives to achieve specificity and sincerity. Her medium, although intended for the public sphere, is self-consciously more private and less accessible – a more fitting form for an experience that no one should presume easily to understand. Unlike the simplistic magazine story, De Kok's speaker is not intrusive. Rather, she is sufficiently sensitive not to assume that there are solutions for grief. The lyrical poem implicitly advocates the suitability of its own form – personal and non-popular – to suggest images that express how specific, private and internal grief feels for those who experience it. At the same time, the poem does not propose a cure for pain:

But everyone knows sorrow is incurable:  
a bruised and jagged scar  
in the rift valley of the body;  
shrapnel seeded in the skin;  
undoused burning pyres of war.

And grief is one thing nearly personal,  
a hairline fracture in an individual skull.

Although grief affects the majority of people, for those mourning it is experienced as unique. The public approach to grief is bought into question through a reminder that even national tragedies are privately experienced by feeling individuals for whom there is no cure.

Shane Graham argues that the poems in *Transfer* and *Terrestrial Things* “address the impossible necessity of narrating stories about traumatic loss. And... that the key to unravelling this paradox lies in remapping the intimate, complex connections and displacements between memory, landscape, and the body” (2009: 63). Graham cites “What everyone should know about grief” as an example of the way in which both the human body and the physical landscape are used as metaphors for mourning, but also that “these connections transcend the merely metaphorical; the implication seems to be that the healing of one must involve the healing of all at once” (2009: 65). This reading of the poem acknowledges the very real and physical experience of suffering that De Kok conveys through descriptions of “shrapnel seeded in the skin; / undoused burning pyres of war” – images reminiscent of war wounds. To assume, however, that she is issuing suggestions about the nation’s healing is slightly misguided. By acknowledging the severity of its suffering, she recognises that “sorrow is incurable”, that like “a bruised and jagged scar / in the rift valley of the body” it can never fully heal. Rather than implying that the landscape, body and memory all need to be healed at once, as Graham argues, the poem acknowledges that deep grief can never be fully healed, to say otherwise is to be trite or presumptuous about another’s loss. Finally, the poem concludes on another self-referential note, where the poet does not purport to be able to offer the cure for grief, a

homemade elegy which sounds its keening  
in the scarred heart’s well;  
where it is too deep to reach

the ladder of light  
sent down from land above,  
where hands write words  
to work the winch  
to plumb the shaft below.

I have argued that the above two poems ask us to remember the intimate nature of people’s suffering, and that one should not presume to understand or heal another. The poems warn against trite or superficial public discourse which can obfuscate the truth of history and the condition of those who remain scarred. I have also argued that De Kok contrasts her form with the public discourses, implicitly arguing that the lyrical poem may convey truths that seem to be lost in more public media. In the final stanza, the winch becomes a metaphor for writing; it sends down

the 'light from above'. Through her ironic reworking of the phrase, De Kok acknowledges that words cannot save any person from the private depths of sorrow. The poet does not presume to be able to heal grief through her words.

Graham responds to the image of the winch as an example of a theme of "the untellable nature of grief and loss, which nevertheless demands to be told... The implication of this metaphor is that the truth can only be reconstituted inductively, by paying attention to the absences, gaps, seams and traces" (2009: 66). While De Kok certainly explores the difficulties of writing about grief, loss and history, the metaphor of the winch only calls into question the assumption that words can heal and that the metonymous hands hold knowledge and answers. The title, "What everybody should know about grief", exposes the speaking voice as arrogant and misguided; its claims to knowledge are unfounded because of the personal nature of the subject. As I have argued in my discussion on 'Small passing', De Kok differentiates between thinking (or hoping) and *knowing*, aware that writers would be arrogant to presume themselves to be "knowers of reality" (in Berold 2003: 116). Grief, as I have suggested, is represented as being the most individual and personal experience of reality, and therefore the most difficult to access. A caution against arrogance, however, is not the same as a doctrine of "the untellable nature of grief and loss" (Graham 2009: 65) or of the inability of language to communicate truth/s.

Whilst gaps and silences certainly do speak in their own way – and poetry often depends upon ellipses and line breaks – to say that truth can *only* be "reconstituted inductively by paying attention to absences" is to make a claim against language, specifically against poetry, that is not consistent with the body of De Kok's work. As the nature of "the truth" demands some further clarification, I understand Graham to be concerned with the truth of history, the truth of experience related to that of feeling, although his choice of the definite article "the" seems to indicate that there is only a singular truth, whether whose or which he does not identify. De Kok, however, seems primarily concerned in her poetry with the truth of experience or feeling, although it is often in response to history. The omniscient speakers in "*Al wat kind is*" (1988: 59) and "Too long a sacrifice" (2006: 122), for instance, evoke a sense of tragedy through a highly impressionistic, sketch-like form. This constitutes a different sort of truth to that of history or journalism. Though some of the imagery might be fictional, the reader becomes alert to the emotional possibilities of iconic South African events. To speak of "this torn light, this long torn light" would be

unintelligible if it were to feature in a history textbook under a section on police action, yet the long, grave vowels and unnatural juxtaposition of violence and innocence in “torn” and “light” fittingly conclude a poem that expresses a feeling of the senseless and inhuman nature of the act. As these poems successfully achieve a sense of pathos, it is self-evident that some truths, or part of the truth, can be reconstituted, not merely “by paying attention to the absences, gaps, seams and traces” (Graham 2009: 66), but also through the power of the poetry itself.

In a philosophical defence of the truth of poetry, Michael Hamburger concludes that while modern poets like Wallace Stevens and T. S. Eliot showed “a constant concern with the possibilities and limits of language” (1972[1969]: 37), often making language purposefully difficult and truth opaque, “The purpose of poets... is ‘to tell truth’, but in ways necessarily complicated by the ‘paradox of the human word’” (1972[1969]: 40). Modern poets, aware of the potential of “the human word” to distort or obscure truth, draw attention to language itself, prising open its conventions to expose its potential for deceit. Modern poetry, therefore, achieves a kind of integrity and authenticity; moreover, it potentially frees itself from the silencing effects of everyday language usage – for example, a cliché such as ‘home is where the heart is’, when subjected by De Kok to a process of interrogation and reinvention, can be re-invigorated with meaning. It can *say* once again.

Graham makes typically post-modern generalisations about the limitations of language and the impossibility of expression, but says too little about the possibilities of poetry – a form self-consciously at odds with ordinary language usage. If “the” truth, as Graham argues, is “untellable”, a useful idea is that of partial truth: “For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror.... Now I know in part; then I shall know fully” (TNIV 1 Cor 13:13). This gives validity to an individual’s personal experience and perspective, to the possibility of historical documents that contribute something true and meaningful to our understanding of the past, while leaving room to acknowledge ellipsis and even error.

“Tongue-tied” (2002: 24) is an exploration of this theme, in which the aptness of legal discourse in the pursuit of truth of experience is called into question:

‘Do you promise to tell the truth,  
the whole truth and nothing but the truth?’

Someone’s been hurt.

But she can't speak.  
They say she's 'tongue-tied'.

Considering the extent of the psychological trauma experienced by many who testified at the Truth Commission, it is arguable as to whether or not the victims were capable of telling the kinds of truths that the pseudo-legal procedure demanded. The speaker explains, "Someone's been hurt"; by contrast, the public discourse reduces the witness' silence to a common and inadequate explanation: "They say she's 'tongue-tied'". The speaker, however, recognises that the victim's ordeal was sufficiently damaging to impair her ability to express herself. In addition to this, it may be the case that the whole truth of such disturbing experience and loss is impossible to express through language, but the concern here is evidently with the emotional and psychological condition of the witness as she struggles to confront her grief. De Kok's imagery describes the woman trying to speak as being violently strangled:

Like an umbilical neck throttle.  
No spit, sound, swallow.  
Voice in a bottle.

Now she's speaking underwater,  
to herself, to drowning,  
to her son, her lost daughter.

Her tongue's a current  
washing over dead fish,  
abandoned rope and tackle.

The image of drowning conveys a sense of desperation underlying the attempt to speak, and perhaps to live. The image of fishing debris and the aftermath of death is tragic, connoting powerlessness and inefficacy. It is ugly in its invocation of hopelessness, almost reminiscent of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, but De Kok returns the mood to the victim. Breaking away from the fragmented and overtly 'poetic' impressions, the woman's speech opens in quotation and begins with the syntax of an ordinary language sentence. Despite the first-person voice and the past tense, despite the narrative style, her attempts at English-language coherence quickly dissolve into fragments ironically comparable with modernist poetry:

'They came for the children, took, then me,  
and then, then afterwards



the bucket bled. My ears went still.  
I'm older than my mother when...'. .

As in *The Waste Land* the fragmented form resonates with a kind of truth that is different to that of legal procedure – it conveys a truth of feeling and sincerity in expression that is self-consciously constrained in spite of its apparent assertiveness. The poem concludes: “‘That’s the truth. So help. Whole. To tell.’”. The idea of a *whole* truth, in legal terms, is shown to be impossible given the condition of the witness. At the same time, a kind of truth, that of feeling, that of the ravaging impact of the event upon her psyche, is expressed more adeptly through the distorted and transfigured language made possible by poetry.

This harkens back to my discussion of “One thing everyone should know about grief”, where I argued that De Kok in her lyrical mode implicitly draws a distinction between public and popular modes of discourse. The suitability of the former in situations of extreme suffering is called into question. In this case, the register of court-room discourse is shown to be inappropriate: the genre demands a coherent, rational and prosaic verbal account – truth of ‘fact’ – from a person or people rendered incapable of such clinical expressions by the very event that they are trying to express. Poetry, by deviating from so-called ‘factual’ representation of events, depends upon fresh inventions of language and new metaphors – “the umbilical neck throttle”, for instance – to contain truth of feeling that is elided by legal discourse. The public discourse has limited vocabulary to represent the inner world of the witness and cannot reconstruct a wholly true account of the events which she experienced. Although she does not presume to be able to represent the whole of the truth, or the witness’ truth, De Kok by attempting to describe the “tongue-tied” witness as she tries to speak, attests paradoxically to the eligibility of the lyrical poem to address the difficult task of representation more accurately than legal testimony.

Moreover, as I have argued in my discussion of “William Kamanga”, by reducing the larger historical event to a single event and focusing it upon a single character, De Kok personalises and intensifies the public event. To talk about the Truth Commission in general terms risks neglecting the specific and personal experience of individuals. “Tongue-tied” (2002: 87), in summary, responds to a very small and specific instance – a phrase or word used about a particular person, place and time. By expressing that moment in scrupulous detail, De Kok places it under a

microscope of perception. Her insight into the minutiae of the moment facilitates a deeper understanding of the larger circumstance.

De Kok's work contains an in-built self-awareness that acknowledges the limits of poetry in situations of extreme grief. Though her poetry conveys certain kinds of truths – the truth, in part – there are some things which she does not presume to be able express in full. The most self-reflexive of all the poems in the Truth Commission series in *Terrestrial Things* is arguably the opening poem, "Parts of Speech":

Some stories don't want to be told.  
They walk away, carrying their suitcases  
held together with grey string.  
Look at their disappearing curved spines.  
Hunch-backs. Harmed ones. Hold-alls.

Some stories refuse to be danced or mimed,  
drop their scuffed canes  
and clattering tap-shoes,  
erase their traces in nursery rhymes  
or ancient games like blind man's buff.

And at this stained place words  
are scraped from resinous tongues,  
wrung like washing, hung on the lines  
of courtroom and confessional,  
transposed into the dialect of record.

Graham refers to the images of entertainment and performance rituals (in the second stanza) and in the third to legal proceedings, arguing that

The TRC here becomes a parody of a Vaudeville show, an institution poorly equipped to track the erasures and displacements of trauma into encoded cultural symptoms. Moreover, when it does turn to the task of discovering the truth, the TRC is depicted as proceeding in a clinical, institutional way.... The narrator seems to see the TRC's self-appointed task as one of sanitizing the past rather than elegizing it, leading her to despair in the final stanzas at the ability of stories to transcend pain.... (2009: 67)

He observes that the 'performance mode' of the Truth Commission is not appropriate to the sobriety of the content, while the "institutional way" in which it proceeds adequately address the emotional, or human, dimension of the stories. I have argued, rather, that De Kok illuminates the insufficiencies of public discourses. Graham, however, makes no clear distinction between story-telling, testimony, and poetry. He applies a broad theme to De Kok's work, that of "the impossibility of telling stories about trauma" (2009: 66), but does not address the possibilities opened up by poetry,

specifically lyrical poetry. De Kok, on the other hand, draws these distinctions. While “Parts of Speech” certainly reveals some of the insufficiencies of the Truth Commission process it does not conclude on a note of despair.

Graham, I think, inaccurately assumes a ‘narrator’, a convention that belongs in novels and other story-telling forms. De Kok, instead, utilises the poetic convention of a ‘speaker’, a persona who creates the impression of a poet’s thoughts or perceptions. The lyrical speaker’s voice is almost internal, as that of a ‘consciousness’ rather than of the oral rhythms and syntax of ordinary speech, narrating voices, or even performance-style poetry (whether spoken or written). This small error is symptomatic of Graham’s failure to take account of the different modes of discourse and their value in communicating parts of the truth, or different kinds of truths. He makes a blanket claim about the “untellability” (2009: 68) of stories, that no part of the truth can be communicated. Moreover, he ignores the capacity of lyrical poetry to represent truth of feeling in a way that story-telling cannot.

The final stanzas to which Graham refers are both framed in question form, and therefore sufficiently open-ended to provoke multiple readings:

Why still believe stories can rise  
with wings, on currents, as silver flares,  
levitate unweighted by stones,  
begin in pain and move towards grace,  
aerating history with recovered breath?

Why still imagine whole words, whole worlds:  
the flame splutter of consonants,  
deep sea-anemone vowels,  
birth-cable syntax, rhymes that start in the heart,  
and verbs, verbs that move mountains?

Graham reads the questions as entirely rhetorical: that “Why still believe stories can rise...?” is an assertion that one should not believe in the veracity of stories. He argues that “The narrator here almost mocks the idea that stories – mere words, which as we have seen can only ‘look like acts’ – are enough to ‘move mountains’ or effect changes to material space” (2009: 68). I have argued that in apartheid South Africa, words are sufficiently powerful to legislate violence. It remains to be seen whether, in post-apartheid South Africa, words can bring healing or reconciliation, or at the least, whether words can expose truth. In an interview with De Kok, Erica Kelly expresses

a similar response to that of Graham. Regarding the final stanza of “Parts of Speech” she asks:

Is this a despair that you express, that language cannot access truth? As a poet, how do you address the limitations of the very medium of expression to which you are most strongly committed? (2003: 35)

The question implies that truth is completely inaccessible through language and that the poet’s tone is one of despair. De Kok responds:

I feel no despair that language fails or has limited expressive range or access. That tension and paradox is at the root of the activity of writing poetry itself. It is its very material. ...On the one hand, verbs can, and on the other they cannot, “move mountains”. (2003: 35)

The response shows that to be aware of the limitations of a medium is not the same as despairing of its “expressive range or access”. Verbs very often can have efficacy, but there is a limit. The ascending tone and beautiful lyricism of the final two stanzas, as quoted above, create a sense that the acts of imagination and emotional expression are still important: lyrical poetry is perhaps most indispensable precisely when “Some stories don’t want to be told”.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Gender and the Lyric

I have drawn attention to the ways in which home spaces are a locus of political events, and that public concerns affect individuals in a deeply personal way. The binary between ‘political’ and ‘personal’ is in some ways a fictitious one in a South African context. Ingrid de Kok uses the lyric form to capture ways in which historical events impinge on private lives. In this chapter I shall demonstrate how, when the typically masculinist public discourse ignores ‘women’s experience’ – children, family, the home, even sexuality – De Kok affirms the value of such subject matter, even as she extends her reach to national concerns. Discussion on home and family, for example, includes the effect on families and children of HIV/AIDS. The lyric form becomes the ideal medium through which to talk with tenderness and caution about a disease in which sexuality, the body, poverty and gender relations intersect. Problems of the writer’s subject position as white and, as an academic, relatively financially secure, recur in the poetry, mirroring many of the issues I have already raised. Finally, my discussion leads to De Kok’s approach to the city, and whether the lyric can respond to an alienating urban environment. Here, the intimate form must encompass the anonymity, or the sheer size, of an environment that would seem to deny close and personal experience.

In a 1994 interview Kelwyn Sole says: “I’d argue that resistance to an openness about sex is typically South African, typically prudish, typically macho” (in Berold 2003: 39). Sole connects a lack of representation of intimacy and sexuality in South African poetries to attitudes of masculinity. I would argue that these omissions are a result of men having dominated both public and literary life. With women having been relegated to their homes, home-life and private life have been neglected in South African literary discourse.

Some of De Kok’s most stridently feminist poetry emerges alongside her most overtly political poetry. “Woman in the glass” (1988: 38), for instance, addresses the issue of sexuality from a decidedly feminist perspective:

I am not the woman in the train  
who pulls your hand between her legs  
and then looks out of the window.

I am not the woman with the henna hair

in a city street, who never says a word  
but beckons you, beckons you.

Nor am I the woman in the glass  
who looks at you look at her  
and the glass smokes over.

...

Nor am I the woman in the dark  
whose silence is the meteor  
in the sky of your conversation.

The lines resist feminine identities as prescribed by the masculine gaze. The speaker's assertion of self-hood is predominantly a rejection of images of womanhood produced by patriarchy. The women depicted here are oriented towards the gratification of men. The opening of the poem is abruptly erotic; it is juxtaposed against female indifference and acceptance of complicity in woman's own oppression. The speaker is sharply critical of the women who perform these phallogentric roles – the woman who sells her body, or who watches in the mirror absorbed in her own objectification. The speaker chastises the artificial and dehumanising image of woman in which female sexuality exists for the gratification and exploitation of men:

That woman:  
bent over, offering her sex to you  
like a globe of garlic, asking for nothing;  
the one without fingerprints.

By contrast, the acts of speaking or writing resist the egocentric male audience which delights in the silence of women. The feminist speaker's individual self-definition begins with the negation of constructed images of womanhood that erase *authentic* female experience. De Kok openly confronts the personal theme of sexuality, thereby challenging, and even undoing, the patriarchal or 'macho' South African discourse that precludes both private experience and women's voices.

Conversely "To a would-be lover" (1988: 40) dismantles what are seen to be artificial (that is, socially constructed) masculinities. In the opening stanza De Kok couples erotic content with industrial imagery to jarring effect:

I once knew a man who made love  
with pockets of iron filings.  
The machines were oiled, the pistons shone,  
we were stapled together and sent through a shute.

...  
I cannot love athletes or the makers of metal things  
or anyone associated with Concorde.  
I like the sillier body, earthbound,  
with its many joints and dents:  
a squat figure on a sweaty mat.

The representation of men as powerful, machine-like and dominant is, ironically, accurate of many men's desired experience, but in which the language of power, strength and utility is presented as dehumanising. The speaker expresses a preference for a softer, "sillier" kind of body; in effect, she is interrogating both the erotic and romantic metaphor. Like "Woman in the glass", "To a would-be lover" resists the popular representations of gender and pursues instead ordinary identities, both masculine and feminine:

The delicious fiction, love,  
must dangle its infinitives,  
forget to close its clauses,  
offer alternative endings,  
a hero whose shirt hangs out  
and a heroine who trips over the bed  
because her contacts are lost under the sink.

Praise be the inelegance of ordinary love.

She offers here an alternative ending by describing, instead, an awkward and believable kind of relationship. She resists the public media, including literature, that is so often oppressive of men and women alike. Shying away from heroic narratives and representations, she affirms instead the validity of commonplace experience.

In addition to the patriarchal exclusion of women's voices and spaces, the South African literary tradition by necessity has for the most part turned its attention to the historical events that demand witness, creating a vacuum in personal and domestic concerns. Jeremy Cronin says in an interview, "certainly there is a real struggle now to validate millions of ordinary people's hopes, aspirations, experiences and energies" (in Berold 2003: 128). Or, as Sole said later in a 1994 interview, "Visibility is a big thing in the arts these days. As a sweeping statement, I wonder if the new South Africa hasn't become mesmerised by a sense of art as easily consumed spectacle" (in Berold 2003: 40). Against this trend, De Kok makes space for small and quiet experiences of history as well as for representations of the mundane.

Sole echoes a sentiment expressed by Lesego Rampolokeng, who, talking about his career as a political poet, says:

I was also, of course, from my really young days, completely romantic about our struggle. Everybody looked at the word ‘struggle’ as though it was a really huge golden thing that we all had agreed upon. We saw only the one struggle in life, and so often neglected the fact that every single moment we live is engagement in struggle or struggles. There are other struggles that are as important as the political one. (In Berold 2003: 30)

As a lyrical poet, De Kok has never neglected the small struggles. Having avoided being defined as an expressly political poet, she pursues an holistic approach as far back as *Familiar Ground* (1988). Although produced and published at the height of political turmoil, this collection gives credence to other important struggles. Among these are the struggles of women against patriarchy, of grief, alienation and exile, as well as those of children, parents and lovers in their interpersonal relationships. In his chapter “Sequestered from the winds of history:...” Chapman provides an overview of South African poetry “beyond 2000”. He argues:

What distinguishes voices beyond 2000 is a tangential shift from art/politics interrogations towards forms of family habitation. An aesthetic of the low mimetic remains apt for ventures into a new content: a content that, under the banners of struggle, would have been derided too easily as ‘bourgeois’. (2009:184)

Chapman recognises that the context of the struggle necessitated witness poetry, and that poets had a responsibility to engage with the public event. He suggests that the gritty realist register of resistance literature is now being harnessed to capture smaller details, private lives and home spaces – concerns that might have seemed petty or irrelevant in the apartheid context.

To illustrate the kinds of struggles hitherto neglected by criticism, “Text of necessity” (1997: 46) translates the idea of a poetry of necessity from a political context (recall Milosz) to a relational one. The speaker describes the rhythms and habits of a romantic relationship over time:

One by one  
the small refusals  
add up to a life.  
...

You give and gain  
scrupulous care, scrupulous blame,



won and lost and then reclaimed

...

What you want  
becomes a set of words,  
mirrors in your mouth.

Transpose this into necessity,  
or make it plain

when you stifle, as you rename  
the stirring of some  
unscheduled love or pain.

Here De Kok creates a sense of equilibrium; the dialectic of hurt and love becomes so commonplace and repetitive that the articulation of desire is a mere echo, like a room full of mirrors. The speaker instructs the reader, or perhaps the lover, to translate the meaningless, repetitive set of words into new words, the language of necessity – need – rather than desire. This renaming of “love or pain” is necessary in order to break the predictability and stasis of the relationship. Words, new words, are needed to communicate afresh against the tedium of experience. Perhaps the poetry itself is exposing the necessity of its role in being able to re-invigorate the expression of desire within stale relationships. De Kok’s speaker does not celebrate “ordinary love” so much as express feelings of confinement and frustration; the overarching sense, established in the first three lines, is one of being stifled and disappointed. Yet some negative sentiments are complicated by the deep attachment to what is presumably a long-term partner. The poem evades simplicity – ordinary life does not afford the binaries of explanation offered by political rhetoric.

Chapman argues that the present demands more complex representations than the political past which necessitated generalisations in order to unify individuals in struggle solidarity; in his words: “My point is that the challenge, after apartheid, is to rehabilitate a more nuanced society; the challenge for the person of words is to break out of caricature, stereotype, simplification” (2009: 191). It is Chapman who notes that in the South African context, the lyric form in particular has the faculties to present complex, “nuanced” and also private realities. His discussion of contemporary poetry supports the claim by Terry Eagleton from whom the title of his chapter – “Sequestered from the winds of history” – is taken; Chapman writes:

... in the poetry I have discussed there is a pointer as to why Eagleton ... is able to identify poetry as the literary genre most resistant to political criticism. It is that the verbal invention most of us associate with a poem, whether in shorter or longer form, leans towards lyricism. And lyricism, even of the low mimetic, favours the personal, the expressive register. (2009: 191)

Although, as I have discussed, De Kok utilises “the personal, expressive register” in protest against social and historical concerns, her voice is one that expresses the private, individual response to the event, rather than the public, declamatory voice of the politician to the masses. Even her most political work is fraught with complexity that deliberately thwarts simplistic or narrow readings. She makes no excuses for the difficulty of her form: “Writing and reading this sort of poetry is solitary and demanding. So be it!” (in Berold 2003: 117).

Chapman, in conclusion, suggests that “poetry – the minority genre most sequestered from the winds of history – may help delineate the potential of everyday life” (2009: 192). Although his discussion refers specifically to South African poetries beyond 2000, Part II of *Transfer* anticipates this shift towards domestic and ordinary subject matter. It is as if De Kok’s interpretation of South Africa’s transition from apartheid to democracy were one that hopes for a return to love and to home – for exiles, migrants, politicians and self-censored poets.

“Aubade” (1997: 52), for instance, self-consciously borrows from the traditional European genre of a song or poem about lovers separating at dawn – the transition from night to day. The title makes the canonical connection explicit, and as a further reminder of the speaker’s (and the lyrical writer’s) colonial inheritance, a duck feather pillow that has migrated from a “Yorkshire aunt” is included in her description of the private bedroom space. The poem, however, is set in a contemporary and local context – where someone is “opening the side door / to the mountain”, perhaps Table Mountain or an equally iconic feature of the South African landscape. While heir to the lyric tradition, especially in its emphasis on song or sound, the poem deviates from the conventions of the traditional aubade in a number of ways.

Whereas John Donne’s “The Sun Rising” (1990: 92) pictures the lovers together at dawn, De Kok’s “Aubade” narrates the point of view of the speaker lingering alone in bed, listening to the sounds of the partner who has already deserted

the bed. This is in contrast to the aubade convention of lovers who are reluctant to part:

When I wake  
and you have already  
left the bed  
(I hear you swirling  
water in your mouth,  
plugging the kettle in,  
opening the side door  
to the mountain),  
I steal your pillow  
for a moment, the plump one  
your Yorkshire aunt  
packed with duck feathers  
in 1961, and I lay my head  
on your head's imprint,  
while downstairs your head fills up  
with morning enterprise,  
inventories, rehearsals, plans,  
the day's new rustling feathers.

The sense is one of being left behind; the speaker alone is depicted as lingering, holding on to the absence left by her partner, physically transferring her presence onto his empty pillow in an attempt to be closer to him. The poem is as much about distance and absence as it is about intimacy; the speaker moves her head closer to his absence, symbolised by the imprint he has left behind. The speaker's partner is "downstairs"; he has moved away from the intimate space, and becomes involved in the demands of the day. The absence left by his head on the pillow is placed in contrast to the presence of his plans and busyness with which his "head fills up".

As the speaker listens to the sounds of her partner's movements, the intimate space is replaced by the realities of the external world, the fact of ordinary living and industry seldom represented in love poetry. The register of De Kok's aubade, therefore, is that of the relatively low mimetic in comparison with Donne's symbol of the bedroom as eternal to the spheres. By describing the sounds of ablutions, the kettle and the slidedoor, De Kok focuses on an actual inhabited home. At the same time, there is movement rather than stasis; the transfer to day, busyness, and the external, public world invades the intimate relationship with tangibility. While retaining the personal and expressive voice of the lyrical poet, the comparatively bare language of De Kok's aubade – not Donne's heterogenous ideas yoked by violence

together – posits a kind of realism and authenticity that resists trends of spectacle or fantasy in political poetry or love poetry, respectively.

Unlike “The Sun Rising” and most traditional aubades in which the speaker is unselfconsciously masculine and imperialistic – for instance, Donne’s speaker who proclaims “She’s all states, and all princes I” – De Kok’s poem is presented from a woman’s perspective: it is placed in a series of ordinary-love poems spoken with a female voice. It resists the courtly tradition of love as a game of conquest, and presents instead a romantic realism; it details the commonplace routine of what appears to be an ordinary couple. The lack of any obviously masculine roleplay and of female objectification works as an act of resistance against the patriarchy of the ‘love’ tradition. Moreover, the representation of home space in itself acts against the dominance of public, male-oriented spaces in so much poetry in general.

My emphasis on the subversive features of the poem are as much a postcolonial concern as a feminist one. Just as De Kok resists the patriarchy of the inherited tradition, so too does she resist its imperialism, thereby ‘South Africanising’ the lyric and transforming its purpose to one that is local and relevant, in a deeply political sense. As I discussed in my Introduction, while the legitimacy of colonial forms is under question, De Kok recognises her responsibility to transform the lyric and to meet the challenges posed by contemporary national concerns. In the same section of *Transfer*, “Safe delivery” (1997: 42) gives an account of the birth of a child, venturing further into the relatively uncharted territory of the ‘feminine’ and the ordinary. Although the emergence of South Africa as a new democracy three years before the publication of *Transfer* is often couched in mildly obstetric discourse – the “birth of the nation”, for instance – De Kok’s language of transition is intimate in character. While both the English canon and South Africa’s political literatures deal extensively with the transfer from life to death, the transition from womb to external world is a less popular focus of subject. What might be called gynocentric poetics – for instance, imagery of the ‘fluid’ body in Ruth Miller, Ingrid Jonker, Antjie Krog and Lebogang Mashile, to name a few – have put the flesh of the women’s bodies on a mainly androcentric South African literary map. De Kok’s lyrical form, like Miller’s before her, details the personal spaces of women’s bodies and sexuality.

In an unusual approach, De Kok describes a home-birth in which four “parent midwives” of both genders participate. The result is an affectionate, even a farcical

description of the parents, addressed to the child:

One attached to a phone,  
one holding a do-it-yourself book,  
a third adjusting the bed and a fourth  
basketting your pulsing head.

While the gynocentric content appears to be overtly feminist, the narrative itself serves to create a sense of inclusivity as male counterparts participate in the supposedly female event. This is illustrated by De Kok's play on the feminine term "midwives" which she uses in its modern, gender-neutral sense and, more importantly, by an atmosphere of egalitarianism that is conveyed through the narrative itself. In terms of gender politics, the poem serves to represent previously marginalised subject matter in a spirit of equality. The subversion of the old literary tradition heralds the birth of a new counterpart.

The title, "Safe delivery", signals from the start a positive outcome. Thus it is without anxiety or melodrama that the topic of birth is introduced. The delivery could be something as ordinary as a parcel in the mail; the poem serves to demystify the 'miracle of birth', actually the very visceral nature of birth and women's bodies. The birth is described in a tangible exposition of bodily experience starting from the birth canal:

Your birth was a constricting band  
denying you familiar dark circulation;  
then a rush of air, gush of light  
splashed you through the net of your mother,  
...

Born in a caul, coughed out of the belly  
of the whale, wide-eyed, quivery.  
Now blossoming into family flesh.  
I wish you well in your human livery.

The messy realism of birth and afterbirth is carefully controlled, but without censure, as the sense of liquidity of the amniotic fluid and release of the infant is described in terms of a marine parallel: through the safe yet permeable barrier of the mother, likened to Jonah's whale, the fish-like newborn enters the world. From the body of the mother, the speaker draws attention to the body of the child – the focus is on its

“flesh”, the physical and bodily aspect of the human being. In a play on the title, and on “life” or ‘lives’, the concluding phrase, “human livery”, completes the delivery, or transfer, into the child’s own human body which is likened to a uniform or garment. By breaking the silence on bodily functions and the ‘female’ subject matter, De Kok – like Antjie Krog after her – pushes the boundaries of the intimate to include the realities of bodies, women, and life at its origin. As Krog explains in her poem “God, Death, Love” (2006: 20):

God, Death, Love, Loneliness, Man  
are Important Themes in Literature  
menstruation, childbirth, menopause, puberty  
marriage are not.

By making space in literature for ‘female’ concerns, these writers challenge assumptions about what constitutes an ‘important’ theme.

In a similarly ordinary, bodily expression of everyday reality, “After forty” (1997: 40) addresses the issue of ageing, another seldom-spoken subject, more recently confronted in bold, even shocking ways by Krog in her collection, *Body Bereft* (2006). With an angry and satirical voice, Krog in “When tight is loose” (2006: 23) describes a woman whose body is “crumbling away” as she ages:

in the *Hormone Book* by Susan Mare  
she reads about the wane  
of oestrogen: the waist thickens and  
the vagina wall thins and the colon crashes  
through its own arse.

Krog’s vocabulary here is frank, graphic, as she deliberately avoids euphemism, openly confronting taboo and neglected subjects, namely the female body, sexuality and ageing. De Kok’s poem, “After forty”, published nine years prior to *Body Bereft*, is a slightly melancholy, yet also satirical, reflection on this transition as the speaker describes her journey in terms so commonplace as to be unceremonious:

Got half-way with the gene basket,  
two birth marks and slasto cellulite.  
Hitched a longish ride  
with a one of a kind thumbprint,  
astigmatic vision and maybe original sin.

The image of birth marks and cellulite, in contrast to popular, media representations of the perfect woman, depicts the imperfections of a real body. De Kok's self-exposure confronts the reader with the less than glamorous facts of ordinary life. The tone is blunt and matter of fact; there is a hard edge to the self-description which confronts the reader with the truth of the body after forty. The juxtaposition of "astigmatic vision", a very physical, commonplace disability, against the tenuous and mystical concept of "original sin", serves to heighten by ironic contrast the reality of our human vulnerability.

The sense of the ordinary continues in the second stanza, in which life is described as being routine and structured:

Now life's a honeycomb, an anagram,  
ammonite, ant trap, knot;  
alarm clock set for the same time every morning,  
limping iambic footprint, warning trochee cough;  
dot-to-dot puzzle on its way to being completed,  
meals on wheels, rolling downhill.

Ultimately, the predictable and the mundane chart the degeneration of a human life that culminates in old age and finally death. The sense of anti-climax is almost completely at odds with the lyrical convention, which is one that typically intensifies emotion. Here, the dispassionate tone is a striking deviation from the tradition, acknowledging instead the processes of internal experience that are usually too bland for literary recollection. It is the sense of authenticity, however, and the verbal dexterity through which it is expressed that, to continue the ironic contrast, sustain the lyrical voice.

The disappointment of the speaker is felt more acutely in the final stanza, which reflects back on the hopeful anticipation of the speaker as a child:

So much for the family photograph:  
the crisp child posed in front  
of her past like a fifties filmstar;  
a fledging imperial eagle  
in front of her future.

The sense of defeat is felt by the reader, who is also left with the image of the child "in front of her past", who, it appears, never fulfils the expectation but instead falls

behind, bound to earth by work, obligations and fragility. As in “Aubade”, De Kok does not miss the opportunity to reflect caustically on her colonial inheritance: the ‘whiteness’ of the unrealistic social expectations. Although the speaker expresses a sense of dissatisfaction or deflation, on closer reading the impassive scientific description of herself as a “gene basket”, or the common or garden vocabulary of “slasto cellulite”, is strangely beautiful in its accessibility in comparison with the falsity and glamour of the child posed “like a fifties filmstar”. It is the social expectation placed upon the girl in the family photograph that is at fault; the speaker by comparison emerges from the page as a credible representation of womanhood.

Whilst the family photograph in “After forty” represents the ideologies and expectations of white South African society, the family domain is also the most private of all human experience. In my discussion of “William Kamanga” I argued that the political and historical events of the time are made personal through the focussed description of a specific person in the privacy of the family space. I also suggested that the journey outside of the speaker’s own family space into the external world and family home of ‘the other’ signifies the beginning of a process of restoring balance and equality to the colonial relationship. In “My mother’s house hold” (1997: 36), however, the dynamism of the journey moves in the opposite direction – the external world migrates inwards towards to privacy of the home space.

This lyric, whilst extending itself to meet the demands of national circumstances, does not neglect to capture the the most intimate and tender familial gestures – the “heart of the house” (from “*Al wat kind is*” 1998: 59). In what could be read as a womanist lyric, De Kok affectionately describes the relationship between the speaker, together with her siblings, and her mother. Importantly, the refrain, whilst the last stanza slightly modifies the first, looks outwards towards the woman’s friends:

My mother held us to her.  
This made friends chafe and sting,  
or want her for their own.

A contrast is presented when the mother’s own children are described by the speaker as reluctant:

There we four were, dragging out feet  
backwards and forwards to her love,



trying to keep a secret of ourselves,

while the house filled up with  
other people's children.  
Perhaps she stole them away.  
Now there are more,  
those children's children,  
an undertow of love.

The mother's love draws other children to her, so necessitating the enlargement of her private home space to be able to receive children from outside. As the visitors go on to have their own children, the sense of hospitality and openness serves to open up the domestic sphere to the larger 'human family'. Through simple affection and kindness, the barrier between the private and public sphere becomes increasingly redundant but does not compromise the safety and belonging conveyed in the description of home and mothering. It is still the mother's household, even as she permits others to enter its nurturing domain.

The poem "The head of the household" (2002: 59) appears at the start of the subsection "Freight" in *Terrestrial Things* (2002), a subsection of poetry concerned with HIV/AIDS and its effects. Here, as in the Truth Commission poems, De Kok responds to a specific public event, showing its effects on private lives. Of the crises that face contemporary South Africa, there is none as personal as those of sexuality and the body – the individual locus of the AIDS epidemic. HIV and AIDS are at once a national, even a global concern, and an extremely private affair, often infused with social shame and moral judgment. The public event, then, touches upon the most intimate and personal aspects of human life. "The head of the household", like "My mother's house hold", is a poem concerned with home, family and mothering. While the title anticipates a similarity to the previously discussed poem, the first line immediately thwarts the expectation of a safe domestic bubble:

... a girl of thirteen  
and her children are many.

In this case, the great 'matriarch' is only a child; yet alarmingly she is like the elderly matriarch in that she cares for many children. Although the personal pronouns shift to the third-person, the emotional intensity of the content finds its expression through the

lyrical voice. The harsh realities of survival for this child-mother are conveyed through a gruesome depiction of these, her children:

Left-overs, moulting gulls,  
wet unweaned sacks.

Perhaps the grizzly, even vulgar, depiction of private suffering is what is meant by “An aesthetic of the low mimetic [which] remains apt for ventures into a new content” (Chapman 2009: 184).

The unnatural burden of responsibility carried by the thirteen year-old girl as a result of the HIV/AIDS crisis is reiterated in the image of her being overloaded –

she carries them under her arms  
and on her back

though some must walk beside her  
bearing their own bones and mash

when not on the floor  
in sickness and distress –

and in the final image of the house being balanced on her head like a jar of water, or domestic responsibility. Here, as in “My mother’s house hold”, the mother figure seems to attract an ever-increasing group of children towards her from the outside world. In this instance, however, the burden is overwhelming and the resources are insufficient; the children walk only when they are not too sick to get up from the floor. The children are needier, and the mother, being only a child herself, has not the resources to share. “Love” finds no place in a household of barely enough food; mothering becomes a barbed euphemism for survival; the “moon and bone-cold stars / navigational spoor” point the way not to a hopeful destiny, but to sickness and death:

ambulance, hearse,  
the delivery vans

that will fetch and dispatch  
the homeless, motherless

unclean and dead  
and a girl of thirteen

children in her arms,  
house balanced on her head.

The home, in this instance, has not been enlarged by the intrusion of the outside world; rather, it has been destroyed.

Similarly, “Compassionate leave” (2002: 63) portrays the paradox of the national crisis that is experienced and mourned in a personal, often private way:

Almost everyone’s on leave,  
gone away  
...  
  
to pay respects  
in rooms and huts  
  
to watch and pray for dying ones  
shrunk under streets  
  
to vigils through the night  
in closed-off streets.

Here De Kok describes rural settings in which those who mourn or wait for death do so in privacy – in the concealed spaces of “rooms and huts” and at vigils in streets that are also cordoned off, reinforcing the confinement. The sense of privacy and interiority is conveyed through the enclosed spaces, whilst the phrase “watch and pray” is reminiscent of Christ’s agony in Gethsemane with those who await his execution. The mourning rituals themselves seem to mirror the malnourishment and atrophy of diseased bodies:

small and smaller funeral feasts  
  
after truncated prayers  
chanted by tired priests.

The descriptions point to an exhaustion of physical and emotional resources in the face of large-scale HIV-related death. Nevertheless, despite the personal nature of Sexually Transmitted Diseases, and of grief itself, many must go to public places – “taxi ranks and stations”, “billboards, radios” – to find information. The event is unavoidably public.

In a paper, the title of which takes its cue from this poem (“Compassionate leave”), Sarah Brophy and Susan Spearey respond to “Freight”, the section of *Terrestrial Things* devoted to HIV/AIDS and its effects. They note that, as De Kok

puts the lyric to the service of the current historical moment, she becomes once again a witness poet, describing the public crisis in its intimate and personal manifestations. In keeping with her circumspect style and carefully contained emotion,

...De Kok eschews the sensational and the polemical. Even on occasions when her poetry of witness brings readers face to face with the most widely publicized of South Africa's historical traumas... her treatment of the public crisis foregrounds their psychological and embodied impacts on the quotidian routines of speakers and readers. (2008:312)

The public event returns to the experience of ordinary people, of their bodies, homes and families. Thus it can be seen how once again the lyric in its tendency towards elegy and its ability to contain and express highly emotional subject matter draws on the resources of its form and encompasses the historical occasion – in this case, HIV/AIDS. Beyond the destruction of families and homes, the physical effects are immediate and personal to those infected with the virus. In addition, social and moral stigmas abound in the light of the sexually transmitted nature of the disease. Despite the scale and reach, the matter is private.

In an honest, even disturbing, treatment of the issue, De Kok confronts the experience of poverty-related HIV/AIDS from the perspective of those who witness it from a privileged lifestyle. “The child at the lights” (2002: 62) conveys this distance and isolation in what is a strikingly *impersonal* treatment of an orphan suffering from the effects of AIDS. Rather than harnessing the form to personalise the faces of begging street children or to evoke an empathetic response through sensitive characterisation, De Kok draws attention to the callous indifference of wealthier people:

The child in the street  
motions, asks for something.  
Noon, a school day.  
The car windows are steamy  
but unopened to his mouthed request.  
We have been told to keep doors locked fast.  
We have been told to turn from  
clamorous hands, tear ducts, miming necks.

All remember the call  
for a hardened heart,  
for welded arteries,  
a wary pulse,  
when children irrupt

at the traffic lights at the threshold of the city.

If the poem is in fact about the child at the lights, it tells only of the ellipsis incurred by this child who is not noticed beyond his gesture of request. The speaker continues to describe not the child, but the response of the passengers. Readers too are perhaps implied by the pronoun “We”. In an apparent abdication of responsibility the speaker recalls the instructions that “We have been told”, so that the heartless response is experienced as a “call” or duty – almost a moral imperative. As the lines shorten and the pace slows, it becomes clear that the orders to be numb to suffering attack the vital human functions: heart, arteries and pulse. The image, “Welded arteries”, denotes the mechanisation of organic matter, hinting at a loss of humanity.

It is a loss of humanity fairly characteristic of De Kok’s depictions of the city. The child at the lights is metonymic. His ‘irruption’ is felt by the motorist to be intrusive and serves to justify the insularity of the passengers as they try to retain a sense of their privacy whilst living in an urban and, therefore, densely populated space. This is in stark contrast to the permeable membrane of the mother whose home is protective yet welcoming to outsiders.

It is as if the accents of the lyrical voice were under threat as the voice seeks to capture the atmosphere of the city. The specificity of De Kok’s childhood poems is lost. Her Cape Town poems, for example, do not focus intimately on a single person, as do many of her other poems about children. Rather, the Cape Town poems signal a sense of distance as the speaker’s subject-position elevates her above immediate involvement in the life of the city. In “Cape Town morning” (2006[1997]: 60) she observes from a neutral distance:

Street children sleep, shaven mummies in sacks,  
eyelids weighted by dreams of coins,  
beneath them treasure of small knives.

...

And trucks digest the city’s sediment  
men gloved and silent  
in the municipal jaws.

As unknown, unnamed figures go about their daily lives, the speaker’s voice loses something of its personal quality. The description of the gloved men might be

contrasted with the precision and proximity of De Kok's account of William Kamanga. It is the anonymity and hostility of the city, which is too large to be known, and yet close enough to be a threat, that presents the greatest challenge to the lyrical voice. As it seeks to convey the truth of experience, it encounters the numbness of loneliness and alienation. This creates a tension, for the poems continue to try to humanise distant and anonymous figures.

"Cape Town by day" (2006[1997]: 61) presents an industrialised, mechanised entity that is at once enchanting and inaccessible:

A marshland of fog and gas  
muffles the commerce of sound  
turns Cape Town into Venice

as the light on the dock laps  
tackle, cranes, yards, grain elevators,  
suspending them in tidal anchorage.

The impression of a city, eerily without people, is at odds with the intimacy one expects from the lyrical mode. What this does achieve, however, is a snapshot of the city in a particular moment in time that is entirely unique; or not quite: one hears echoes of Douglas Livingstone's Durban from his collection, *Eyes Closed Against the Sun* (1970). Like Livingstone's Durban, De Kok's Cape Town is not the city of postcards or tourism flyers.

Herein is the connecting thread of De Kok's lyricism. While central Cape Town continues to market itself as a clean, colonial, and largely white enclave, her series of poems attempts to capture a more gritty and sociologically true rendition of the city. The unpleasant realities are exposed again in "Cape Town by night" (2006[1997]: 62):

From Signal Hill  
on Valentine's night  
car alarms rouse  
the last romantics.

...

Underneath,  
gaunt men in doorways  
and ransacked women  
key back rooms.

The first scenario is both quirky and cynical in its approach to the threat of crime. Possibly its humour is uniquely South African. The third line shatters expectations as the romantic allusions give way in minimalist, abrupt language to an account of the seedier side of Cape Town. The poem hints at despair in what is left unsaid. As 'postcard' Cape Town is discarded, De Kok points to an alternative city identity. At the same time, she writes as one who lives outside the city that she describes, as one who watches, but does not experience an involvement.

In "Notes for that week" (2006: 141), however, De Kok is able to reconcile these impressions from a distance with a more immediate daily experience. By fragmenting the poetic structure into 'days', she is able to construct a collage of incongruous images. While "Friday" describes a medical condition (presumably arrhythmia), which draws the reader into physically close and emotionally private quarters, the private space of the home on "Saturday" captures the anonymous 'underclass' of the city:

From the window we watched  
three men in the street  
search our garbage bin  
for bread or bottles,  
liberation's leftovers.

The grim realities of political disappointment are never far from home; in the city, poverty lies on the borders of protected domestic space. "Sunday" describes things that have changed since 1994, but there remains the plight of desperate people:

Men from the Congo  
their eyes border-crossing  
safeguard the cars  
in courteous French.

What is again a sketchy outline of a city scene is juxtaposed against particular experiences of domestic life. Displaced car guards outside; inside a colonial-bourgeois residence:

*Thursday*  
Inside.  
The house with the cool rooms in summer.  
High ceilings, white mouldings.  
Light filters through wooden blinds  
...

Who is sleeping away the long afternoon?

Without apparent justification, the ‘snapshots’ are placed alongside one another in the same place and time – a particular week, in a city, in South Africa in 1994. There is a sense of artificiality, of paper-thin public/private demarcation, as these separate worlds of domestic luxury inside and urban poverty outside are forced into an uncomfortable tension by virtue of a shared location.

In this way, De Kok seeks, within poetic form, to negotiate irreconcilable aspects of her experience. The city poems, for the most part, serve to deepen the sense of alterity between private and public space. This somewhat nullifies the achievement of poems such as the Truth Commission series which capture public events with the personal voice, or, of the personal poems which extend the home space to include political concerns. Whereas the Truth Commission series carefully, sensitively represents the nuances of individual suffering, the snapshots of the city are viewed from a distance, one which implies, at times, the perspective of the privileged classes. It is the city, rather than politics, that provides the greatest challenge to the lyrical poet. The environment that is at once so near and so inaccessible is expressed in a muffled, slightly alienated voice that is muted by the challenges of a disparate environment.



## POSTSCRIPT

### Witness in 'Unlyrical' Times

De Kok's Cape Town poems, like the many concerned with HIV/AIDS, attempt to respond to the reality of desperate economic inequality with both compassion and responsibility. While the poetry succeeds in capturing the city with its warts rather than the glossy images portrayed by the tourist industry, the subject of the city does pose more generally two major challenges to the lyrical voice. First, the alienating effect of cities on individuals is anathema to personal experience, perception, or identification. In this way the city poems are markedly different from the larger body of De Kok's work. Second, as the distance between the speaker and the images in poems such as "The child at the lights" becomes apparent, the question of the positioning of the writer *vis a vis* her material resurfaces.

Writing *about* poverty, like writing about apartheid or the experience of black women, we are reminded, is a conundrum for the white, relatively privileged artist with a sense of social responsibility. While 'development' has become a buzz-word amongst well-meaning thinkers and activists, the term is fraught with similar difficulties of power-relations, as I presented in my Introduction. Those who want to 'help' the poor struggle to avoid a relationship of dependence; those who do not show a concern for social justice stand complicit in a system in which thousands of people are denied human rights by virtue of their material circumstances. Education is believed to be an important key to ameliorating the causes of poverty and disease, but as I have explained in my discussion of knowledge and power, education is closely tied to westernisation, or the 'imperial' influence in Africa. Practically speaking, skills and knowledge are a type of wealth still largely in the hands of more privileged white educators, especially at a tertiary level. Those who wish to rectify social and economic injustice by transferring their skills may end up reproducing a very unequal relationship. Writers, then, particularly those who are comfortably off and educated, face the challenge of responsibility either to impart their knowledge or skills to those who may benefit, or to represent the plight of those whose suffering is being ignored, and who find themselves effectively voiceless. The former poses the problem of 'proprietary rights over knowledge' and reproduces reminders of the imperial mission; the latter a knowledge or understanding that is equally reprehensible to those who are

sensitive to the politics of representation. It is such challenges with which the empathetic and socially aware lyrical voice must engage.

The alternative is to do nothing, or to remain silent. And silence, it would seem, is becoming an increasing threat, as I shall discuss in the following paragraphs. I hope that I have considered the difficulties of white writing in South Africa, and that the debate concerning who has a right to speak about whom is important and legitimate. It is my experience, however, that the interests of being politically correct and compensating for white guilt serve to limit honest and necessary discussion. Socio-economic problems in southern Africa are sufficiently urgent that those who can speak (write, teach) are compelled to do so, despite an unavoidable trespass of their subjectivity or power. Recalling my discussion about complicity, white guilt, and women's writing about 'race' cannot be divorced from a national crisis that has become an economic crisis. De Kok's work shows a vocal yet sensitive response to these problems. She shows is aware of the difficulties of her position, yet despite the danger she continues to contribute her voice.

The tension between a 'postcolonial' resistance to the west and a human rights concern to alleviate suffering has been most obviously evident in ANC party members' response to HIV/AIDS, in which 'western' science was rejected partly on the basis of a pan-African impulse. AIDS denialism, as far as I understand it, was seen to be a reaction against western pharmaceutical companies which, it was believed, were fabricating scientific facts about anti-retrovirals in order to kill black Africans. If my understanding is not accurate, it serves only to show the vagueness of the ruling party's response to the national crisis under Thabo Mbeki's leadership. The rejection of 'western' methods of understanding and problem-solving is understandable at an ideological level, but the urgency and scale of the situation render the response inhumane. In this respect, De Kok's portraits of HIV-related suffering posits the necessity of communicating the truth about these painful experiences, whatever the difficulty of the writer's subject position. Although the idea of speaking for any group is problematic, I wonder if, in South Africa, the realities of poverty and disease should disallow academic idealism, in the sense that practical measures, however ideologically troubling, are often necessary if material inequalities are to be alleviated.

That is not to say that De Kok has elected herself as a spokesperson; her tender descriptions of children without parents, nonetheless, have the effect of

bringing to life, and to light, the experiences of those who are often ignored. Political leaders are not the only South Africans to ignore the problem of HIV/AIDS: many people continue to engage in risk-taking sexual behaviour, whether well-off or not. A reason might be that the scale of the problem is too overwhelming, resulting in desensitisation or hopelessness. If anything is to intervene in such a condition, the ‘medicinal’ effects of literature on a hurt or broken national psyche are not to be trivialised. If De Kok’s intervention achieves anything, it is her controlled handling of trauma so that hope may remain a possibility.

Joan Metelerkamp, in 1992, spoke of her “sense that there’s a lot of censorship, self-censorship in South African writing. There are legitimate themes and illegitimate themes” (in Berold 2003: 9). If self-censorship of writers who are sensitive to the politics of representation has not already muted academic and literary voices, the political climate, in a reactionary response to modes of thinking that operated under apartheid, is such that voices of contestation, or ideas that do not fall within party lines, are easily cast aside as ‘counter-revolutionary’. Pragmatically, the silencing of dissident voices retards problem-solving and thwarts progress; ideologically, such silencing poses a serious threat to democracy and human freedoms. My discussion on contrasting political modes of writing or speaking with the lyrical mode has pointed to the lack of detail, complexity and ambiguity in political discourse. In short, politics talk simplifies issues. Unrealistic promises may be made, for example, to rural, uneducated constituencies that are vulnerable to deceitful rhetoric.

The story of South Africa’s past, or even present, has become increasingly obfuscated by self-interest. Jacob Dlamini, in his memoir *Native Nostalgia* (2009), discusses the renaming of black townships (or the re-writing of history) and goes on to say:

Still, this attempt at distorting history is, to my mind, the lesser of the many evils made possible by the corruption of black history we see all around. Far more dangerous is what has been made possible by the fiction that black South Africans lived, suffered and struggled the same way against apartheid. This has allowed racial nationalists to claim with impunity that if all blacks suffered the same way, then any black person can stand in for all blacks. It has made it all too easy for some to play the race card. It has also allowed a few black faces to get rich at the expense of millions of blacks – all in the name of black economic empowerment and transformation, whatever that means. (2009: 21)

Dlamini's argument points to a need for truthful representation not only of the past, but also of present circumstances. While the political and financial success of individuals purports to represent the situation of the majority, the hardship experienced by many South Africans is elided and the need for a new kind of witness poetry becomes apparent. De Kok writes in "Too long a sacrifice" (2006: 122):

For those who queue in cold dawn air,  
uncounted by the census  
the hope barometer falls,  
memory returns like the weather.

...  
What to do? Watch and pray?  
No benign conclusion waits  
in the wings, enters to pull the curtain  
down over hunger, grief and hate.

This poem acknowledges the damage that has incurred as a result of South Africa's treacherous past, but also that for many the triumphalist political narrative of the present offers neither practical solutions nor hope of an alternative to current material circumstances. De Kok bears witness to, and remembers those who are "uncounted by the census", who are ignored, forgotten and omitted from political consideration. Ironically, 2006 saw the failure of Statistics South Africa to conduct a plausible national census in its failure to take stock of the difficult economic conditions faced by many South Africans. In a characteristically compassionate manner, the poet captures the truth of experience of those whose plight is being ignored, or even censored. Whereas political modes of language can avoid or distort the truth, the lyrical mode attempts to touch the needs of the wider human family.

De Kok's concern with memory is markedly different from those who invoke the past as an excuse for money-laundering and 'tenderpreneurship'. Not only is the poet's reconstruction of history likely to be less self-interested than that of politicians, but De Kok's skill is to record a diversity of small experiences, not an homogenous and inaccurate singular story. As memory is a theme throughout the body of her work, it can be seen that acts of remembering are important to her commitment to the poetic medium. Her poems concerned with 'national memory', in particular, may become crucial to the survival of the details of truth. "Bring the statues back" (2006: 124) confronts this topic with a lightness that accentuates by ironic contrast the serious intent:

Nobody lives in Verwoerdburg or Triomf anymore.

Names have changed,

...

Remember the gasp, the sheer delight:  
(in memory filmed in black and white)  
apartheid's architect a dangling man  
at the end of a winch on a crane?

We hear he then was moved  
to a garage in Bloemfontein

...

How easy, after all  
to remove a world  
to erase a crooked line  
and start again.

But the memory of a belted policeman,  
his moustache like a dog on a leash -  
let's not lose that, or we'll begin to believe  
DRC church spires were darning needles.

...

Let's put Verwoerd back  
on a public corner like a blister on the lips;  
let's walk past him and his moulded hat,  
direct traffic through his legs,  
and the legs of his cronies of steel and stone.

By turning the Dutch Reformed Church spires into darning needles, De Kok illustrates the irreverence of amnesia, revealing its inappropriateness and thus highlighting its risk. The figure of Verwoerd is rendered ridiculous in a voice that is ironical in its attack on public display. Thus De Kok makes her point while retaining her lyrical voice. Her interest, clearly, is not in her own political agenda, but in remembering with concern what people have suffered, and in preventing the recurrence of a traumatic historical narrative.

Beyond a culture of silencing (in the context of political correctness), of postcolonial stigma, and the erasure of history, the proposal of the recent 'Secrecy Bill' or Protection of Information Bill, has raised controversy about media freedom. In the light of this, André Brink's article, recently published in *The New York Times*, comes to mind:

Mr. Zuma has ushered in a new kind of silence that is threatening to take the place of ordinary communication. His proposed legislation betrays a dangerous attitude toward the word, written or spoken. It has been said that the prime function of the word is to interrogate silence; but if silence becomes sequestered beyond the reach of

words, of language, of the press, of literature, that space becomes inhabited by lies and distortions, pretences and subterfuges and inadequacies of all kinds. (2010)

It is difficult to know whether the Bill will translate into the kind of censorship that Brink envisions, but it might be the case that silence about government spending could lead to an even greater abuse of public funds, further entrenching an already startling wealth inequality, and that self-interested politicians will be legally protected from exposure. If this were to be the case, then it seems that the role of the artist will again (so soon after apartheid?) become one of witness, in which uncomfortable truths are told through story and poetry.

The times are 'unlyrical', most simply in that truth is constantly under threat. White South Africans, in particular, write from a precarious position; paradoxically, their whiteness – once their guarantee of privilege – is now easy target for 'race-card' reaction. As the historical narrative of racism and oppression is manipulated and exploited by a some among the 'newly empowered', transformation has become a euphemism for black BMWs. It is in these conditions that legislation against government transparency will quite possibly become a reality. It is in this climate of the 'unlyrical' that lyrical poetry must continue to tell the truths of our human experience.

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