Long recognised as a major writer in Afrikaans, Antjie Krog is now receiving sustained attention in English-language literary criticism in South Africa and the present volume of excellent essays indicates the level of engagement with her work. Antjie Krog: an ethics of body and otherness began as a guest-edited issue of Current Writing in 2007 and now appears in expanded and more focussed form, again edited by Judith Coullie and Andries Visagie. Six of the original essays have been included and, as Visagie explains in the Introduction, the other seven essays were specially commissioned for this volume. The result is coverage of the range of Krog’s writing from 1998 onwards with only Begging to be Black (2009) not drawing an essay of its own. The volume Skinned: a selection of translated poetry (2013) is also not studied because it appeared just as this volume was going to press.

As the sub-title An ethics of body and otherness suggests, the primary collective concern is a moral one which focusses particularly on Krog’s representation of her own physical body and her powerful personal presence in exploring major events and issues in South Africa’s distant and more recent past. ‘How do these events and conditions matter to me?’ seems the most ethical, because the most engaged, approach for her to take. What is also deeply at issue in these essays, and which might not be immediately evident from the title (if it were used, say, for a keyword search), is the question of translation. Exactly what Krog has tried to achieve in undertaking so much translation, and more particularly, why she has felt it so important to endeavour to move between the country’s languages, is the subject of
several essays. Broadly the reason lies in what the sub-title does denominate – ‘otherness’ – our history of racial domination, of enforced divisions arising from perceived differences between peoples, and the current need to develop elements of an ethical outlook which might counter the inequalities and distrust consequent on endless divisiveness: tolerance, respect, openness, mutual understanding.

While ethical principles may be general and constant, ethical action needs to be context-specific and, as many of the essay show, Krog’s approach to issues through autobiographical narrative and poetry has enabled her to bring this truth to life with great vividness. Louise Viljoen, a distinguished Krog scholar who publishes in Afrikaans as well as English and writes on her prose as well as her poetry, has two essays in this collection. In “‘I have body, therefore I am”: grotesque, monstrous and abject bodies in Antjie Krog’s poetry’ (Coullie and Visagie 2014:98-132) she establishes a point about Krog’s ethics which surfaces in many of the essays: they are usually oppositional and often combative. As Viljoen’s epithets suggest, when Krog’s topics are at their most transgressive her moral concerns are usually at their most challenging. For example, in discussing a poem which presents a ‘breathtaking crudeness of […] action’ (117) in its last line, Viljoen claims that the poetry both recognises that an ‘aging and menopausal body is indeed an affront to the existing social order’ but that it is also ‘trying to confront society’s negation of the menopausal woman by making this body visible in all its abject specificity’ (120). In her second essay, Viljoen takes up a related line of discussion that is also important throughout the volume: autobiographical writing and the ethics of representation. ‘The mother as pre-text: autobiographical writing in Antjie Krog’s A Change of Tongue’ (133-56) looks at Krog’s representations of her relationship to her mother, the Afrikaans writer Dot Serfontein, as a person and as a writer. As it becomes clear that Krog will not replicate her mother’s choice to ‘rate political loyalty to her Afrikaner heritage higher than loyalty to her writing’ (105), but that they share equally in the constant tussle between the claims of family life and writing life, Viljoen touches on Krog’s admission (made in a later interview) that in depicting her mother’s angry explosion when her daughter objects to being written about she had fictionalised the scene (145-6). She did so by transferring an incident that occurred between herself and her daughter onto her mother. This leads Viljoen to wonder about the ethics of Krog’s representation of ‘the (m)other’ (152), particularly the means used to “lie the truth” [as Krog puts it] or
universalise certain experiences’ (153). The ethical issue of a fiction’s being used to attain a greater, or otherwise inexpressible, truth is taken up very fully by Kim Rostan in ‘The ethics of infidelity in Country of My Skull’ (24-43). In a sophisticated argument constructed on a series of parallels, Rostan works with Derrida’s view that quotation, in shedding its original context, is somewhat paradoxically caught in an ‘infidelity at the heart of fidelity’. The transcribed testimonies in Krog’s account of the TRC are similarly unfaithful quotations in which her narrating voice becomes one among many in a new collectivity: a collage of voices. Whereas a family relationship demands ‘loyalty’, this new, textually-created entity demands, like the envisaged new nation, ‘justice’ (the two concepts and their differentiation are taken from Richard Rorty), and the requirement of justice, of being accountable to an entity larger and newer than the family in the interests of an outcome desired by all, is what Krog’s narrator brings as personal experience to the task of encountering so many narratives of atrocity and betrayal.

The sometimes unexpected demands of particularised moral issues and the insights arising from their treatment are explored by Christy Weyer in ‘The ambiguity of the erotic: Antjie Krog’s Down to My Last Skin’ (157-183) in which she looks at the poems grouped under the title ‘Love is all I know’ in that volume. To illuminate the ethical element in Krog’s poetry of the erotic body (which has met with a marked critical silence compared with, for example, the reception of her more political prose writing), Weyer turns to the ‘foundational insights’ (176) of Simone de Beauvoir who suggested that ‘the erotic experience is the one that most poignantly discloses to human beings the ambiguity of their condition; in it they are aware of themselves as flesh and as spirit [or mind], as the other and as subject’ (174). This central ambiguity enables an ethical outlook to flourish, however unlikely that may at times seem. For example when, in Krog’s lyric ‘marital psalm’, the poet-speaker presents her desire for her husband as ‘connected to her desire for self-definition’ (171) which only his desire for her is able to fulfil, this might seem a retrogressive step in a feminist quest for ‘ontogenesis’, but as de Beauvoir puts it, ‘subjectivity …cannot exist without inter-subjectivity’. Weyer adds that this is ‘a foundational principle of the Southern African philosophy of ubuntu’. She takes this argument further to say that the erotic recognition of the other is ethical both in being reciprocal and in making one vulnerable, for ‘to recognise the other as really free is to understand the other as a point of resistance to me’ (Bergoffen qtd 175) and it is these boundaries which Krog’s poetry seeks to open. The same dynamics, but at work around
a different set of issues and in a very different context are discussed by Judith Coullie in the last essay in the volume, ‘A question of ethics in There was this Goat: investigating the Truth Commission testimony of Notrose Nobomvu Konile’ (313-31) in which she argues explicitly that ‘crucial to Krog’s ethical project […] in all her writing] is the refusal […] to take a position and hold it; rather […] certainties are rendered fruitfully unstable through the relentless hunting down of ambiguities’ (314). The account of their ‘pilgrimage’ (320, Coullie’s term) to visit Mrs Konile in Indwe in the Eastern Cape, which they undertook as part of their effort to comprehend the ambiguities in her TRC testimony, is written by all three investigators who are colleagues at the University of the Western Cape: Nosisi Mpolweni (in the Xhosa Dept), Kopano Ratele (in Psychology and Gender Studies) and Antjie Krog (in the Arts Faculty). They combine their trans-disciplinary skills to work on what the official TRC record suggested was an incomprehensible testimony given by the mother of a young man killed by the secret police. Coullie concentrates on Krog’s experience of being excluded from the conversation between her Xhosa-speaking colleagues and Mrs Konile when they arrive in Indwe, and particularly on her responding to her ‘complete marginalisation and effacement with both “delight and anger”’ (qtd 324). The anger is not difficult to place but the delight is challenging: Coullie sees it primarily as arising from an over-turning of the country’s old ‘racialised hierarchy’ (325) and claims that ‘like a true pilgrim, Krog has been discomfited and demeaned so as to shed her old identity, to re-enter the community as a changed self, purged, contrite, absolved’ (326). Krog’s vulnerability, her experience of othering and renewed selfhood, allows Coullie a concluding claim for Krog: ‘She admits new truths and finds, for the time being, a new way to be’ (327).

As the preceding essays indicate, the matter of cultural as well as linguistic translation pervades the volume, but before turning to those essays which deal explicitly with Krog’s work as a linguistic translator, one or two other topics and writers warrant mention. Anthea Garman has two contributions: the first, ‘Antjie Krog and the accumulation of “media meta-capital”’ (73-97) charts the choices and chances which have allowed Krog to move from being a respected ‘Afrikaans woman poet […] to a media figure who] enjoy[s] national and international renown’ (81). In the second, ‘Running with the jackals: Antjie Krog the journalist’ (184-214) Garman examines the relationship between Krog’s poetry-writing self and her work as a journalist, particularly in her reporting of the TRC hearings. Potentially
there is considerable conflict. A journalist working with ‘hard news’ would gather material on an ‘intellectual-critical level’ and would provide an objective report of an ‘external, public situation’ supported by expert opinion, rather than filtering it ‘through a person as an affected receiver of the experience’ (193). But ‘Krog’s insistence that truth resides not just in fact or in considered opinion, and that the way the truth is realised is via an actual encounter with the extremes of experience ... was the kernel of poetic commitment – and the discomforting contestation – she brought into hard-news journalism’ (209). Susan Spearey describes her reasons for teaching *Country of My Skull* to students in Canada and the pedagogic steps that she took to enable them to engage ethically with some of the harrowing TRC testimonies. In ‘*Country of My Skull*, the transmission of testimony, and the democratisation of pedagogy’ (44-72) she takes her view of ethics from Brian Massumi – ‘ethics is about how we inhabit uncertainty, together’ (qtd 45) – and in her conclusion expresses the hope that in joining Krog’s working ‘at affective and embodied – as well as cognitive, socio-political and ideological – levels [we will be enabled] to overcome the constraints upon our capacities as individual and social agents, as witnesses and ethical beings’ (67). Also using *Country of My Skull* as her case study, Judith Coullie, in her second article in the book, examines a much discussed topic – the ‘role of memory in the creation of the post-apartheid nation’ (1) – but takes a less often articulated line on the issue. ‘Remembering to forget: testimony, collective memory and the genesis of the “New” South African nation in *Country of My Skull*’ (1-23) attends to several points at which Krog begins to ‘negotiate her way out of one kind of [past] nation into another’ (8), often by refusing certain of the material that came her way while reporting on the TRC. This kind of forgetting was accompanied by her decisions to foreground other material, for example, the testimony of women. Citing Ricoeur, Coullie concludes that if we are to ‘use the past as lessons for future generations […] we have a duty to remember and a duty to forget’ (19-20).

Because building a new future involves cultural translation, translation has been a pervasive, if not always prominent, theme so far. In the remaining essays, the acts of translation that are considered are more pointedly linguistic, but the attendant issues still entail profound cultural change. After a rather generalised account of Bourdieu’s ‘habitus’ and translation as a ‘field’ in “‘Inhabiting” the translator’s *habitus*: Antjie Krog as translator’ (291-312), Frances Vosloo, who works on the sociology of translation, focuses on Krog’s particular case. She suggests that as Krog is a ‘self-
conscious writer’ who has used writing to heal the self and who seems to have made a transition to being a ‘self-conscious translator’ for similar purposes, both activities can be seen as ‘a continuous and recurrent process where the acts of translation she engages in become metaphors: metaphors for identity, for empowerment of the self and others, and for the writing subject’ (307). In ‘Writing the Medea myth in a new context: Tom Lanoye, Antjie Krog and Mamma Medea’ (241-62), Andries Visagie discusses the decisions made by Krog in translating the Belgian writer Tom Lanoye’s play into Afrikaans. Lanoye’s modern version of the Medea myth reflects ‘the [historical] cultural and linguistic tensions between the Netherlands and Flanders’ (244) by using different dialects (as well as metre and register) for the conflicting parties. In translating it, Krog uses several different dialects of Afrikaans, including ‘Engafrikaans’, standard Afrikaans, a more colloquial Cape Afrikaans, and Gariep (Namaqualand) Afrikaans. Visagie argues that Krog, in suggesting that all dialects should be granted a poetic register, is making an important political gesture. He notes too that her practice of ‘foreignisation’ as a translator has always been to counter an embedded resistance to the other, as when she translated Nelson Mandela’s autobiography so as to help ‘rid […] Afrikaans of the vocabulary of power and retribution’ (qtd 256).

Dan Wylie writes a subtle assessment, in ““Now strangers walk in that place”: Antjie Krog, modernity, and the making of //Kabbo’s story’ (215-40), of the challenge that Krog, like many other writing about the painting and story-telling of the San/Bushman, has faced. She has grappled with two seemingly unavoidable, dichotomous generalisations: firstly that there is ‘an essential “Bushman” world view which can today be known’ (217, original italics) and secondly that there is ‘an essential “Western” world view’. In them, a Bushman sense of identity and harmonious belonging is seen as an antidote to modernity’s ‘own perceived lack’ (218). Aslant these oppositions, however, Wylie argues that in Antjie Krog’s The Stars Say ‘Tsau’ (her re-translation and versification of selections from the Bleek and Lloyd /Xam manuscripts into Afrikaans and then into English), ‘the two conceptions of identity “co-construct” one another’ (218). Wylie turns to Krog’s poems in an earlier collection, Once We Were Hunters: a journey with Africa’s indigenous people, to trace the poetic strategies she first developed there in order to create an inner life for an autochthonous community which also allows an interactive expression of her own experience of modernity and its malaise. The resulting voice implies, Wylie suggests, ‘that modernity has
united them [the poet and her subject, the indigenous peoples] in their senses of dislocation and uprootedness’, largely because their identities are ‘analogously threatened’ (224). For example, when //Kabbo decided to tell his story to Bleek and Lloyd, to ‘embrace literacy as a medium’ in what should be construed as an act of resistance rather than an acceptance of domination, he is in a situation very like Krog’s own as she decides, in writing works such as *Country of My Skull*, to translate herself out of Afrikaans and into a hegemonic English (229). In his assessment of the result of her versification (233) of //Kabbo’s stories, and in looking in them for a critical lever against modernity, Wylie moves with great delicacy, sympathetic to the difficulty that a member of one (modern) culture has in ‘feel[ing] that they talk with understanding’ (a line quoted from //Kabbo’s narrative, 235) of another, autochthonous culture; and sympathetic to the tension between reproducing something like a vanished rhetoric and creating one that appeals to a modern reader. He doubts that the results can always have integrity but does allow that ‘in the [resultant] transculturation, new and potentially fructifying perspectives are opened up’ (237).

Taking its title from an article by Ortega y Gasset, the subject of translation practice is the focus of Ileana Dimitriu’s conversation with Antjie Krog: ‘The splendour and misery of translation: interview with Antjie Krog’ (263-90) which was conducted in 2006. In it Krog explains her long-standing wish to dissociate herself from the power that was vested in Afrikaans and, by using ‘same-language translation’ (266), to bring back all the ‘impure’ features that officialdom felt had to be weeded out of the language, as well as to recognise current changes in it. Presumably in connection with her choice of English for works such as *Country of My Skull*, she also acknowledges its importance as a lingua franca (265), but asserts that she uses it not in order to meet English-speaking literary circles, but to reach out to ‘the rest of the country […] my black colleagues’ (271). The multi-lingual reality of the country also means, she suggests, that when authors use English today, they are ‘already – at least mentally – translating from their mother tongues. So even if a book appears as a novel in English, it’s already a translated text’ (277). Thus sequences from, for example, J M Coetzee’s *Disgrace*, or all of Phaswane Mpe’s *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* should be read with the complexities of cultural / linguistic translation in mind. She has found cultural translation to require ‘a complete re-education of myself’ (279) and that it has frequently meant encountering the hostility of those who seek security in their mono-cultural mind-set and refuse to cross boundaries. In the last part of the
Interview both speakers lament the lack of public understanding of the complexity of the translator’s role and consider its various characteristics: missionary/educator; public intellectual; bridge-builder; creator of beauty; interpreter of stylistic challenges; social activist. Krog accepts them all and finally adds poet to the list, seeking in it the ‘potential of splendour’ (289).