

## The Google of My Skull

Had Stephen Watson phrased his accusation of plagiarism against Antjie Krog published in *New Contrast*<sup>1</sup> in an academic or professional manner, I might have been sympathetic. As it is, I am tempted to distance myself from the accusation because of the rude and embarrassing manner in which it was made. If one takes plagiarism seriously, one does not make or publish such accusations lightly. However, exactly because the accusation is serious, one should consider it seriously.

Watson makes two allegations of plagiarism.

Watson's first charge is that Krog's "the stars say /tsau" is "an act of appropriation which is outright theft". It appears that there is nothing that Krog could have done to avoid Watson's allegation. The full title of the book is listed on Amazon.com as "The Stars Say 'Tsau' : /Xam Poetry of Dia!kwain, Kweiten-ta-//ken, /A!kunta, Han#kass'o, and //Kabbo"<sup>2</sup>. The Kwela website lists Krog as the compiler, not the author<sup>3</sup> (other Kwela poetry books list the author). Krog credits and includes brief biographies of each of the /Xam poets. Watson seems chiefly annoyed that he was not credited, for he claims that "... Krog has quietly filched the whole concept for her book from me". Watson is not the first to use the Bleek and Lloyd collection<sup>4</sup>. His argument is obscured by his invective about the quality of Krog's poetry. His case lacks merit.

Watson's second allegation, that a paragraph in Krog's "Country of my Skull" is strikingly similar to Ted Hughes's 1976 essay "Myth and Education," also warrants examination<sup>5</sup>. Watson quotes the passages side-by-side, with all common or similar phrases in bold. The similarities in the paragraphs are striking, but when one realises that the Krog quote consists of a single paragraph, while Watson has edited 2 pages of the Hughes piece to produce the desired effect, one suspects Watson of disingenuity<sup>6</sup>.

Nonetheless, let us undertake some investigation and do something that Watson neglected: work<sup>7</sup>.

Before I present the results of my investigation, I want to insert a disclaimer. This is not a thorough investigation, let alone an academic study. In fact, it's not really an investigation at all. Let's call it a back-of-the-envelope exercise. It's something to give us an idea whether there might be any legitimacy in Watson's claim.

I searched Google for some key phrases that the Krog and Hughes pieces have in common<sup>8</sup>. Of course, I found many mentions of Watson's allegations, but I was more interested to count the other

---

1 <http://www.suntimes.co.za/2006/02/19/watson.pdf>

2 [http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0795701756/ref=sr\\_11\\_1/002-8890727-5857663?%5Fencoding=UTF8](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0795701756/ref=sr_11_1/002-8890727-5857663?%5Fencoding=UTF8)

3 <http://www.nb.co.za/Kwela/kCatalogueDisplay.asp?iItem=2844>

4 Krog, in her reply to the Watson article at <http://www.suntimes.co.za/2006/02/19/krog.pdf>, mentions Eugene Marais's use of the work, and Nèlleke de Jager of Kwela Books mentions others who have used the collection. [http://www.litnet.co.za/seminarroom/krog\\_kwela.asp](http://www.litnet.co.za/seminarroom/krog_kwela.asp)

5 Watson does not mention how he discovered the similarities between Krog and Hughes. I read them in a Robert Kirby article in February 2005, but Watson does not credit Kirby or anyone else. Perhaps Watson discovered these similarities himself, but "one suspects the worst".

6 Eve Gray writes "When I checked the passage in Hughes, I was struck by the fact that it extended over two or three pages." [http://www.litnet.co.za/seminarroom/krog\\_eve\\_gray.asp](http://www.litnet.co.za/seminarroom/krog_eve_gray.asp) I have not checked the Hughes myself.

7 For all Watson's arguing that Krog is a lazy writer, he makes such a poor and confused argument that one suspects he, too, has committed the deadly sin of Sloth. From his tone one suspects him of committing a few more deadly sins besides.

8 Trying to track down the Kirby article, I came across this Karen Bliksem: <http://www.sundayindependent.co.za/index.php?fSectionId=1080&fArticleId=2417463>. Although I had read the Bliksem article in 2005, it did not initiate my Google-based investigation.

pieces – articles unrelated to Krog OR Hughes – where these phrases also occurred. These are my results:

Google Phrase	Number of references to work besides Krog and Hughes
“unit of imagination”	13
both “unit of imagination” and “contradictions”	1
“unit of imagination” and “contradictions” and “reconciles”	0
both “unit of imagination” and “workable fashion”	0
both “workable fashion” and “single word”	4

This detective work surprised me. I had guessed these phrases would appear frequently, but, except in references to Krog's “Country of my Skull” and occasional references to Hughes's essay, they occur together extremely seldom. This suggests one of two possibilities:

- The web is not the place to seek phrases from real literature, for while an infinite number of monkeys may produce all the works of Shakespeare, they haven't yet produced the works of Ted Hughes, or
- Further investigation might bear fruit.

I must return to my disclaimer: this is a dreadfully flawed experiment. To be convincing, I should need to check how representative the web really is. Is a search for a distinct phrase in a work likely to yield a Google match? I would also need to show that, given any work of literature, I can't find a sequence of phrases strikingly similar to another work, or at least that the odds of that happening are so slim as to be inconsequential. It is probably a PhD project. I suppose, one could accomplish this using a very large, electronic library and something like Amazon.com's *Statistically Improbable Phrases*<sup>9</sup>. A quick glance at Amazon.com offers the following Statistically Improbable Phrases for “Country of My Skull”:

long white shadow, amnesty deadline, truth commissioners, amnesty hearing, amnesty applications, portfolio committee, thousand rand, radio team, investigative unit, gross human rights violations, media briefing<sup>10</sup>

None of the phrases that Krog and Hughes share are “Statistically Improbable”, but without knowing how Amazon identifies these phrases, that is not significant.

What does this tell us about Krog and Hughes? Nothing, except that there might be something to investigate further. But it does tell us that Watson did not do the work. Make no mistake: I have not done the work either. These back-of-the-envelope scribblings simply suggest there might be some work to do. They do not make a case of plagiarism.

The party here who has really neglected their duty, who has most disgracefully not done their work, is the editor of New Contrast, Tom Eaton. His duty was not to prove or disprove this case, it was to firmly tell a contributor that their article was too rash, too immature, and too poorly argued to merit publication, and that, before making such serious accusations in print, they had better have a watertight case. Eaton doesn't realise how serious the allegation is. In an article about his decision

<sup>9</sup> For an explanation of Statistically Improbable Phrases see <http://www.amazon.com/gp/search-inside/sipshelp.html/002-8890727-5857663> I have no idea how Amazon.com computes these. One would need to understand this before one could build a plausible case on them.

<sup>10</sup> [http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0812931297/qid=1143040057/sr=2-1/ref=pd\\_bbs\\_b\\_2\\_1/002-8890727-5857663?s=books&v=glance&n=283155#sipbody](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0812931297/qid=1143040057/sr=2-1/ref=pd_bbs_b_2_1/002-8890727-5857663?s=books&v=glance&n=283155#sipbody)

to publish, he writes:

If [Krog] wishes to return the favour and sling a cream pie at Watson, I would be happy to provide the venue<sup>11</sup>.

In Eaton's mind, Watson merely 'slung a cream pie'. This is wrong: Watson attempted to destroy Krog's career with the most serious accusation that can be made against a writer. In the literary and academic worlds, plagiarism should be a death-sentence. Eaton's cavalier publication is more disgraceful than Watson's diatribe. Watson, perhaps, was overcome by emotion, but Eaton was incompetent and irresponsible.

Craig Mason-Jones  
22 March 2006

---

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.chico.mweb.co.za/art/2006/2006mar/060303-eaton.html>