5

‘Bugger Universality’: An Exchange with Antjie Krog

Antjie Krog and Peter D. McDonald

Antjie Krog is a South African poet, translator and academic. Professor in the Arts at the University of the Western Cape, South Africa, she has published widely in Afrikaans and English, including the poetry books *Jerusalemgangers* (1985) and *Lady Anne* (1989), and the prose works *Country of My Skull* (1998) and *Conditional Tense: Memory and Vocabulary after the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (2013). *’n Vry vrou: Gedigte van Antjie Krog*, a collection of her poems edited by Karen de Wet, was published in 2020. This email exchange with Peter D. McDonald, Professor of English and Related Literature at the University of Oxford, took place in August 2020.[1]

Peter McDonald: Antjie, I am very grateful to you for agreeing to this email exchange, which replaces the conversation we planned for the Art & Action conference in Oxford, fatefully booked for 20 and 21 March 2020, in what has now become our ‘plague year’. You have lived at ‘the intersections of authorship, politics, activism, and literary celebrity’, as the conference organizers put it,[2] over the course of a tumultuous half century in South Africa’s history, but I know you are uneasy about the idea of celebrity.

Antjie Krog: My whole being revolts mentally and physically at the word ‘celebrity’, not to mention the phrase: ‘literary celebrity’. I want to use Afrikaans expletives like *kots* (vomit) and *walg* (retch/disgust) when I see that word linked to literature and art. Even the thought that I have to try and explain it, sickens me.

[1] The interview has been edited for length; an uncut version is available on the website *Artefacts of Writing*, artefactsofwriting.com/2020/09/01/art-action-an-exchange-with-antjie-krog/, posted 1 September 2020.

[2] Sandra Mayer and Ruth Scobie, ‘Call for Papers: Art and Action: Literary Authorship, Politics, and Celebrity Culture 20–21 March 2020’, *The Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities (TORCH)*, 20 December 2019, www.torch.ox.ac.uk/event/call-for-papers-art-and-action-literary-authorship-politics-and-celebrity-culture.

Should I begin by how poetry festivals changed from the 1990s (where some of the most powerful poets of that century read their work dressed in dreadful clothes, with unkempt hair, bad teeth, terrible eyesight, physical features distorted with fear, eccentricity and loneliness) to what it has become now: young poetesses with perfect faces, big hair, daily Facebook entries, dressed in breathtaking evening gowns performing their work with electronic sounds?

Or should I tell how Random House, when approached to publish a book of mine, asked: how marketable is she?

I became aware of all of this when *Time* magazine published their list of best statesmen, great leaders of the twentieth century. I assumed Nelson Mandela would be there. But no, he was under icons. To my horror I realized that that was a castration of his powerful message. It no longer mattered what he said, he was simply the kind handsome Black old man everybody likes to celebrate. The deep challenging values he held were of no importance. His celebrity status disempowered his life's work.

Or should I tell that I often assist prospective poets? While going through a poem discussing lapses, unclarities, clichés, etc., one once angrily said: But I already received over a hundred likes for this!

Or the day I found students filing at the door after class to take selfies with me … a question here and there proved that they didn't know my work at all. How do I stop this?, I wondered.

Or how book signings have also become major selfie opportunities with people not even embarrassed that they haven't bought a book. So, suddenly I have to worry about my hair, my ageing teeth, my wrinkles, my pulled up shoulders, the face spasm that distorts my face when I am stressed. Really?

It was about ten years ago that I decided to take definite steps to resist becoming a celebrity. I refuse bluntly any invitation to appear on television, or in the press for any other reason than having published a new book. I only answer questions about my work and will NOT be on any programme about my life or, even worse, answer those standard questions: what is your worst nightmare? What is your favourite recipe? South Africa loves doing series about icons, role models, and of course the whole visual industry depends on celebrities. I refuse all of these requests. But as it became too complex even for me to explain the difference between being a writer and being a celebrity, I have learned to say: I don't think I should be on your show because I still want to commit a terrible, disgraceful scandal. This works like magic. It's understood immediately: she will not be good for our show/magazine/image.

The problem with the term celebrity perhaps lies in its etymology. The Latin word *celebritas* means 'multitude, fame', from *celeber,* 'frequented, populous'. It is a combination of fame and numbers, which more and more has nothing to do with the reason for the fame, but only the numbers around the fame.

One of the best descriptions I could find for a celebrity comes from the introduction to the historian Greg Jenner's *Dead Famous* (2020): 'A unique persona made widely known to the public via media coverage, and whose life is publicly

consumed as dramatic entertainment, and whose commercial brand is made profitable for those who exploit their popularity, and perhaps also for themselves.'[3]

What I am trying to describe here is that the term celebrity contaminates, no! deeply corrupts, the hard, courageous, lonely work writers do. Celebrity is a trap. It disturbs the focus of doing what has to be done, to consider physical and social mores, demands and yardsticks. Trying to please an audience is the beginning of the rot for a serious artist.

PMcD: Many writers share your feelings about 'literary celebrity', I think. We could look back to Henry James, who deplored the rise of the intrusive personal interview in the 1890s, or sideways to the contemporary Indian writer Amit Chaudhuri, who campaigns against what he calls the 'market activism' of today's corporate publishers. Perhaps we could shift the terms of the discussion from *celebrity* to *publicness* more generally.

AK: Publicness! What an excellent word. It maintains the notion of being public, but keeps the space open for risk, failure and disgrace. Should every creative act not be a fall/jump down a waterfall – never sure that one will come up breathing? I would like to return to the 1980s, but am concerned that it all may sound too self-servingly autobiographical … Let us try …

As the apartheid state grew in harshness during the 1980s, one felt driven to respond. But how? The oppression was so crushing, so fully destructive that to write a political poem, no matter how good, in Afrikaans and to publish it with an Afrikaner publishing house became shamefully inadequate, even dastardly cowardly. So, I thought: well, I have a daily life as an ordinary human being and I have a life as a poet. With the poems I will follow Nadine Gordimer's dictum: a revolutionary's duty is to write as well as s/he can. But my daily life is something else and will be involved with the struggle. At first that brought major ethical relief and changes. I started teaching at a college in the townships, became involved with COSAW [Congress of South African Writers] and ANC activities, participated in marches and tried to live as activistically as possible, experiencing how my privileged and public whiteness (more than my literary publicness) was used brazenly by the local activists in the small rural town where I lived [Kroonstad]. I also began assisting younger township poets with their work.

But of course, this 'new' life inevitably influenced my writing. I began working on a poetry volume where the whole foundation, and not only part of the volume, was political, choosing a political theme to encompass everything and link it to politics. The volume *Jerusalemgangers* (1985) has poems about the disruption of bourgeois suburban life by angry Blackness interspersed with Black mythological figures. I also drenched my theme and style in the concept of 'haplography' – so this was my first book with a complete political foundation.

[3] Greg Jenner, *Dead Famous: An Unexpected History of Celebrity from Bronze Age to Silver Screen* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2020), 9.

But again, in the avalanche of assassinations, anger, fear and retaliation, it felt pathetically inadequate. So, I decided to move away from a successful, important Afrikaner publishing house [Human & Rousseau] to a small but struggling publisher [Taurus] who published mainly banned texts, giving up any royalty I might earn. I was hoping this shift would set me free to write what I wanted and not what I felt I should write. In vain. My next volume, *Lady Anne* (1989), deals with the specific challenge of the poet confronted by severe injustice. The poet's senses should wean the cries of outrage from the leaves, the blood from the barricades of groceries and pick up the murders from the blockades near her desk. But how to write effectively without falling into propaganda and crude rhetoric? Can I split my poetry as well? Write cruder poems with well-known slogans only to be read in front of agitated rally-audiences, while writing others for publication to a small poetry-loving but elite audience?

And yet, despite all this, I haven't figured out how to write a political poem (for that matter, *any* poem) that will visibly *change* things. At the same time, I do believe that poetry can bring human beings into what Heidegger in *Being and Time* calls 'the open clearing of truth'.[4] All I know is that one should never move from unstable shaking ground to safe steady ground. One should always be harassed by the various contexts within which one writes and have an acute sense of context, yet the bravery to dare to imagine. The moment one moves from publicness to celebrity, one exchanges the flagellation of the conscience and the risk to dare, for the caressing of a fickle one-dimensional popularity.

PMcD: Are there other ways in which the changes in the publicness of the literary life have affected your own 'hard, courageous, lonely work' as a writer? Since you made your debut in the early 1970s, the publishing industry, for instance, has undergone a dramatic transformation. I am thinking not only of the digital revolution, but, in your case, of the move from a world of relatively small Afrikaans literary publishers like Human & Rousseau and Taurus to multinational and multilingual conglomerates like Random House Struik (now Penguin Random House South Africa), to say nothing of the change from an era of draconian state censorship to one in which you have a Constitution explicitly committed to upholding the 'freedom of artistic creativity' and linguistic rights in a democracy with eleven official languages.

AK: In 1970 six copies of my first poetry volume were sent by post. And that was that. Nowadays I have to fill in a form in which I make suggestions of how to market my book, who its potential readers might be, suggest publicity events, etc. Special photo sessions are organized. Interviews – often by journalists who have *not* read the book, but have a lot of googled questions about your previous interviews.

I also became aware of agents and creative writing schools. I watch in shock how young ambitious students who have not written more than 5,000 words have to write

[4] Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (1971; New York: Harper & Row, 2001), xii. See Antjie Krog, 'To Write Liberty', *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa* 30, no. 1 (2018): 77–84.

a proposal for a book that must include the literary theory behind their story, the other texts it follows and competes with, as well as ethical clearance. And before the book is even finished the student has an agent …

PMcD: I liked your earlier description of the creative act as a 'fall/jump down a waterfall' in part because the pointed equivocation about intentionality opens up some big questions about poetry and politics. Given what you say about the challenge of writing political poems, I wonder if you think there is any merit in seeing every poem as political simply because it is inescapably a fall/jump in the medium of language. I say this not because all language is ideological but because all language is public and therefore entangled in structures of power, struggles over ownership and correctness, the nightmares of history and injustice, etc. At the same time, language is intimately and democratically private in so far as it permeates (shapes?) *every* speaker's way of being with herself, with others and with the world. On this account every creative fall/jump, even one with no ostensibly political content, could be a politically charged 'change of tongue'[5] in form as well as potential effect. I'll leave the question of actual effects on real audiences open for now.

AK: Of course you are right. I wrote 'My Mooi Land' ('My Beautiful/Pretty Land/Country', published in *Sechaba* in 1971) and was completely thrown to learn that it was read on Robben Island and that the political inmates said: if an Afrikaner girl is saying this, we will be free in our life-time. So yes, in terms of 'changing' things, the very first poems perhaps already did that. But at the same time it was a kind of easy attack on one's own people, with hardly any knowledge of who it was that one was reaching out to. One became aware of the absence, the not-knowing, then of the anger, the real murderous intent and Black writers asking: where are the Afrikaner writers when the country is burning?

So, the framework within which Afrikaans poetry was written during the 1980s complicated any nuanced way of thinking about the political. With the exception of Breyten Breytenbach, most poets, backed by the literary establishment, thought that poetry should be universal, and that universality was the opposite of writing against apartheid – the latter being too localized to bring forth great literature and politics the death of any art. At the same time, there was from the English and Black literary establishment the demand to write 'effectively'; to be part of the movement to bring the apartheid regime to its knees – remember the criticism of Nadine Gordimer of Coetzee's *Michael K* (1983)? To hide in a hole feeding a pumpkin plant with a teaspoon full of water, was *not* 'effective'; driving away with the freedom fighters, or understanding or celebrating them, *that* was 'effective'.[6] So, where I previously battled to find a way, a style, a metaphor, a theme to express the injustice and the weight of it, *Jerusalemgangers* enabled me to universalize apartheid politics through history and everyday life. Whether you have a suburban

[5] A reference to Antjie Krog, *A Change of Tongue* (Johannesburg: Random House, 2003).

[6] Nadine Gordimer, 'The Idea of Gardening', *The New York Review*, 2 February 1984.

affair, or attend a party, or stretch out a hand to Adamastor,[7] or Shaka's Sangoma,[8] all was political in its foundation of unjustness.

So, my involved ordinary public self allowed me to obey my conscience; that in turn challenged my writing, enabling the poet to make peace with what and how she writes. So, if the art changes nothing, one could hold on to the notion that one's life (as an ordinary white woman in a march of Black people) does make a difference; when one lands in muddy and compromising political waters, one can still hold on to the clarity of the poems.

(The other day I heard one of the Afrikaans writers who wrote 'universal' literature snottily say that he did not 'jump on the bandwagon of politics in the 1980s' … I could just shake my head. He was so safe, he was so lauded by the literary establishment, while Breytenbach sat in jail and I received death threats and my family harassment.)

Nowadays of course, everything is political. It has become nearly impossible to write anything without being political in the way you don't want to be political. Today one is suddenly exposed, without a personal past or a body of writing, in front of everybody who has access to the internet in English. To write a poem about, say Nelson Mandela, or a Black rape victim, is high risk. To end a poem with: 'only black lives taken by whites seem to matter HERE' is total suicide. So, one thinks: I don't want to be political in that way. At the same time, the idea of criticizing the government of the day (as I did before 1994) has also become highly problematic. I find that more and more, I can only write strong political poems when outside the country, and then trim, cut, soften and hone once I get back.

PMcD: As I understand it, you spent the first two decades of your public writing life essentially as an Afrikaans poet of the page. Then you began to explore new media, new forms, new languages and new locations. How important or formative have these various transitions been to you? And what bearing have they had/are they having on the sense you have of your own publicness as a writer?

AK: Although I deeply believe that the essence of poetry is oral/aural, when I was younger, it felt extremely narcissistic to read one's own work in public. But Black South Africa literally pushed me through an initiation from page to stage. During the 1980s I was invited to 'perform' at a local Free Nelson Mandela rally. I was in a sweat. Perform?

Although my work has always had a political slant, an assignment to stage something illegal and dangerous in public about a banned man was something completely different. I frantically started looking for good examples of liberation

[7] Adamastor is a mythological character created by the Portuguese poet Luís de Camões in his epic poem *Os Lusíadas* (1572), as a personification of the Cape of Good Hope. He is supposed to have been one of the Giants of Greek mythology, banished to the Cape of Good Hope for falling in love with the seagoddess's daughter, Tethis. Adamastor manifests itself as a hideous phantom out of a storm.

[8] Queen Ntombazi was a *sangoma* (diviner) and acknowledged to be one of the politically most influential women of the pre-Shakan and Shakan eras. She infamously collected skulls of kings conquered by her son Zwide. Shaka, founder of the Zulu kingdom in the early nineteenth century, had her locked in a hut with a hyena to test her power.

rhetoric, by Bertolt Brecht, Paul Éluard, Mao Zedong. Finally, I come across Aimé Césaire's *Return to My Native Land* (1956): 'I want to say storm. I want to say river. I want to say tornado. I want to say leaf, I want to say tree …'[9] Yes! I want to say Mandela. I ask around. I consult students and activists. But it is clear: Mandela is simply a symbol. Nobody knows what he looks like, nobody knows what exactly he said. We only know that he is in jail on Robben Island for the freedom of us all.

When I arrive at the rally in the township where literally thousands of people are waiting, I realize three things at once. First, hundreds of policemen with rifles are looking over the boundary wall. Secondly, the pages on which the poem is neatly typed in Sesotho, Afrikaans and English are going to flutter so much in the wind that I will not be able to read from them. And thirdly, I am not properly dressed. Ghangha, the chief poet, is dressed in feather-tassels in the colours of the ANC. 'You poets on paper', he shook his head when he saw my effort and immediately arranged for the pages to be neatly pasted on the plank of a tomato box with the first-aid kit band-aid – three little sheets under each other.

When I took the megaphone that day it was in a kind of disbelief. I stammered the first line. The main poet came and stood next to me, he shouted my first line loudly and repeated it. I got the idea and yelled the first line into the megaphone, my voice felt from another planet. There was cheering. The chief poet repeated and I repeated. The cheering doubled. By the third time the crowd joined me rhythmically in Afrikaans: *Die vuis is Mandéla! Mandéla in Máokeng* (This fist is Mandela! Mandela is in our township Maokeng [Kroonstad, Free State]). From there the poem took on a life of its own. Mandela was among us. Mandela in a coat – we saw him, we heard him stirring in the sirens, we sat with him behind the school desks, we saw his tracks in the dusty streets of the township, Mandela breathed among us, he ate in the outbuildings, he raised his fist in the prisons. From the dusty winds blowing across the plains, he would come to us and set us free. People jumped: *Thaaa! Tha-thaa!: Die vuis is Mandéla!* a mixture of Afrikaans and Sesotho. People furiously toyi-toyied, which then turned into an angry thumping dance where everyone aimed imaginary AK-47s at the faces of the policemen, who, not to be outdone, were brandishing their own weapons across the fence.

That day taught me: you have to respect your audience – the trouble they went to come to *hear* you, their own situation, their desires and anguishes, their languages and their furies – if a poem manages to put a temporary band-aid on one wound in that audience, the poem was not in vain. Bugger universality. Secondly, one can crush and turn a poem in any way to assist the performance; the poem on your page and the poem in your performance have nothing to do with each other. So, I keep one copy of each volume with a big V on the cover: *Voorlees* (Read aloud). Inside the poems are cut, things are added, parts are linked to other parts, all for a specific reading. I would also often make changes while reading. And I began to write poems with a stronger

[9] Aimé Césaire, *Return to My Native Land*, trans. John Berger and Anna Bostock (1956; New York: Archipelago, 1969/2013), 23.

sense of aurality like 'Paternoster'.[10] While reading this poem to a Dutch audience in Utrecht with translation screened behind me, something happened and I felt myself transported into a fiery angry sound. The next poem was quieter and I read it in a whisper and became aware of the absolute silence in that big hall. Even when I walked off the stage, it was so totally quiet. The reviews of that reading established me in the Netherlands and since then, over time my audience has become Dutch. I sell more books there and my poetry readings have become quite legendary. I steadfastly try not to think why that is, or who my readers are.

But wherever I read in the world, at home or elsewhere, the moment there is a Black person in the audience I feel my whole stomach constrict. I feel in the wrong. I feel I am offending. Am taking up too much space. Sometimes I can scarcely breathe and find that I am reading only for that one Black person. My eyes are searching to find those of that one Black person. I read to reach, to find forgiveness, to mend …

PMcD: Talk about art and action tends to focus on individual writers and their creative integrity. But writers have often worked collectively, forming professional and other groups to defend their interests, campaign for various causes and more. This was especially true in South Africa during the apartheid era. How did the possibility of collective action affect your sense of your own publicness, integrity and/or activism as a writer? And do you see any viable avenues for such action today?

AK: The Afrikaans novelist Etienne le Roux once said: a writer only joins a guild, or a representing body, in order to resign dramatically. In a way this rings true, as all these kinds of bodies need exactly that in which writers are not good. They desire uniformity of opinion, simplicity in expressing the banal, commitment to stick uncreatively to the issue at all times; they need a constitution, the dry routine of organization, of boring tailor-made-for-news declarations and statements, while writers can only produce the opposite: a creative variety around a theme, encompassing many opposing views, individual, unusual language and expression, a deep sense of undermining, a resentment of bureaucracy, etc.

(Therefore it is not strange how clumsily writers often express themselves when they do 'issue' a statement as a group. Take, for example, the 'Letter on Justice and Open Debate' recently signed by, among others, Salman Rushdie and J. K. Rowling and published in *Harper's Magazine*.[11] One cannot believe so many writers signed it: it is so flat and full of holes, so embarrassingly opaque in its argumentation that one doesn't know what to make of it.)

Writers and poets write because they cannot talk (metaphorically speaking!), because their true medium not only fits, but enhances their expression. They find the form of the literature they engage in: nuanced, subtle, multi-vibratory, multi-voiced, daring, rule-breaking, incoherent in a purposeful way – in other words, adequate to sufficiently express the complexity of what they want to express with clarity. What I

[10] Antjie Krog, 'Paternoster', in *Gedigte 1989–1995* (Groenkloof: Hond, 1995), 66. Translated into English in Krog, *Skinned: Selected Poems* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2013).

[11] 'A Letter on Justice and Open Debate', *Harper's Magazine*, 7 July 2020.

am saying is that any issue is more than often better served by writers writing, than by writers talking and making statements.

Looking back, I find every participation in a writer society or every petition signed a complete waste of time, except perhaps joining COSAW during the 1980s. Not because it did anything for me as a writer or even for writing per se, but because it brought a group of people together across the apartheid boundaries, assisting one in experiencing for short moments the country as it should/could have been. Having said that so vehemently – supporting a cause at certain junctures in history is very important, and fortunately, there have often been people involved in writer societies who could effectively guide and lead. Locally, the Afrikaans Skrywersgilde (Afrikaans Writers Guild) presented an important anti-censorship stance under apartheid, while the Swart Afrikaanse Skrywers (Black Afrikaans Writers) held three symposia that are still being studied for the invaluable input they made around thinking about Afrikaans literature.

Today I personally practise activism in various ways that are solely literary: I assist young poets who do not have access to any assistance. My work at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) fortunately entails that I assist anybody from the community with their manuscripts, whether they are students or not, and we have published an impressive list of books and some of the most important young poets in Afrikaans today have come through UWC. I also found that I have a talent for assessing and placing quite accurately a text within the broader history of South African literature. I can point out: this is new in a shout or a reader's report.

The second kind of activism is an obsession with translation. I found funding to translate a relevant selection of poems from indigenous languages into Afrikaans;[12] then started to re-evaluate the work of Thomas Mofolo, an African writer who wrote the first novel ever written in an indigenous language in Africa.[13] And more recently I coordinated one of the largest translations of a variety of African language classical literary texts into English for Oxford University Press's Africa Pulse series. The project is continuing with two students who are translating three major epics written in Sesotho and Sepedi.

Another way is perhaps simply the wishful thinking of an old poet: the poems by pre-internet poets like me have no monetary value. Nobody can put a price on any of my poems. Poems push back the notion that you can pay for art. Poems make a mockery of the ridiculous prices people pay for visual art. Maybe poets my age, as Geert van Istendael suggests, are the last true heretics of the world?[14]

PMcD: There is one particularly charged moment in your career when many of the issues we have been discussing came to a head: the moment you won the Hertzog Prize

[12] Antjie Krog, *Met woorde soos met kerse* (Cape Town: Kwela Books, 2002).

[13] See Chris Dunton and Antjie Krog, 'Re-animating the Works of Thomas Mofolo by Engaging with the Original Sesotho Texts', *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde* 53, no. 2 (2016): 5–14.

[14] See Geert van Istendael, 'Over het belang van poëzie. Nu.', *MO Mondiaal Nieuws*, 30 March 2015, www.mo.be/column/over-het-belang-van-po-zie-nu.

in 1990 for *Lady Anne*, arguably your most sustained poetic reflection on art and action. Established in 1916, the Hertzog, which honours poetry every three years, is the most prestigious Afrikaans literary accolade. Reflecting some of the complexities of the time, the list of winners has you flanked on both sides by T. T. Cloete, who was both a leading poet and a censor. He won the Hertzog in 1987 and 1993. You won it again for *Mede-wete* in 2017. On the first occasion, the award rules required you to give a short acceptance speech. The poem-speech you read takes issue with the prize, raises questions about your relationship to the literary establishment of the time and to Afrikaans, and concludes with a public expression of solidarity with COSAW and anti-apartheid publishers. Could you comment on the public symbolism of the Hertzog in 1990 and in 2017?

AK: The Hertzog of 1990 was given by people I deeply resented: the Afrikaner establishment. I knew all too well they had given it to signal to the new-powers-to-be that the Afrikaner establishment is changing, see how it embraces critical voices, see they are with everybody in the new South Africa. Some years before, Breyten Breytenbach had refused the prize. I thought to take the prize and give the money where it should have been in the first place – with the marginalized. The people who gave the Hertzog in 2017 are a shadow of the previous lot. They are hanging shivering by their anxious white nails onto a literature the context of which has radically and irretrievably changed and they smell their own redundancy. So, I took it in 2017 as one powerless one from another powerless one. I firmly believe that the context in which the poetry that I write makes any sense is disappearing like a sheet in the dark …

About the poem-speech in 1990: I was angry, young and strong, and fundamentally understood the cruel, false, powerful context into which I was writing. Now I am angry, old and weak with a pathetic grasp on the Black context into which I am writing. At the same time, being initiated into compassion by Archbishop Desmond Tutu and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, I'm filled with despair about the dire, dehumanizing poverty drowning our country, yet have compassion for the corrupt, inept and insecure establishment that has to deal with the mess of colonialism and apartheid. Standing on an over-elaborate stage a few years ago, receiving literary acknowledgement from the Black government among young Black celebrities in the arts, with the knowledge that the food and drink and evening gowns could keep a rural town in electricity for a month, I had nothing to say. I took the award and said *Kea Leboha* (Thank you). I was *stumm* – as I should be … a coward, I think.

PMcD: In the conference brief, the organizers framed this discussion as a tension (or contest?) between literary writing and activism.

AK: It is a tension, and a healthy one I believe. At the same time, it becomes problematic when celebrity status is regarded as a condition for real activism.

PMcD: They used phrases like 'politics and poetics', 'authorial and activist selves', 'literary/political border-crossings', etc. Responding in part to this oppositional logic,

the Indian writer Amit Chaudhuri has in recent years been a leading proponent of what he calls 'literary activism'.[15] At a time when, as he sees it, questions of value have either been abandoned (notably by academic literary studies) or co-opted (especially by the 'market activism' of a corporate publishing world), he has been calling for a public activism focussed on the literary as such.

AK: We have to pause at the word 'value'. The kind of value that the Nobel Prize is seeking is worth exploring: the worthy candidate should bestow 'the greatest *benefit* on mankind' delivering 'the most outstanding work in *an ideal direction*'.[16] Therefore the work should be 'outstanding', aesthetically I gather, while what it says should point in an 'ideal direction'. There is clearly a very broad yet very precise expectation of influencing humankind in a progressive way here. Should this not be the essence of literary activism? Should we not try to find works often extinguished by the loud noise of market activism or those un-mainstream works in smaller languages falling soundlessly into a dark hole of nothingness? Should we not elucidate the direction in these works and generate discourses around that, especially also those empty ones ramped up by market activism?

I think academia is doing it, but I ask myself why have I stopped reading the winners of the Booker or Pulitzer, even the T. S. Eliot poetry prize – why do I often find nothing there, nothing new, nothing related, nothing shifting one? The names of writers I find worth reading are passed on by friends like a secret treasure.

I remember a PEN conference in Germany where there was a special session for agents. I asked them whether they do research or go out into non-European countries and unknown languages to look for works to represent. One man responded with the utmost confidence and conviction: 'No, we don't need to. The good works find us'.

PMcD: Chaudhuri's kind of project carries a number of predictable risks. It can all too easily be dismissed as reactionary (revivalist aestheticism?), quixotic (nostalgic universalism?) or, worse still, cast as a desperate rear-guard effort on behalf of an old elite to postpone their inevitable redundancy.

AK: Chaudhuri's literary activism seems to me in the first place a reaction to, and against, a particular market activism. His examples refer to publishers who pursued really good writers whom they then actively marketed for a deservedly larger audience. Nobody would have a problem with any publisher who is active: rather publish with someone flying somewhere because he is reading, than a bank-manager-publisher – not staying longer than four years before moving on to a higher bean-counting position.

I share, however, a restlessness with another kind of market activism: books and authors published because they are fashionable merchandise often based on a popular blog, in other words, its 'value' lies in its sales.

[15] Amit Chaudhuri, 'Manifesto: On Literary Activism', *Literary Activism: A Series of Presentations and Interventions*, 2014, www.literaryactivism.com/mission-statement/.

[16] In the original Swedish, this reads: '*menskligheten den största nytta*' / '*det utmärktaste i idealisk rigtning*'. See '*Alfred Nobels testamente*' (Alfred Nobel's will), 27 November 1895, on the Nobel Prize website: www.nobelprize.org/alfred-nobel/alfred-nobels-will/.

At the same time, one does understand that publishing houses were to an extent forced to revert to this activism for various reasons. One is that so many newspapers, television and radio stations do not carry one second or iota about books or a discussion on the content of books, be they literary or popular. Interviews with 'marketable' writers yes, stories about their lives on the celebrity pages yes, their houses, their recipes, their heart-opening-ups yes, their scandals, fights, accusations of plagiarism or plundering, appropriation, yes, but no engagement with the works themselves.

So, because a good book can no longer reverberate enough publicness that rewards publishers, they have to publish the work of those who already reverberate through their own efforts ranging from a scandalous life to a popular blog. Perhaps the most crucial reason is the technology of our times. The soul of the internet is short and fast and infinite. If you are not on that jet, you do not exist, so fewer and fewer are educated into the slow grip of a piece of writing and how it can forever transform your innermost being.

PMcD: At the same time, as you have already pointed out, talk of literary value is inherently risky, so a value-centred literary activism is inevitably fraught in fact and in principle. Seen in this way, Chaudhuri's project looks necessary and opportune from your point of view.

AK: I would think the project crucial precisely because the backbone of the literary lies mainly in academia: that which is being prescribed, studied, researched and written about is what will outlast trendy one-day-sparrows. We have seen in South Africa how particular writers have come to the fore only through the slow painstaking work of academic studies (take Zoë Wicomb, for instance), how the work of generations of students studying a great poet finally engages a wider public. Even new fashionable themes like identity, or the animal, send scholars back to both older and new work. This activity and knowledge has always spilled over into more accessible spaces like book reviews, book discussions, newspapers and electronic media.

But academia seems in trouble. For me the problem arose the moment scholars pulled themselves back into small subthemes, picking a seed here and one there (either because they felt overwhelmed by the sheer forceful volume of publications in English or because they had been terrified by cause-fighters into submission to minor themes), without keeping abreast of the values and issues of contemporary literature. It becomes very difficult to determine where and how 'new' ground is being broken in terms of, say, the novel. Who is changing the format into something new? What are the main themes and who and how are they transgressing?

In South Africa things have become even more dire: the 'made' or 'imagined' gulf between Black and white or feminist writing is causing the death of much literary activism. Some academics now prefer to stick to 'their' field, others sow destruction in every text they touch, others are so busy championing that there is hardly time for in-depth analysis. The moment somebody touches an overview on South African literature the critics mercilessly slaughter the person – and often rightly so because

so little is known about the literature being written in nine of South Africa's official languages. Scholars also seem reluctant to write book reviews for a more popular audience.

The mainstays of Afrikaans writing are *leeskringe* (reading circles). Spread across the country, these groups decide on their reading list for the year and often get a scholar to discuss the book with them. Afrikaans newspapers still offer some solid space for book reviews. Then there are various awards where academics often serve as judges – reading circles then often select the books of prize-winners to discuss. So, the potential for a rewarding integration of literary activism is (still?) there in the Afrikaans literary world.

But I think it is different for English literature in South Africa. To me it seems that because nobody wants to be caught 'on the wrong side', the newspapers have effectively stopped reviewing literature. Extracts are published by publishers, but no solid reviewing. English writers have mentioned to me that their works sink like stones in South Africa, that they could just as well have published only the blurbs as nobody seemed to have read more than that.

Some of the literary prizes for poetry and fiction have quietly fallen away, perhaps because the tensions between white and Black judges, white and Black publishers, the issue of white editors, western standards, etc. became too explosive to touch. Our two most important prizes, the Alan Paton and Barry Ronge prizes, were simply stopped for a year or two, and really, it seemed nobody cared. When the prizes were initiated, the winners were front page news, books displayed in shop fronts. Lately, the event and writers hardly get a small news article on the arts page.

Literary activism should be a response to the distortion of market activism and should work in conjunction with and in addition to the market.

PMcD: What of the Afrikaans poetry to come?

AK: A poet finds and forges her voice among the voices that came before her – in my case Afrikaans poets writing in an Afrikaans with its tight grid of Dutch and German intact. Until about ten years ago, almost all the Afrikaans poets were schooled in a literature that was mainly western and white. In the meantime the majority of speakers in Afrikaans are no longer white, but of colour and still suffering the total destruction of apartheid. This means that poets from this group are writing about their surroundings, their anger, the consequences of the devastation, breaking new ground writing about poverty in a literature that existed on middle-class longings, sense of beauty, notions around poetry, and a solid sense of how 'style' in poetry has developed from naïve rhymes to complicated layered structures to the avant garde (e.g. I love simile, the swiftness and surprise of it, but find very few young poets using simile. I can write endlessly about landscape, but realize now that nature is a pure middle-class and ownership passion).

The coloured poets have their own version of Afrikaans: they create their own vocabulary and style, quote their own heroes (Tupac Shakur and no longer Paul Celan), make a whole set of new audiences and bring in innovative themes of injustice

and suffering which make the middle-class poetry look like indulgent candyfloss. They are therefore contributing very effectively in an 'ideal direction'.

But there is also the younger internet generation of poets – who thrive on publishing on the internet with immediate gratification of making an impact. They don't work with poetry volumes with titles feeding and broadening the themes, or the coherent gathering, shaping and cutting of something that cannot be said. With videos and other electronic material, they have vast influences on their audiences. It is within these kinds of contexts that my poems, despite dealing with injustice and humaneness, would make less and less sense. I do not begrudge anybody for it. It is, for me at least, the biggest challenge for literary activism – how do these contribute to a more progressive and just society?

So, great changes lie ahead.