

EDITORIAL: WHITHER OR WITHER TRC?

Special issue: The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission

PINS's (Psychology in society) plan to devote a special issue to the operations and effects of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was hatched in 1998. At this stage, the TRC's Committee on Human Rights Violations had completed the harrowing testimony-collection from survivors and produced a report summarising their findings (TRC, 1998); the Committee on Amnesty was embroiled in hearings with perpetrators of politically motivated human rights violations, and in (contentious) judgement about whether the intent and quality of their "truths" warranted their "pardon"; and the Committee on Reparation and Rehabilitation had yet to find a way to begin their work of compensation and healing. Two years on, it is difficult to discern signs of "closure" in any of these realms. This is not to disavow ongoing, well-intentioned and committed work within (and without) the TRC process, but to acknowledge the shifts in public discourse that have come to interrogate the map, the route and the destination of the TRC. Thus, what would count as "closure", and to whom?

Early writings about the TRC are now positioned as naive due to their idealistic and ideologised assumptions about "truth" (that is a recoverable "it" under Apartheid's secrets), and the linearity of the relation between this truth and "healing" (as if we would be liberated by / from truth) (e.g. Asmal, Asmal & Roberts, 1997). More recently, the indicators of and signposts in these processes are contested, and blurry. Undoubtedly, contestation has been lead by academics (and others) who have discovered the South African memory-making market, which, positively, has produced opportunities for searing social diagnosis and stirring analysis of the (very) "thick" texts produced through the TRC hearings. Since 1998, academic thinking, writing and talking about the TRC, manifest in a proliferating number of conferences, books and journals - the marks of institutionalised imperialism? - has redoubled.

This is not intended to demonise power-knowledge, for we-Foucauldians recognise its operations as contradictory and diffuse rather than simply conspiratorial. It is also not without irony, for this **PINS special issue** (and this editor herself) is complicit in the TRC truth-business. However, it does draw attention to the *effects* of academic discourse - its trickling up/down into everyday talk and experience - in (re)producing the critical surfaces on which the TRC is now made to appear. Several of these folded, reflexive surfaces will be mentioned briefly while introducing the four papers included in this TRC-issue.

The aims of this **PINS special issue** were in keeping with this critical gaze on the TRC: to create a space for reflection on, and constructive engagement with, the institutional,

political and theoretical role of psychology in the historicised process of “truth-telling” and “reconciliation” in South Africa.

The constitution of “truth” with regard to the TRC’s work is a battleground, often negotiated by way of oppositions: realism (either true, or lies) versus relativism (constructed versions). The former draws in corroborative evidence to establish facticity, and predictably, much constructionist work ends up on a very slippery slope around the physical and historical reality of abuses and violations. Wendy Corry and Martin Terre Blanche’s paper - *Where does the blood come from?: True stories and real selves at the TRC hearings* - considers the key elements necessary to a constructionist reading of TRC survivors’ narratives. This argument pivots on strategies of analytic praxis, where complementary ways of reading TRC narratives are deployed: a top-down reading of the TRC as “institution” (in terms of discourses and practices); and a bottom-up reading of survivors’s accounts (in terms of the body-experiences of torture). This boldly enmeshes structure and agency, real and version, to deconstruct hegemonic binaries between these terms.

Here, the body appears as a surface on which authentic / inner chaos is enacted, and hatred inscribed (cf. Eisenstein, 1996). While other theoretical accounts of the body-tortured have seen it as silenced, without words (e.g. Scarry, 1985), Corry and Terre Blanche’s body speaks through its situation in the TRC process. The TRC is recast as a complex institutional space, lacerated by different discourses (e.g. legal, political, religious, media), and positions, which invent - or certainly scaffold - the “stories” and “selves” that victims are enabled to tell. Clearly, this formulation of subjectification arises from “a regime of signs”, always tied to an assemblage of discursive practices or organisation of power (Deleuze & Guatarri, 1988:130), that is, speaking appears in particular spaces and procedures in order to be sayable and hearable, and in relation to other positions. Thus, the TRC enables some to speak the truth, and others to acknowledge its authority and embrace it, aspire to it, submit to it (cf. Hepworth & Turner, 1982).

It is perhaps the clear demarcation of TRC-structures and narratives for analysis (cf. “nothing beyond the text”) in Corry and Terre Blanche’s paper that facilitates such a reading of subjectification (fabricated *and* real, constrained *and* empowered). The remaining papers in this **PINS special issue** - by way of engaging with victims in various ways “outside” of the TRC process (e.g. interviews about the TRC, or therapy at the Trauma Centre) - construct the “victim” in a different way. A dominant theme among these papers is that the victim is in possession of a *surplus* of meaning, experience or need, which is somehow *thwarted* through the TRC process. Thus, the pain of oppression is “too big” (or “too real”) to tell, or to hear. Within this formulation, the victim is betrayed by a TRC process more committed to refashioning collective memory than acknowledging individuals’ needs in terms of therapeutic care, remunerative reparation or juridical justice. This critical surface is folded through concerns about the TRC’s easy assumptions of “healing”, for example, conflation of individual and national healing (Swartz, 1998), and vague notions of catharsis (Hayes, 1998).

These issues are empirically explored in Brandon Hamber, Dineo Nageng and Gabriel O’Malley’s paper: *“Telling it like it is ...”: Understanding the TRC from the perspective of survivors*. Based on interviews with twenty survivors of Apartheid’s political violence

who had given testimony to the TRC, the authors engage with survivors' opinions about healing, truth, amnesty and forgiveness. This content analytic study found that survivors had interacted with the TRC in good faith, and with legitimate expectations that they would find out what really happened in their case. In the manner of qualitative accounts, responses were nuanced and contradictory: sometimes comforted by the process of story-telling (perhaps in the short term); but angry that the truth did not emerge, and angry that their anger was silenced in the TRC process. Furthermore, for these survivors, truth, justice and reparation were interlinked. Thus, reparation, and often punishment of the perpetrator, were symbolic markers that justice had been done, and that trust might be restored in a just and hopeful future.

Hamber, Nageng and O'Malley found that when survivors highlighted the successes of the TRC, it was at a national level, for example, breaking the silence about Apartheid's atrocities, raising public awareness, contributing to national reconciliation, and so on. However, while public testimony may mediate closure of traumatic events in this societal space - and it is not at all clear how this works (cf. Felman & Laub, 1992) - it remains uncertain if this translates into healing for the individual psyche. It is with concern that these authors note the "conflicting interests" that inscribe the TRC's work; and that the feasibility of providing follow-up legal support (in terms of prosecutions) and adequate psychological support (in terms of counselling) to thousands of victims is threatened by pragmatism and expediency.

The remaining two papers recast similar concerns about "healing" within Kleinian and Lacanian psychoanalytic frames, alternately putting the shattered nation and the embattled psyche on the couch. These papers are framed within the edgy relevance of psycho-analysis in a South African context (cf. Sey, 1998) - like a chattering from the margins, a debate which **PINS** has fostered in previous issues.

Len Bloom's paper - *After the war is over, truth and reconciliation?* - proceeds through juxtaposing the conditions of possibility for "reconciliation" in the German Nuremberg Nazi-Trials and South African TRC contexts. Bloom carefully unpacks the psychic defences which block the TRC's function in facilitating "mourning". In this analysis, victims and perpetrators - and by implication, *all of us* who bear witness to these testimonies - are unable/unwilling to mourn because they/we are unable/unwilling to accept the reality of their pasts (e.g. "too angry", "too distressed", "too guilty", "too humiliated"). Without mourning, and reparation - in the Kleinian sense of undoing destructiveness, forgiving oneself and accepting the forgiveness of others - there can be no movement towards "unmasking", "ending" and "reconciliation" on individual or national levels.

Eric Harper and Patrick Ntsime's paper - *Playing rugby with the truth* - is situated fourth in the **PINS** special issue because it implicates many of the reflexive, critical surfaces mentioned in the other papers. Here, a (mostly Lacanian) psychoanalytic lens is used to look at the construction of so-called white and black (mostly male) psyches. This is effected in the paper by way of two main tactics. First, various "stake-holders" in the TRC process are demarcated (cf. positions with colliding interests), namely, "victims", and those who bear witness to victim's horror, setting up a division between those who attempt to see/hear, and those (racist white males) who can't/won't. A second tactic to examine psyche-construction is effected through the deployment of several mediatised

court-cases which happened in South Africa simultaneously with the TRC process. One of these, reflected in the title of the paper, is the legal battle between then-President Nelson Mandela and the *South African Rugby and Football Union (SARFU)* over racism in rugby.

From these two tactics to identify sites of fissure and disjuncture, Harper and Ntsime's paper explores the political struggle the TRC is/was caught up in, over who would control representations of the TRC process, and over who would construct "truthful" memory. Thus, media portrayals of the TRC by way of "truth" and "forgiveness" are starkly counterpoised against the unbearable cost to victims whose life-circumstances continue to deteriorate amidst thwarted expectations for "truth" and thwarted needs for reparative support and retributive justice.

The four papers included in this **PINS** *special issue* have demonstrated that, while some of the early idealism about the TRC has withered and lost its gloss, the operations and effects of the TRC are refashioned, regrouped and reproduced through the (potentially) corrosive space of academic discourse. With the aim to engage more substantively with the discourses around "healing" and "reconciliation", this **PINS** *special issue* has included four contributions which foreground "truth-telling" for victims/survivors of Apartheid's violence; although the latter two papers offer interpretations of those who witness victims' testimonies. Explicit inclusion of those Others, the perpetrators of abuses, as a competing category of person/action and set of interests in re-editing the past, might have facilitated further critical surfaces and folds, but also diffusion of issues.

Clearly, the daunting challenges of reparation and rehabilitation for thousands of individual-victims still lies ahead. Yet it is at the level of "national healing" that my closing reflection on all four papers in this **PINS** *special issue* finds an under-theorisation and/or essentialisation of *the audience* of the TRC. How is the TRC's "spectacle", "theatre of hell", or "institutional space" implicated in *who* is being addressed, *how* we are being addressed, and *what* we are expected to *do* when thus addressed? This relates directly to my comments at the beginning of this editorial, on proliferating academic discourse on the TRC. Here, academics appear as a particularly recalcitrant and vociferous audience - *not* the only audience, and by *no* means homogenous - as they appropriate and recycle theoretical, political, critical, ironic and reflexive surfaces for contestation of the TRC's operations and effects.

The imperative for multiple readings of the complexities of the TRC process - in terms of the rhetoric of "rupture" (anger, dissent, contradiction, etc.) as well as "suture" (atonement, forgiveness, resolution, etc.) - would seem to recast "national healing" as a process of audience-*construction* (cf. Dahlgren, 1998). This view deconstructs easy presumptions of positions of identification with audiences based on "psychic stereotypes" of the historical past (e.g. "racist whites", "black activists", etc.), and acknowledges an active, discursive process of re-narrativising our pasts in a shifting present, the assumption of *new* subject positions as we re-scaffold our "selves" against an uncertain future. Academic discourse on the TRC, in its power-full "leaking" into and transformation of institutional practice and everyday experience, cannot afford to shirk its constructive (and deconstructive) role in this regard.

This **PINS special issue** closes with five book reviews by Wendy Corry, Mike Earl-Taylor, Grahame Hayes and Lindy Wilbraham on issues related to the TRC, namely, TRC processes in other contexts, Eugene De Kock and the making of memory by way of representations of and writings about the past/present.

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