Jenny Penberthy / CARTOGRAPHY OF ONE'S OWN COUNTRY: An Interview with Ingrid de Kok

In March 2004, *The Capilano Review* hosted South African poet Ingrid de Kok as its Writer-in-Residence. She consulted with local writers on their manuscripts, gave a reading of her poems, and in a lecture titled "'Verbs that move mountains': Commitment and the Lyric Poem," reflected on the nature of the poem's authority in the public sphere.

Ingrid de Kok grew up in Stilfontein, a gold mining town in South Africa. In 1977 she immigrated to Ontario, Canada and then returned to Cape Town in 1984. She has a MA from Queen's University. Among many other projects, she co-edited *Spring is Rebellious: Albie Sachs and Respondents on Cultural Freedom* and contributed to *Negotiating the Past: the Making of Memory in South Africa* and *It all begins: Poems from Postliberation South Africa.* Her poems have appeared in *West Coast Line* and in *Sulfur.*

De Kok's collections of poetry — *Familiar Ground* (Ravan, 1988), *Transfer* (Snailpress, 1997), and *Terrestrial Things* (Kwela/Snailpress, 2002) — have been published in South Africa. Her work has also been given much attention in Europe, the US, and Canada. It has been translated into several languages including Italian, Dutch, French, and Japanese. In April 2006, a collection of new and selected poems, *Seasonal Fires*, will be published by Seven Stories Press in New York.

This interview was conducted in print rather than in person in September 2005.

You're just back from the Berlin Internationales Literatuur Festival. In the summer you were at the Rotterdam Poetry International Festival. What were they like? Are these international writing events important to you as a poet?

Both were rather wonderful, because of the nature of the audiences, and because of the presence of other writers — often people I had not heard of before, though they are significant in their home countries. In Berlin the audience was informed, respectful, sober. In the Netherlands the festival foregrounds Dutch poets as well as foreign ones and the audiences seem to be more partisan and engaged.

I had only attended a few international literary festivals before these two, but I understand that they can become a fix, with some writers gravitating from one to another year after year, rather like the writing retreat perambulators. The events do widen my reading, introduce me to other traditions, complicate my notions of contemporary work. And it is valuable, not to mention humbling, to test one's voice in foreign environments. Both the Berlin Festival and Poetry International place great emphasis on translation — especially Poetry International, where the commitment to translation, into Dutch but also into English, is extraordinary. In Berlin actors perform the poems in German translation. In South Africa, there are 11 official languages but few resources for multiple translation, and vexed debate about its necessity, so I was impressed by the power of Dutch translation culture.

Does the South African writing community sustain you? Do you feel the influence of other South African writers? It's a diverse community and I wonder how lyric poetry co-exists with the more public, performance-based poetics of black South African poets? Is there an influence from the South African diaspora?

I have been involved in aspects of the writing community since my student years and then through the eighties and early nineties when political engagement, writing and performing were closely interrelated. Sometimes injurious to the writing, but an inescapable condition of the period. I still read fairly widely around the country,

assist some young writers with their manuscripts or in getting published, talk at book launches, help with writing events and other projects, occasionally guest-edit journals or review books. I spend more time doing this sort of thing than writing and I don't particularly enjoy it. I would not say the writing community "sustains" me, though the wider cultural environment does. I am lucky to have supportive friends who are also excellent writers, readers, and artists. But the writing community in South Africa is as mutually suspicious and envious, as divisive and judgmental, as elsewhere in the world. The quality of book reviewing is poor. The resources — publishers, prizes, journals, fellowships, etc. — are scarce or nonexistent, so envy is in a motile relation to aspiration.

While, as you say, the writing community is diverse — because of class, race, gender, access, educational opportunities, language, reading and writing traditions — the products are not as diverse as one might expect or hope. And despite the obvious truth that lyric poetry operates in a print-based and more conventional reading context, it is not as cut off from the performance-based work as it might at first appear. Play and critique exist in the lyric arsenal too. Nor is the writing of lyric poetry by any means only a "white" practice. Recently, excellent lyrical collections have appeared from two black poets — Rustum Kozain and Gabeba Baderoon.

There are crossovers at play between lyrical work and the more public poetics you refer to. For example Cape Town has quite a rich poetry reading culture and every week or two there is some kind of well-attended gathering at which poetry is read — either print-based or more performance-based work. The politics of performative work has itself shifted, from the anti-apartheid evocations of the past to energetic undermining of current nation building myths. Lesego Rampolokeng and the urban poets he has influenced are still important, using a range of linguistic codes to produce critiques of social conditions and of language itself. There are also groups of women poets around the country who deploy their poetry for directly feminist aims. Performance poetry here, as in many places, tends to draw younger listeners and participants — in South Africa mainly but not only black. Some of the work is to my ear self-regarding, formulaic,

more or less crass; and some is openly commercial, employed by advertisers to sell "lifestyle" products.

And the influence of other South African writers on my writing? I think probably not. I don't think my admiration for some of them has necessarily resulted in their influence on my work. Or maybe I just can't see it.

I have strong connections with South African writers who live here but also with others who still live abroad, but visit South Africa frequently, like the novelist Zoë Wicomb who lives in Glasgow and Yvette Christiansë, whom I think of as one of South Africa's finest and most innovative poets, though she lives in New York. Some writers returned home in the nineties, people like Keorapetse Kgositsile, who has published several books since his return and is an important model for many young poets. The increased mobility is bracing, and is breaking down the virtue made of isolation in the eighties, when the cultural boycott was at its height.

Have there been changes in state support for the arts? For literary magazines and publishers of literature? Employment for poets? Performance opportunities? Festivals? What does the Grahamstown Festival offer poets? The Durban Poetry Festival?

There have been limited changes. The key one of course is that mainly Afrikaans writers were privileged in the previous dispensation and now the resources are more equitably divided. There are a few more literary magazines and internet publications; somewhat more publishing opportunities. No real employment for poets as poets really, though a lot of (unpaid) performance opportunities and more festivals. Tiny things mostly but some larger city festivals and the Durban Poetry Africa festival which invites interesting foreign poets. The National Arts Council gives very little money to writers as far as I can tell; the Department of Arts and Culture gives most of its money to big public projects like Robben Island. Basically the country's money is assigned to education, health and housing, all desperately needed. Support for culture is largely symbolic.

Has South Africa seen a growth in demand for Creative Writing courses in the universities or in the community?

Yes. The University of Cape Town was the first, I think, to offer courses at undergraduate and masters levels. The University of the Witwatersrand and KwaZulu Natal now do this too and no doubt other places too. The industry is still in its infancy though there are large numbers of people wanting to do these courses and a fair number who have emerged from them have had work published. The Centre for the Book in Cape Town offers various courses to writers and provides advice for self-publishing and community publishing ventures and there are other modest initiatives in the country. The Centre for Extra-Mural Studies at the University of Cape Town, where I work, offers a small range of writing and art courses to the public.

I think these are positive developments, especially if what they produce is a group of sophisticated readers and reviewers. The reviewing culture in South Africa is parlous (in English especially; Afrikaans is far better served by serious and well-read critics). But I know there are some negative potentials too, that creative writing here will become technically more assured but that certain kinds of human experience and language experimentation might be dumbed down or modified to suit "academic" criteria.

How has South African poetry developed in relation to the other arts, particularly fiction and drama? Are you ever tempted to write fiction or drama?

There is interesting new poetry around, as I mentioned. But I think much of the inventive work is being done in drama and fiction. I think of the work of Ivan Vladislavic, for instance, and Zoë Wicomb, of new writer Mary Watson, of Njabulo Ndebele and dramatists like Mike van Graan. I am sometimes tempted to write fiction or drama, but until recently I have resisted it. I don't have a narrative consciousness, I don't think in terms of plot or cause and effect. I think in rhythmic shapes, in patterns, in sounds. Even the essays or speeches I write long to be poems.

Since 1994, South Africa's isolation from the rest of Africa has ended. How have you experienced this as a poet?

First of all it means one can travel on one's own continent. And therefore, theoretically, can respond to a much wider human and natural environment, if one chooses to. And access the work of African writers in new ways. Africans from around the continent find their way to Cape Town too, so the possibilities for interchange and comparison have increased. I do read more Ghanaian and Nigerian work but, because I don't read French, very little from Francophone Africa, even though I went to a festival in Djibouti in the early nineties. I was recently included in a compilation of African poetry edited by Harry Garuba, a Nigerian critic and writer based in Cape Town; and the opportunity to access other African writers through this double issue of *Poetry International* from San Diego State University has been valuable.

The political content of South African poetry will surely have changed over the last decade or so. How do poets deal with the past now? Is there a weariness with the subject now that there's a new generation of young people who have no memory of living under apartheid?

Well, the gestation of a poem is a mysterious and opaque thing and does not seem to respond in any immediate or predictable way to historical change. And the past — its binary pressure and political language — is so potent that it still inflects a great deal of South African composition in poetry and in fiction. How could it not? For many, apartheid is not exactly dead, it is just hiding more furtively.

It seems to me that, among many, there are two apparently conflicting pressures at work: one towards an identification with the nation, which requires a way of writing into a celebratory space, into the future; the other towards a critical analysis of the new dispensation. The latter may include expressions of anger and disappointment at the pace of change or at the rise of a self-interested new elite. Some young black poets who were too young to write about apartheid now write fiercely about post-apartheid inequities.

Your question asks whether the political as a primary category has been modified. I think it has, but only slightly. The "political" novel or poem is, however slowly, changing into something more reflective, with a greater trust of the imaginative range of language, of the authority of the inner life as well as of the external public context. Writers feel freer to claim multiple identities, not simple single political identities.

My feeling is that there is still a tedious tendency, in poetry and in fiction, to look for the big, the overarching, the monumental statement, the epic, the hold-all that will say everything there is to be said about South Africa. With an overarching set of political narratives controlling us, it is difficult to trust the smaller gesture, the little or muted angled story. But then, look at all the blockbusters coming out in the USA too. A sign of national anxiety rather than strength?

How have your own poems changed over the same period?

Do you think they have? I really can't say. I seem to return to the same topics, to notions of home, relational bonds, the fragility of the body, social disruption, sorrow, and survival. My books seem to all have had the same pattern, alternating personal recollections about childhood, mining life and love, with sections on the textures of immigration, travel, or absence, and sections more directly related to political and social landscapes — apartheid, the truth commission, AIDS. The sections are always interdependent — and I remain interested in the way poetic language can provisionally reconstruct remnants of identity, memory, history. I am still drawn to the elegiac note, though I have been writing some satirical pieces, some longer narrative poems and some tiny little descriptive fragments.

I'm curious about your beginnings as a poet. Did you write before you moved to Canada in the 1970s? Did Canada play a role in your development as a poet? You returned in South Africa in 1983 against the tide of white emigration. How was that?

I had written quite a bit before coming to Canada in 1976, had been published in small magazines and some anthologies, and was probably known already as poet. But yes, Canada did play a significant role in my development as a writer. I lived in Kingston, Ontario, and met a number of writers there, such as Bronwen Wallace, and later Carolyn Smart, who is now my sister-in-law, and others. Stan Dragland, whom I think is a wonderfully elastic writer and critic, published my poem "Small Passing" — now a widely reprinted poem — in *Brick*. Early on I had poems published in journals such as *Event*, *Fiddlehead* and *Descant*. It was an invigorating time, a period when I reconceived myself as a poet, And I still think of Canada as a second — and an intellectual — home. In the last few months I have helped set up the first Association of Canadian Studies in Africa, and my ties remain strong.

I did return against the tide. There were personal reasons as well as a conviction that I needed to be back in South Africa in order to write. And I wished to re-enter the politically engaged environment that I had earlier abandoned.

Since Familiar Ground *(1988), the forms of your poems have tightened — the lines are consistently shorter and there's more rhyme. How conscious is that?*

Both unconscious and conscious. *Familiar Ground* has both short, tighter poems and longer narrative ones. All play with internal rhyme. But I have become more interested in end rhyme. Particularly when writing about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission testimony, I needed a frame that could control the material and also allow it to breathe, to have its own autonomy. I wanted something quiet and something formal.

You give close attention to sound in your poems. You require "close listening" from your readers. Perhaps this goes some way towards explaining the a ppeal of your lyric poetry for live audiences. There is a performative quality to your handling of phonemes.

I respond to poetry that is intricate, rhythmic, where the cerebral is integrated into rhythms of meaning, rather than other syntaxes — of argument for instance. I like to work with patterns and patterning, with the dangers and pleasures of repetition or its variants, with internal rhyme.

Your poems often arise out of or build themselves around overheard or recorded speech.

The rhythm of a line or the shape of a word — yes, that is how some of them are built. I try to listen carefully to the private account and to the public record — not to the material facts necessarily, but to the motive force. And in South Africa the "record" is particularly charged; suspicion of the way something is reported is built into our fabric. That means at best that people subject language to quite close scrutiny, but it also means we are unusually prey to conspiracy theories.

You perform your poems quietly in the voice of a shamed truth teller. How do you experience your relation to an audience? Does this vary with a home audience or an audience abroad?

I don't think of myself as a truth teller. That seems very elevated. But shame is an honourable word. And yes, I hope I read quietly. The drama should be in the language and the voice should respect the silence speech leaves in its wake. I don't think there is a major difference in the way people respond, though I tend to give slightly more contextual information about the poems to foreign audiences, something I am not really comfortable doing. I think people want to feel that the words count, not the speaker.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission and AIDS poems are almost unbearably sad to read. What was your experience writing them?

Painful. I attended some Commission hearings; I listened to many broadcasts, read the reports, compiled notes of various kinds, wrote

scraps. But I did most of the final editing at the Rockefeller Centre in Bellagio where I had a residency. It was strange but not estranging to look out on Lake Como in those most beautiful surroundings and be writing of such horror and pain. Sometimes I had to shift focus altogether, and during that period I also wrote a series of poems set in Italy.

The published AIDS poems are only a fraction of what I have written about the pandemic and especially about women and children. Many have had to be shredded, hopeless because so strident and angry. The demands of writing about AIDS or about testimony hearings are acute; all sorts of respect and delicacies have to be maintained.

With these and other more recent poems there's a move towards a collective mourning, a global consciousness — South Africa's pain added to history's tally.

I have always written about other places, though conscious, I hope, of the myriad difficulties and dangers of "poetic tourism." But yes, I think it is probably true that a shift has taken place. Is it that the world seems even more interconnected than it did before? Or that South Africa's history can be understood as less unique now that the great burden of apartheid — which imposed an imaginative burden as well as a political, social one — is in retreat?

The trammelled injured body is a frequent presence in your later writing — the physical and metaphorical body. Did you write "Pilgrimage" and "Body Maps" as a pair — touring the city/mapping the body?

HIV and AIDS, and South Africa's deplorable history thus far in dealing with them, is always present at the margins if not the centre of one's daily consciousness. So to map the body as a site for pleasure and pain is not just an academic or rhetorical gesture. Injury and its consequences to individuals, to social consciousness, to the issues of rights, to the way we understand shared or separate community life: this harm sediments our culture.

I did not consciously write the two poems as a pair, though they were written in the same few months, and it is interesting you thought they might be related. Perhaps the body and the built space it inhabits are the key frames which keep us upright, alive, in connection with others. How vulnerable are they, and what does their loss mean to our collective memory? Is it possible to recon-figure the past or maintain reciprocity and compassion in the light of fragmentation and disintegration?

Your reputation as a poet in South Africa and abroad derives, of course, from the skill of the poetry and also from its relation to history and culture. I'm interested in aesthetic achievement in a highly charged political and historical context. You're addressing large public issues but in a very fine-tuned manner. How do you understand your success?

I don't know the answer. After all, poetry reaches the tiniest of audiences. But I do think people respond to complexity, to the experience of listening to another mind work its way through feelings and ideas, and to how these resonate in the air. I find that readers are very alert to writers' motives, to what they feel they are being turned into as they listen. They don't want to feel that meaning has been closed, is over, even before their interaction with it has begun. Nobody wants political education or any other education, when they read or listen to poetry. Not even in a "highly charged political and historical context." I am preoccupied with the question of how the lyric individual poetic imagination can encounter unyielding social experience without becoming programmatic or self-aggrandising. Like most poets, I just try to recompose the known and offer it to a temporary community of writer and reader.

Postmodernism seems not to have left a visible mark on white South African poetry. The dispersion of authorial control might have been an attractive strategy for the white poet. Perhaps the reduction of agency and accountability offered no solace to the white poet. I think of Lyn Hejinian's statement: "The 'personal' is already a plural condition." Any thoughts?

I am not sure of your trajectory here. I think postmodernism has left a mark, on white as well as black poetry, but perhaps not the sort of mark one sees in North America. It certainly has influenced the work of Yvette Christiansë and Karen Press, among others. But in countries where expressive conditions are apparently more benign, it is perhaps easier to assert that there is no undivided or essential self to centre, no authority to claim. For those who experience power, control, subjection, rage, guilt, revenge, the reduction of agency in a literary guise is potentially suspect. I am aware that this is a contested position, but I would still claim that the imagination in charged environments has particular responsibilities. That does not mean that poetics in South Africa is somehow out of touch with philosophical developments or the specialized politics of the academy.

There's a shift away from first person governed lyrics in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and AIDS poems plus the two recent ones. In fact, I notice a declining number of uses of the first person pronoun across the three collections: at a quick count, 6 out of 32 poems in Familiar Ground *use no "I" pronoun, 19 out of 29 poems in* Transfer, *and 28 out of 38 in* Terrestrial Things.

That's an intriguing observation. I must be getting old. I will have to think about my disappearing act. Perhaps for writers like me, the "I" is less authoritative as one ages, not more so. But hey, I don't have a problem with "I." It can be a tool of exploration that is sourced in the self but not confessional.

How do you feel about writing a long poem? I note the weakened closure of the more recent poems.

I find long poems very testing, especially at readings. I feel self-indulgent, forcing others to tolerate extended ruminations. Do you mean open-ended endings? Some of those poems are about fractures, lack of resolution, so the endings are intentionally consistent with the poetic material, choices.

Which contemporary poets do you follow with interest?

The great Japanese poet, Shuntaro Tanikawa (in translation, of course); the Nigerian Chris Abani, now living in the USA I think; Szymborska, also only in translation; poets in the USA — there are many that interest me, but at the moment I am reading Carl Phillips and Martin Espada. Nathaniel Tarn I rediscovered recently. He has written a magisterial recent poem about a visit to Namibia. Ron Padgett's poems are a source of great pleasure. Of the Canadians — I am a bit out of touch, but Anne Carson; George Stanley (though I have read nothing since the selected, *A Tall Serious Girl);* Sharon Thesen; Don McKay; Stephanie Bolster; Jan Conn; I liked an intense collection which came out some years ago by Rachel Rose called *giving my body to science.*

The truth is I am not reading much new work. I am re-reading Seferis, Ritsos and Cavafy; Muriel Rukeyser; Amichai; Borges; Frost. There is no logic to any of my reading — it has no particular trajectory; I read more fiction than collections of poetry. I read what is recommended to me by friends, I burrow and borrow, I pick things from my shelves randomly; I don't belong to any "school" and I don't read as if I am attending one. I am entirely unsystematic.

How does Cape Town enter in to your experience as a poet? Living in Kalk Bay which was spared the racial segregation that remade South African city living?

My consciousness seems to be determined by the rather ugly mining landscapes of my childhood, not by the beauties of Cape Town. But I have lived in the Cape for more than 20 years now, and love living in Kalk Bay. I don't want to romanticise it — it is a village with much of the same class and race divisions as elsewhere in divided Cape Town, but the fact that there were fewer removals of black people from their homes here than in many other places means that there has been a continuous black fishing community and a continuous white community. This makes it an unusually relaxed and united place. I like its shabbiness, but it is in danger of becoming gentrified.

Does your working life at the university contribute to your life as a poet?

To the degree that I sometimes get research leave, or leave to accept fellowships, yes. But not really otherwise. I work in adult education at the University of Cape Town. I am not a literary scholar or teacher. I work long hours and have almost no writing time outside of one month's leave a year. And my intellectual and creative contacts tend to be with people not employed on campus.

The covers of your books are always fascinating. How do you choose them? What do you have planned for the Seven Stories book?

My first book's cover was a photograph of children on a building site, by David Goldblatt. I first had to submit my manuscript to him, and an essay on why I wanted to use that photograph. I was very grateful when I passed the test, and even more delighted when recently he used a few lines of mine for a collection of photographs called *Particulars*. William Kentridge, who is a friend, gave me permission to use his drawing *Mbinda Cemetery* for my second book — and Jane Alexander, also a friend, let me use her haunting montage *Harvestime* for the cover of *Terrestrial Things*. I love the disconcerting image, its foreboding and poignancy, but some people are very disturbed by it. The cover for the new book hasn't been settled yet.

Can you talk about your new book, your first to be published outside of South Africa?

I was approached by Seven Stories Publishers in New York, who offered to produce a collected. That gave me cold feet — I thought it might be hubris, so we decided instead on a collection of new and selected poems, called *Seasonal Fires*, due out in April. Seven Stories is an excellent small left-leaning press, and I am impressed by their willingness to risk publishing somebody with only a limited reputation in North America. A South African version will be published in June by Umuzi, an imprint of Random House, South Africa.