

Performing South Africa's Truth Commission. Stages of transition

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Performing South Africa's Truth Commission is one of the most recent studies on the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (hereafter TRC), the country's renowned instrument of transitional justice. In contrast with the vast majority of existing publications on the TRC, the author explicitly claims not to try to evaluate the Commission's work – so not asking the question whether the TRC has actually succeeded in bringing about reconciliation in South Africa, both on an interpersonal and a national level. Having a background in theatre studies herself, the author decided to look at the TRC through the lens of performance. One of the objectives of the TRC was, indeed, to give voice to thousands of 'ordinary' people: the Human Rights Violations Committee (HRVC) offered a platform for the victims of apartheid, whereas the Amnesty Committee listened to the horrifying confessions of the apartheid perpetrators. Being a highly dramatic, public and transparent process, it is clear that the TRC 'embraced performance', as the author states in her introduction. Unravelling the various layers of the TRC as a performative act and investigating the implications this has had on South Africa society, are two of the main objectives of this book.

As most works on the South African TRC, also this book starts with a chapter on the difference between retributive and restorative justice in a society trying to deal with a traumatic past – that is, the difference between trials and truth commissions. Although the two methods have completely different aims – one of the differences being that a truth commission tries to pay a lot more attention to the dignity and the agency of the victims, the author identifies both truth commissions and trials as belonging to the domain of performance (p.4). The South African TRC was the seventeenth commission of its kinds, but it was definitely the most public and publicized commission the world has ever seen. It was especially through the public hearings (victim and amnesty hearings) that the world experienced the Commission. These hearings were highly theatrical, staging testifiers who brought very emotional and dramatic narratives, and they were distributed throughout the world by the audio-visual and print media. In this way, the hearings were 'the public face of the Commission' (p.8) and they were very similar to an actual theatre play. Interesting here is the difference between the victim hearings and the amnesty hearings, the latter being not as theatrical as the victim hearings, but instead having much more power to actually change people's lives. It is important to make a distinction between these two kinds of hearings – throughout this book I have the impression that the author is sometimes referring to the TRC in general, while she actually means the HRV Committee.

In the second part of this first chapter the author zooms in on the case of the Guguletu Seven, an incident whereby seven alleged activists were killed by the South African police force, in March 1986. Several mothers of these young men testified at the HRV Committee and two of the perpetrators came before the Amnesty Committee to apply for amnesty. The author goes into great detail to describe the Guguletu Seven hearings, in an attempt to show ‘the many different dimensions’ of the TRC performance. Indeed, at certain instances these hearings went not according to the predetermined script, for instance because one of the mothers started to shout hysterically. It seems a bit contradictory, though, that the author uses this extremely mediated and constantly referred to example from the HRV hearings, because later on (at the end of Chapter Three, p.89) she claims that ‘the same few testimonies have received an inordinate amount of media and scholarly scrutiny, [...] while the majority of the 2000 public testimonies have received no qualitative analysis whatsoever’. She does conclude this first chapter by correctly claiming that many scholars have focuses too much on the TRC Final Report, a seven-volume masterpiece which has had a very limited distribution. It is the public hearings that demand a far greater analysis, as these hearings really represented the entire TRC proceedings.

In Chapter Two the author discusses three prominent apartheid trials – the Treason Trial (1956-1961), the Incitement Trial (1962) and the Rivonia Trial (1964), in order to discover the genealogical roots of the TRC as a performative act. According to the author, these trials can be compared to the TRC, as they were also performative processes, taking place at transitional points in South Africa’s political history. Those trials of the early ‘60s were one of the last places where the political opposition was given a public voice, before the state repression became so dominant that every oppositional voice was ‘concealed in prison cells and torture chambers’ (p.62). The comparison between the TRC and these court cases seems a bit irrelevant. Since a trial is in essence theatrical, and since the TRC (especially the Amnesty hearings) made use of legal discourse, the similarities are rather self-evident. And there have clearly been other transitional points in South African apartheid history that can also be considered as performative – going from manifestations and uprisings, to the highly dramatic funerals held for anti-apartheid heroes.

Chapter Three and Four talk about two crucial channels through which the TRC hearings were mediated: the simultaneous language interpreters and the journalists. True to the idea of the multilingual new South Africa, the TRC gave every testifier the opportunity the talk in his or her own language. An impressive interpreting service was set up, but due to inadequate training, time pressure and linguistic complexities, this simultaneous interpretation can only be described as a rough translation – where a great deal of the original significance got lost and where mistakes were sometimes made. Many times, the interpreters were emotionally overwhelmed and this made neutrality impossible. Only the English translations were transcribed and put on the Official TRC Website and the author thus calls upon scholars to start investigating the original testimonies, instead of solely relying on the transcribed versions. In the second part of this third chapter, the author is highly critical about scholars who only refer to secondary sources when doing

research on the TRC. She refers extensively to Antjie Krog's memoir *Country of My Skull*, which is a personal account of how Krog experienced the victim hearings. Unfortunately, some researchers seem to cite from Krog's work as if it were a primary source. In conclusion, the author calls upon scholars to study the primary TRC documents in its entirety and to not only pay attention to the gross violations of human rights that were expressed in these testimonies, but also to the articulations of daily life under apartheid.

The fourth chapter is devoted to a second mediating layer: the journalists who edited the testimonies to be broadcast on television. When testifying before the TRC, most victims and perpetrators not only talked to the audience in the room, but they actually talked to the nation at large. The TRC was a huge media event and most South Africans experienced the Commission via radio and television. The author pays a lot of attention to the programme *TRC Special Report*, an 87-episodes current affairs programme televised by the South African Broadcasting Corporation. She discusses how the programme 'walked the thin line between journalism and participation' (p.95), but how it also provided a lot of contextual information by telling the story behind the TRC stories. The author is very positive about *TRC Special Report*: it was exceptional for its richness of the contexts it provided for TRC stories and it can also be considered as an extraordinary archival record of the Commission.

Chapter Five deals with the 'dragons' of South Africa's past: what does the TRC mean to present-day South Africa? A few points stand out in this chapter. First of all it is clear that the TRC has been much more praised internationally, while South Africans themselves are easily confronted with what the TRC did not achieve. Following up on that, it is also obvious that the TRC has often been held responsible for the failures of the state. The TRC was never supposed to bring about reconciliation, nor was it given the authority to grant reparations. People who are disappointed regarding the lack of reparative measures should never forget that it was the responsibility of the state to implement the TRC's recommendations. We then get a few examples of people who were reconciled as a result of their appearance before the TRC. A survey of the prominence of the TRC in the news in 2006 indicates that the TRC is still very prominent in contemporary discourse. This means that people are still thinking and reflecting about reconciliation, which makes the TRC far more influential in present-day South Africa than anticipated. Further, the author talks about an artistic performance of the TRC: the musical work *REwind: A Cantata for Voice, Tape, and Testimony*, which is literally based on TRC testimonies. Although the question of ownership of the TRC stories was considered by the composer, the positive elements of such a performance outweigh this concern: through such a memorial project victims were honoured once more and they were again given agency. Since the mandate of the TRC was far too ambitious for what the TRC could actually achieve, we need these kinds of artworks ('living memorials') to continue the work of the TRC – giving a voice to the apartheid victims.

In the concluding chapter, the author explains that by regarding the TRC as a performance, we can understand the many layers and the intrinsic complexity of the public testimonies. It is important to study how the TRC was experienced as a performance.

And precisely because people experienced it as a performance, it brought people closer to one another. Victims and perpetrators saw each other as human beings and they could begin to respect – or at least understand – one another. And this, as rightly claimed by the author, is the essence of *ubuntu*, the African philosophy that states that one is only human based on the humanity of the other. Interestingly about these final chapters is that in the end the author seems to be very positive about the TRC – although throughout the work she claims that she does not really want to evaluate the Commission; she clearly distances herself from the academics who ‘myopically assess whether the Commission was “good” or “bad”’ (p.168).

In the Afterword the author expands on the concept of truth before the TRC. In its Final Report the TRC distinguished four different kinds of truth: factual, personal, social and restorative truth. On the basis of the public hearings, it seemed as if the TRC favoured personal/narrative truth, but the Commission’s actual practices behind closed doors revealed that they actually favoured factual/forensic truth. In finishing the author calls again upon scholars to analyze the TRC testimonies in detail – on the basis of the original testimonies, or on the basis of new and better translations. It is only in this way that we will truly get a grip on the narrative truth that lies behind these testimonies. A critical issue here is that the TRC archive should be accessible for the larger public and for researchers – which is, unfortunately, not the case today.

One of the overarching themes of this book is that South Africa is still very much a country in transition. The TRC can be considered as the starting point of this transitional process, but the fact that the Commission is still highly present in contemporary discourse, and the fact that the Commission is still being ‘performed’ in one way or another, do suggest that this period of political transition might be going on for many more years to come. Quite fascinating about this work is that it speaks to multiple audiences. It is interesting to scholars with a high expertise in South African history, as well as to artists, to people with a background in theatre studies, and to professionals generally interested in transitional justice and conflict resolution. The research on which this book is based is really impressive – the bibliography is very extensive and the knowledge of the TRC that is put forward is absolutely amazing. This is mainly due to the fact that the author interviewed many people who were very close to, or even part of, the TRC process.

At certain points I do find the book a bit incoherent. I am not really convinced about the points made in Chapter Two (where the comparison is made between the TRC and the political trials in the ‘50s and ‘60s). Also Chapter Five seems a bit incoherent to me: it starts by evaluating the TRC and claiming that it is still regularly referred to in the year 2006, while in the second part the musical work *REwind* is discussed in detail.

The author does make a number of very important points: the TRC was especially experienced through the public hearings, it was the beginning of a process of reconciliation and it did have a long-lasting impact on South African society. More in-depth research on the original TRC documents is required and one of the crucial elements here is that the TRC archives should be made accessible. Finally, financial means should be made available to also reflect on the TRC artistically. This book is definitely a must for everybody interested in the Truth and Reconciliation process, in transitional justice and in South African society in general.

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