

Book Reviews

Antjie Krog. *Skinned*. New York: Seven Stories, 2013. Pp. 175.
US\$23.95.

Skinned introduces the poetic oeuvre of preeminent South African author Antjie Krog to a North American readership. As Krog's first collection of translated poetry to be published in the USA, it introduces North American readers to the autobiographical writing in which Krog explores the different phases in her life as a poet, woman, and mother. Except for a handful of poems translated by fellow South African poets Karen Press, Denis Hirson, and Patrick Cullinan, all translations are by Krog. The apposite title, *Skinned*, emphasizes Krog's preoccupation with skin: skin color (race, culture), skin as a mask (especially in her poems on Lady Anne Barnard), and skin as the marker of identity (societal roles). Several of the skins Krog metaphorically sheds throughout this poetry selection are those of daughter, mother, wife, woman, writer/poet, translator, journalist, teacher, feminist, and political activist. Racial and cultural skins are also cast off in an effort to unite all Africans: White, Nama, /Xam, Sepedi, Xhosa, Zulu, and the West African *griots* (traditional oral poets). Even Claudette Schreuders' wooden figure on the book cover is skinless.

The title, *Skinned*, becomes even more significant if read in relation to the only other Krog collection of English translations, *Down to My Last Skin* (2000). In thirteen years, the poet has progressed from a seemingly definitive stance (last skin) to an unprecedented position of complete bareness (skinned). The former title is derived from one of her poems, which accentuates skin as mask: "I am down / to my last skin" (76). The new selection's title originates from two poems: one indicates the skin of humanity, "that what we are is something so soft so humanly skinned" (124), and the other foregrounds the poetic skin. In "poet becoming," an apt choice of introductory verse, the essence of poetry is revealed: "the only truth stands skinned in sound // the poet writes poetry with her tongue / yes, she breathes deeply with her ear" (19).

Although Krog established her South African literary reputation as a poet who writes in her mother tongue, Afrikaans, when she made her debut at age 17 in 1970, she gained world recognition for her English autobiographical text, *Country of My Skull* (1998), in which she wrote about her experiences as a radio journalist reporting on South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. In 2003, another autobiographical narrative, *A Change of*

Tongue, chronicled transformations in South Africa after the change to democratic rule in 1994. This autobiographical triptych concludes with the provocatively titled *Begging to Be Black* (2009), in which she explores the concept of interconnectedness between all people. Krog's prose works can be read as complementary to the verse in this anthology, especially as the first two autobiographical works in her trilogy offer insightful commentary to elucidate and contextualize her poetry.

Skinned includes poetry from the following publications: *Dogter van Jefia* [*Daughter of Jephthah*] (1970); *Otters in bronslaai* [*Otters in Watercress*] (1981); *Jerusalemgangers* [*Jerusalem Travellers*] (1985); *Lady Anne* (1989); *Gedigte, 1989–1995* [*Poems, 1989–1995*] (1995); *Kleur kom nooit alleen nie* [*Colour Never Comes Alone*] (2000); *Met woorde soos met kerse* [*With Words As with Candles*] (2002); *The Stars Say 'isau'* [Afrikaans version *die sterre sê 'isau'*] (2004); *Verweerskrif* [published in English as *Body Bereft*] (2006); and the testimonial narrative *Country of My Skull* (1998).

The five thematically arranged divisions span decades of Krog's recurring poetic concerns. In part one, "Extenuating Circumstances," the reader glimpses the inner workings of the poet's *ars poetica*, but also the struggle between the often competing roles of poet and those of mother and wife. The revealing poem "writing ode" encompasses this precarious balancing act between underground (the realm of creativity) and ground level (reality).

The second part, "The Lady as Metaphor," comprises fragments of the poetry volume, *Lady Anne* (1989), an epic poem exploring the life of the Scottish aristocrat Lady Anne Barnard, who lived in the Cape Castle with her husband from 1797 to 1802. These poems are characterized by Krog's imperative that poetry not simply be aesthetic but convey a politically engaged message. She juxtaposes the colonial Cape with contemporary South Africa and in doing so delivers scathing commentary on political injustices.

"Colour Never Comes Alone," the aptly titled third section, showcases the rich varieties of South African indigenous languages, dialects, and people. It includes translations of the voices of the /Xam (Bushmen), Xhosa, Zulu, Sepedi, and the Nama people from the Richtersveld ("stone-desert"). The reconciled collective identity portrayed in this section concludes with a praise poem about Table Mountain, translated from Afrikaans.

The process of identity formation and healing—personal as well as political—is continued in the fourth section, "Vernacular White"; Krog experiences "a change of tongue" in order to transform and connect with her fellow South Africans as well as the Africans she meets on the journey through Africa on a Poetry Caravan in 1999, travelling from Gorée to Timbuktu in "Becomings."

In the fifth and final section, “body bereft,” the transience of the female body serves as subject. Krog boldly writes about menopause, the scare of finding a lump in her breast, and surviving a stroke.

In the preface to *Down to My Last Skin*, Krog voices her main concern about translating poetry: “The biggest loss in translated poetry is the sound of the original language, a key element that completely disappears when a work is translated into an unrelated language” (3). Regardless of this hurdle, Krog has, with varying degrees of success, pursued the complex and problematic translation of her poems. In *Skinned*, Krog literally translates Afrikaans diminutives for which there are no English equivalents: “houselet” (81), “songlets” (123), and “childling” (124). More dubious translations include “thinniken” (126), “whiteliness” (155) and “biestings” (173), and (at her most awkward) “how close can the tongue teeters [sic] to tenderness” (145). Yet she also creates fitting neologisms like “onlyest” (39) and “heartbreak-whole” (39). The necessity of poetic license is clear when read in context: “something loosens in this lure / not of being / but of becoming / many / many / becomings” (154).

The inclusion of several Afrikaans and South African English words adds authenticity to the poems but could prove troublesome for readers unfamiliar with South African culture. A few examples of Afrikaans include “sommer” [just (adv.)] (12), “ja” [yes] (82), “Oom Jakobus” [Uncle Jacob] (84), and “baas” [boss] (88). Illustrations of South African English are “vygies” (85), “kaross” (96), “kraal” (98), “kloofs” (142), and “zol” (170). In *Down to My Last Skin*, a glossary explains Afrikaans terms to English South African readers. This volume’s transatlantic readership might have benefited even more from such a glossary. *Skinned* is a collection that, despite a few translation and translatability difficulties, remains a worthy addition to any world literature bookshelf. It manifests the idea of transnationalism: “skins will become undone / as we learn / changes of tongue” (141).

Krog not only pushes the boundaries of poetic decorum but also shatters stifling notions of propriety. Her work is unvarnished, at times gut wrenching, yet still beautiful. Her earlier work calls to mind the raunchy Erica Jong, whereas her preoccupation with her position as woman and poet recalls Adrienne Rich and Sylvia Plath. Allow *Skinned* to introduce you to the challenging, provocative, and multifaceted poet Antjie Krog.

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Work Cited

Krog, Antjie. *Down to My Last Skin*. Cape Town: Random, 2000. Print.