



LETTER TO THE SPONSOR
ANTJIE KROG

Antjie Krog completed a degree in Afrikaans, Philosophy and English at the University of the Orange Free State and obtained a Master's degree from the University of Pretoria and a teaching diploma from the University of South Africa. She is a poet, writer, journalist and Extraordinary Professor at the University of the Western Cape. She published twelve volumes of poetry in Afrikaans, two poetry volumes in English, and two non-fiction books: *Country of my Skull*, on the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and *A Change of Tongue* about the transformation in South Africa after ten years. Krog had been awarded most of the prestigious awards for non-fiction, translation and poetry in both Afrikaans and English, as well as the Award from the Hiroshima Foundation for Peace and Culture for the year 2000, as well as the Open Society Prize from the Central European University (previous winners were Jürgen Habermas and Václav Havel). She also received honorary doctorates from the Tavistock Clinic of the University of East London, UK, the Universities of Stellenbosch, Freestate and the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University. – Address: Faculty of Arts, University of the Western Cape, Private Bag X17, 7535 Bellville, South Africa.

Villa Walther
My last day at Wiko
24 July 2008

Dear Sponsor:

During my first year as a university student I was obsessed with Ayn Rand's virtue of self-ishness. Imagining myself a character in *Atlas Shrugged*, I lived a cold and self-demanding life, despising everything selfless as weak, while waiting for the Ayn Rand helicopter to airlift me to that place where all people lived according to her philosophy. But then, politics came ... and after spending a lifetime trying to learn to be selfless and to understand forgiveness, I was indeed airlifted: to Wiko.

I write this letter, dear sponsor, because I would like to explain two things to you: The first is why it is important to invite scholars from the Third World.

Here at the Wissenschaftskolleg, in the Grunewald, I have experienced an extraordinary sense of well-being. It took me a while to realize that this was not *only* the product of the exceptional, generous support systems provided by Wiko, or the safety of being here, or my self-disciplined solitude, but was actually due to the fact that the Kolleg forms part of a larger coherency – larger than its staff, its Fellows from all disciplines and backgrounds, and especially larger than its location in Berlin's Grunewald.

What I mean is that the name of the street I would walk along on my way to Roseneck, say the Furtwänglerstraße, would one morning form part of a cultural program on rbb, would form part of a newspaper article a month afterwards, would form part of a recent museum exhibition about the choices of musicians during the Second World War, would form part of a university course on conducting styles, would form part of German history taught and written about, would be available as a biography in a book or CD or DVD at Dussmann's, would be part of a documentary on late-night television, or appear as a street address on somebody's business card, or slip into a conversation about the bus stops of the M29.

This kind of coherence also means that shop windows on the Kurfürstendamm and in the Kurfürstenstraße would display clothes and shoes for workers in hospitals, on roads, at construction sites, in factories and at clean-up sites. The following week they would display dresses from the Prussian period for Christmas, then soccer gear in the German national colours, then fabrics decorated with figures from Greek mythology. And so many coherencies interlink to form a structure in which one can fully function.

In South Africa we live in incoherency. It looks like this: the area I live in has a name only some people can pronounce (be it Oranjezicht or Qunu), its meaning lost to most of us. Many provinces, regions, towns and streets had other names before their current ones, so one will find some people still using the previous name, others the one before that, some use the correct pronunciation, others a new Anglicized version of the correct pronunciation. Apart from Mandela and Verwoerd, we do not know the people as statues on their pedestals, or the people honoured or vilified by naming and renaming. In our history some had been against and others for some of us. No part of our history is without its exclusion and destruction of some part of the population.

Every South African, on a daily basis, skips from one solid knowable stone to another that is barely within reach. If one misses, then one treads and wades within an unknown morass until reaching something recognizable to stand upon for a while and catch one's breath.

Workers' clothes would never be displayed in our shop windows, because work had been racified and therefore despised. Nobody wants to be a worker. The clothes on display are for the bosses. Everybody wants to be a boss.

On our national holidays (Heritage Day, Reconciliation Day, Youth Day) we realize we have nothing in common – not what we read, not what we speak, not what we write, not what we sing or eat, not whom we honour. Nothing binds us. Our daily third-world lives are broken into hundreds of different shards of unrooted incoherent experiences. (Visiting Djakarta with a group of Dutch and Flemish writers, one of them remarked how they found it difficult to navigate through the streets while checking for all manner of undesirabilities, unequal surfaces, unexpected holes, open sewers, pedestrians, bicycles, etc., and how I seemed to walk the streets with a different sensibility – knowing the geography beforehand and full speed ahead.)

This is of course nothing new for black people. They have lived just such fragmented lives ever since the whites arrived. But for Afrikaners it is new. We created our coherent world through the system of apartheid and now we are all tumbled into a country that most do not recognize.

Why do I tell you this, dear sponsor? Following the media, listening to the debates, one realizes that the influx of people from other cultures and religions into Germany is starting to influence that very coherence I have experienced these past nine months at Wiko. Clearly, big decisions lie ahead on how to manage and operate an increasingly fragmented and diverse society; even on how to submit to somebody else's coherency in order not to accept

that the only possible fields of communality are shopping, American soap operas, video games and movies.

The second thing I want to tell you about, is my colloquium, because I believe that the Dienstagskolloquium is an integral part of Wiko.

The colloquium allows the Fellow to “address” an unimaginably diverse and intelligent group – top-fit in terms of critical thinking. To have one’s own thinking surveyed and challenged by them is a privilege that most academics do not have. Most of us like to teach, and because we are enthusiastic about our subjects the Fellow on stage usually has a conspicuous glow of self-expectation, and it is amazing to see how ordinarily quiet or shy Fellows blossom into riveting border-shifting lecturers.

The first hurdle is the theme. It is not easy to distill, from a lifetime of work and several books of research, something that is not only interesting but explicable to those Fellows outside one’s own field, while at the same time showcasing what precisely it is that makes you “worthy” of being here in the first place.

The second hurdle is to ask somebody to introduce you. For months one agonizes: on whom dare I impose myself? On the other hand, those who asked me, immensely enriched my life.

The third hurdle is the writing of the piece. Because of the audience, because of the kind of internal debate that has developed during previous colloquiums, one’s paper needs to be tailor-made.

Experiencing daily the coherence of Berlin, I realized that all my research and writing was actually an attempt to come to terms with incoherence; that it was an effort to work out the possibilities of living coherently with incoherence. For the colloquium I combined two examples of incoherence that were rooted in the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission: the testimony of Mrs Konile and misperceptions as to what was underpinning the peaceful workings of the TRC.

I awoke that Tuesday morning, 24 June, very peacefully. The grammar in my paper had been checked and in general everything was as good, sharp and focused as I could get it. As I was drinking coffee I heard a big noise outside and saw something very rare: a swan with enormous effort lifting itself out of the water by its upsurging wings and running with a flatfooted noise on the water surface until it achieved lift-off. At that moment my husband phoned from South Africa. When he’d arrived home the previous night an enormous owl was sitting on the roof – turning its head right around to look at him. Are you

okay, is your mother okay, are we all safe? We both laughed carefully, as third-world people do when death-superstitions enter the space.

I was early for my presentation and stood alone in the *Großer Kolloquiumsraum* – a wonderful space, where the light streams in from the surrounding trees, all year round, whether the trees are autumned, snowed or greened. This room had provided me with much pleasure during the year – from unbelievably beautiful chamber music to lectures where I learned something I hadn't known or simply hadn't thought about before.

A cleaning woman suddenly entered with a blue cloth and carefully cleaned the tables so that when we sat down, there would be no dust or crumbs. I could only shake my head at such care.

The colloquium is a ritual. The Fellow whose turn it is imperceptibly withdraws some two weeks before, writing, consulting, but as the day comes nearer the energy starts to build. On the day itself the hair is washed and one's clothes carefully selected so as to be sober but not dull. A big decision is then taken – on whether to stand – (taking control) or sit (inviting calm discussion).

My time had come. The Fellows assembled. They greeted one another, chatted, and, as always before a colloquium, there was an air of expectation. Fellows have their certain places where they like to sit. Some staff entered, also the main deacon and his deputy. Water was ready, watches taken off. Elizabeth Jelin introduced me. I began. And as I looked up I saw the faces that I have come to know so well over the months – the concentration, the keenness to be engaged, the indispensable critical crinkle around the eyes; also, of course, the signs of self-preoccupation and slight boredom. When Mrs Konile's familiar face with the headcloth and voice appeared on the screen, my insides churned. There she was. In our midst. The sounds she made into the big white cloth were the sounds of a person un-used to crying; in Mrs Konile's life crying for a killed son verged on luxury.

The hour-long presentation is the setting of the table and the serving of the food. The hour-long Q&A period is the tasting and judging of the food. I noticed that my hands shook slightly when I drank my water. It felt as if a kind of terror came from all sides, all disciplines. I felt that I responded inadequately. I was drowning, but also overcome, suddenly, by a feeling of being deeply responsible, not only for Mrs Konile having an unbearable life, but also for her being here in this room, so inadequately. And I knew, as I had known all my life, that I could not make this good, that nothing could ever make up for her harsh, dirt-poor, grief-heavy racialised life. But suddenly, after a question from Martin Loughlin, something happened, something changed, like an *Atemwende*. I felt something

inside myself was stretching forward towards something, I know not what. It was as if one was pushing beyond the limitations of the real – grabbing, letting go, fumbling, tracing, breathing against, shall one say, a kind of still unknowable truth? One's thoughts, not having words yet, grew fingertips that were feeling, probing towards light that one suddenly had become aware was there, very close by.

This kind of moment was noticeable in most colloquiums and it was here, while trying to find an answer, that Fellows would move towards a sort of truth that was being egged on by the faces in the room.

It was only afterwards that I realized that whatever our fields of expertise, as we sat there, our lives were forever interconnected with that of Mrs Konile. We might forget her name, not be able to recall her face, but she would still be there, sitting upright, thin and resistant, demanding from us: a JUST life – maybe the fundamental challenge to that beautiful light-filled, white, plum and bamboo-coloured room.

Yours Sincerely,
Fellow Antjie Krog

P.S.: A message awaited me on my return from Berlin: Mrs Konile had died.