

Trauma Testimonies as Public Narrative and Reparative Action: Reflections from the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission

Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela

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Introduction

The problem of how violent pasts are remembered by individuals and the groups to which they belong, what symbols are used to remember these pasts, how victims and victimisers frame their narratives about violent and painful pasts, and how these narratives are passed on and play out intergenerationally are questions that continue to dominate public and scholarly debates in the 20th century, and increasingly into the 21st with new departments and academic societies forming around memory studies and related themes. Truth commissions have been central in these debates, giving rise to new terrains of investigation in the fields of transitional justice and peace studies research, and a burgeoning literature and new avenues of inquiry that have emerged across disciplines in the Humanities and Social Sciences on a range of topics related to what is commonly referred to as “dealing with the past” in order to restore democracy and peace after mass violence and conflict. The debates on the role of truth commissions in bringing about sustained peace and social transformation in the aftermath of violent conflict continues. More than 50 truth commissions have been established globally, most of them as part of rebuilding peace and political stability after violent conflicts and dictatorships in South America and the African continent. Truth commissions have also been established to respond to calls for acknowledgement by descendants of victims of colonial-era abuses in Canada and Australia. The main goals of truth commissions include: investigating past human rights crimes in order to establish a common understanding of the nature and causes of these crimes, and building a foundation for a democratic and peaceful society. The way that different

truth commissions have approached these goals has been determined by the unique nature of the transition process in each post-conflict setting, and the priorities that these countries set out for their respective transitional justice processes. For instance, South Africa laid emphasis on the importance of conditional amnesty for those found to have been responsible for gross human rights crimes in order to facilitate national reconciliation. Both the **“truth”** and the **“reconciliation”** aspect of the TRC’s work was reflected in its structure of (i) a rigorous investigative committee, (ii) public hearings for both victims and victimisers, which were organised by the human rights violations committee and the amnesty committee respectively. Perpetrators were required to give full disclosure for their crimes in public at amnesty hearings chaired by a group of carefully selected judges, and to show that their crimes were politically motivated. In contrast, the Chilean truth commission eschewed the conditional aspect and granted blanket amnesty to members of the military. The Rwandan process has been focused on “national reconciliation”—the Rwandan National Reconciliation Commission—taking a “softer” approach to the investigation of the crimes of genocide. All truth commissions respond, in varying degrees, to the need for acknowledgement of the pain suffered by victims and accountability for past crimes.

The focus of this presentation is on the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the TRC—and the insights and reflections that I will share are inspired, in part, by my own role on the TRC as the Chair of the victims’ public hearings process in the Western Cape region. My aim is to show the TRC’s contribution to South Africa’s transition to democracy, the significance of the process for victims as well as those who perpetrated gross human rights crimes, and its impact in the wider society. My reflection is on the TRC’s most visible aspect—the public hearings—and will be framed by four constituent domains organised around an understanding of the TRC testimonies as public narrative.

The first of these constituent domains concerns the collective dimension of individual testimonies. The second is the reconstruction of the victim's story into something meaningful. Thirdly, victims testimonies sometimes reflected a process of what we call in psychology the process of mastery of a traumatic experience, or what object relations psychoanalysts might call integration of the disparate aspects of traumatic memory as a way of making sense of it. The fourth dimension that I will discuss is what I have termed "reparative humanism"—which refers to those testimonial efforts that gesture toward transcending a victim or perpetrator identity in order to embrace of a vision of transformation. Before I discuss the dimensions of public narrative that I have outlined here, let me give you a flavour of the environment that prevailed in South Africa before the work of the TRC started—albeit schematically for the sake of brevity.

A few months after the release of Nelson Mandela in 2 February 1990 and the unbanning of the African National Congress, the ANC, South Africa plunged into violence and killings that some believe exceeded the number of black people killed in any other period of violence during the apartheid years. Although contested, evidence suggests that a "third force" from within the apartheid security forces was behind the killings, and operated as a counter-revolutionary force to derail the negotiations for a multi-party democracy. In March 1992, then President FW de Klerk called for a national referendum of white voters, who formed only 15% of the South African population, with the question: "Do you support continuation of the reform process which the State President began on 2 February 1990 and which is aimed at a new Constitution through negotiation?" More than 68% white South Africans voted "Yes," and 31% voted "No." This resounding victory allowed FW de Klerk and Nelson Mandela and their negotiating teams to pursue the vision of multiparty democracy.

In April the following year, however, Chris Hani, the much admired former leader of the Military Wing of the ANC, was shot dead by a Polish man, Janusz

Walus, who was hired by the leader of a right wing, anti-negotiations political party. He was caught on the same day, with the help of an Afrikaner woman who took down the registration number on his car as he fled the scene. The anger that this evoked threatened to bury any prospect of the process of negotiations continuing. But Nelson Mandela, keeping his eyes on the prize, went on national television, and addressing all, but mainly black South Africans, said the following;

Tonight I am reaching out to every single South African, black and white, from the very depths of my being. A white man, full of prejudice and hate, came to our country and committed a deed so foul that our whole nation now teeters on the brink of disaster. A white woman, of Afrikaner origin, risked her life so that we may know, and bring to justice, this assassin. [...] This is a watershed moment for all of us. Our decisions and actions will determine whether we use our pain, our grief, and our outrage to move forward to what is the only lasting solution for our country.

This was, indeed a turning point in the negotiations process—Hani’s assassination as a historical turning point, because the negotiations, which had been experiencing some setbacks because of the violence I mentioned earlier, moved forward with greater resolve, leading to a decision to hold South Africa’s all-race elections in April the following year.

Nelson Mandela’s vision was grounded in the quest to establish a richer sense of identity that would connect all South Africans as members of a human community. He expanded the horizon of what is possible in human relationships by spearheading, as part of the political negotiations, the drafting of an interim Constitution that would ensure that the multi-racial elections the following year would lead to a democracy with a Truth and Reconciliation Commission as a cornerstone of the post-apartheid society. In 1993, post-amble of the Interim Constitution of South Africa made provision for the establishment of the truth

commission. This became effective after the first non-racial elections of April 1994. The TRC began to set up its offices in all regions of the country in December 1995, and the first victims' public hearing took place in April 1996.

The Collective Dimension of Individual Testimonies.

To introduce this theme, I would like to play a short 1-minute audio-clip:

AUDIO CLIP

At the opening of the public hearings of the TRC, the large city hall in East London was capacity-full—all black with the white TRC commissioners and some reporters – the only visible white people in the audience.

Ppt. → City Hall

When the audience rose to sing a song that was at once a poem and an anthem of black pain, sung throughout the years of apartheid repression **by** black people at mass funerals, political rallies, and peaceful protests, the song “*Lizalis’idinga lakho Nkos?*” (Fulfill your promise Lord), reverberated into the large hall, carrying the hope that the moment promised.

This was the same moment into which one of the witnesses at the opening of the TRC public hearings, Nomonde Calata, screamed her own pain. She “dared” to wail her pain and the suffering she was subjected to into the large hall, giving voice to it, bearing witness for all to hear, beyond the walls of the public hearings space in East London.

Ppt NOMONDE CALATA

It is this wailing voice that South African musician Philip Miller resurrects from the archives of TRC narratives, the music/cry played at the start of my presentation. One of South Africa's celebrated soloists, S'bongile Khumalo's iconic voice then picks up Mrs Calata's crying voice and re-presents it through her magnificent and electrifying mezzosoprano. Later in the song, several other voices emerge, and merge in a choir – with different levels of intensity, male and female voices, singing this wailing cry—a chorus of collective voices, bearing witness to this human cry.

Later in Phillip Miller's music you hear this voice-cry, intermingled with the voices of other victims and survivors, and sometimes the victims' voices are dominated by those of perpetrators and their commanders, by their confessions, and their denials. The effect that Philip Miller produces is a seamless repetition that reverberates like a re-enactment of a wound that refuses to be silenced— history playing itself out, confronting the audience with the reality of the fact of the living memory of this past. The piercing scream seemed to shatter the magnificent walls of the East London city hall, a structure built in colonial times to celebrate Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee. The building still housed memorial plaques for some of the fallen British soldiers when the British and the Afrikaners fought to take over South Africa. Reflecting on this scene at the time, surrounded by the walls that hearken back to an earlier generational time, it seemed to me that this wailing cry, with the violent movement of Mrs Calata's body thrown back as she let out the

scream, might be interpreted and captured as a moment that represents at once an expression of anger and pain, screamed at a past that goes back several generations.

And as if this was the thought on Archbishop Tutu's mind. As silence hovered over and covered the hall, with the piercing reverberation of Mrs Calata's cry the only sound to be heard, the gentle interruption by Archbishop Tutu with the song *Senzeni na?*

[SLIDE: "WHAT HAVE WE DONE"] itself a wailing cry of black pain, brought together two generations of struggle for dignity and human rights, the struggle against humiliation. The song spoke to the collective memory of trauma and pain, re-enacted here in this scene that seems to carry the narrative through the silence of words, as well as through the body.

"I want you to know, Mr Taylor," Mrs Calata told her husband's killer in an encounter organised by Taylor's church, ostensibly to ask for her forgiveness, "that for these last eleven and a half years I have suffered a lot and I am still suffering because of you. You robbed my children of their father's love, and you robbed me of my husband's love, and I want to make it clear to you that my husband was not only my husband to me, he was my brother, my friend, he was everything to me and you decided to take him away in such a cruel way."

Eric Taylor asked his church to arrange the encounter with Mrs Calata: he wanted quick forgiveness; but Mrs. Calata wanted a deeper level of truth, and because Taylor failed to rise to this level of the kind of truth she needed for her

journey into the future, she did not grant him the forgiveness he wanted. Eric Taylor was enacting the double strategy of those who are still afraid of facing their shame: admitting the truth, without actually **facing the truth**. They hope the past will go away, forgiven and forgotten, and that victims and survivors will “move on,” as the expression goes, in a spirit of reconciliation.

The aim of the story is to show that individual narratives and experiences recounted at the TRC carried an extra weight because they went beyond the individual to capture a larger story of collective trauma. The testimonies were an important source of history, and of historical reflection on the significance of traumatic pasts for memory, its reconstruction as victims and survivors tried to make sense of their traumas and to reclaim their sense of agency.

When trauma has been experienced collectively by a group, the disruptive effects of are shared collectively by the group and affect the group’s sense of identity. As a “victim-centered” space, the TRC made the trauma of victims visible, allowing them to break their silence. The painful pasts were remembered by victims *as members of groups*.

Thus, as a public process “performed” on the national stage, the TRC served a narrative function that went beyond the individual victims’ testimonies—it is in this context of remembering that a collective working through of the past can take place.

2. Reconstruction of The Victim’s Story into Something Meaningful.

I now want to discuss the second constituent domain of the Public Narrative process I outlined earlier, and to draw from two TRC testimonies to illustrate how victims use their testimonies and bearing witness in front of an audience to reconstruct their trauma not as a loss that shattered their lives, but as something meaningful:

- Mrs. Plaatjies
- Mr. Mkabile

3. Public Narrative as an Attempt at Mastery OR Integration of the Trauma Narrative

Some victims used their testimonies to regain a sense of control over their traumatic memory—to “master” the traumatic past, or, as psychoanalyst of the Object Relations theory might say, to “integrate” the disparate aspects of the traumatic experience into the self.

- **Tony Yengeni and his Torturer, Jeffrey Benzine**

It was one of the most dramatic moments on the TRC: Tony Yengeni, anti-apartheid activist who suffered severe torture and detention faced Jeffrey Benzine, the most feared police torturer in the Western Cape.

Relate the story of the dramatic testimony, show image of Benzien demonstrating the “wet bag” torture method

Yengeni wanted Benzien to demonstrate how he tortured his victims. He came ready with a friend to act the part of victim, and had brought a black pillow for Benzien to use as the “wet bag.” While stunned commissioners and judges watched the “victim” lay face down on the TRC floor, hands locked behind his back and the torturer Benzien sitting astride on him, demonstrating, Yengeni was urging him to show how he did it:

What kind of human being does that to another”? Yengeni pressed Benzien. “Sir,” Benzien said, addressing Yengeni with respect, “I have asked myself that question many times before.”

“What kind of man are you?” Yengeni asked, his voice filled with disdain. “What kind of man uses a method like this one of the wet bag on other human beings, repeatedly listening to those moans and cries and groans, and taking each of those people very near to their deaths?”

Benzien explained that they were afraid that black people were going to take the country and chase whites away: he was fighting “for the right of myself, my family and the general public to continue to live in South Africa in the way that our forefathers lived.”

“With hindsight, sir,” he told Yengeni, “I realise that it was wrong, and for that I apologise. I must also admit at this stage, with the way the country is being run by a new set of ministers, and especially the honourable state president [Nelson Mandela] I can only say I am extremely amazed and very happy to still be in South Africa today—and I am still a patriot of the country.”

These scenes at TRC hearings, when perpetrators were forced to face their own loss of humanity led me to think about these moments as “the mirror of dehumanisation” reflected back at them. They had dehumanised their victims, but being confronted directly with their deeds meant that *they* were now looking into the mirror of their own dehumanisation.

4. Reparative Humanism

What it entails ... Explain:

These moments of empathic engagement between victims and perpetrators are rare and unprecedented in the history of atrocities in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Often we, as listeners and witnesses, are drawn into these kinds of encounters with our own internal stories that we bring into these spaces of dialogue about the past. We are not simply present to provide the containment that

is a necessary part of the listener's role. In the process we are drawn into participating with our own stories in their different forms, including our own 'unfinished business' from the past. Whether they are stories of the pain of trauma, or stories of the pain of guilt—that is, whether we are victims, perpetrators or bystanders—we become co-participants in the process of witnessing and we are moved to participate at a deeply personal level.

I have referred to this tendency for an audience to be drawn to the stories of those bearing witness about the past through identification as a process of “making public spaces intimate.”

In the aftermath of crimes against humanity, individuals and communities of survivors, and perpetrators who dare to face their shame and their guilt, and transcend it, are searching for ways of being human, for reconnection to their sense of agency, which is vital for a sense of being human. Perhaps a word that best captures what is needed is not forgiveness, but rather empathic repair. The notion of “empathic repair,” points toward not only one's healing, but also one's responsibility to participate in the building of a society in which people could come together and be fellow human beings – “to touch the other, to feel the other” – sharing in the vision of a more humane society. The TRC, the Rwandan gacaca process, and similar restorative justice processes – all are strategies established to create a space for testimony, a space for confrontation and listening, for moral reflection and for initiating the difficult process of healing. These sites of testimony, of mutual recognition and shared experience, provide points of

identification, entryways into the experience of others, which enable comparison across critical registers of difference. Appeal to the familiar and the familial creates a context in which it is possible to engage empathetic questions, such as “How old was your daughter/son when... ?” By grounding themselves in what is shared, they create mutual intelligibility. The shared experience of loss, for example, cuts across the distinction of black or white, Tutsi or Hutu, Israeli or Palestinian. On the terrain of a horrific past, certain statements resonate deeply: “My son was eighteen years old when he was conscripted into the South African Defence Force during apartheid; he was brought back in a body bag and I wasn’t allowed to see him.” “My son was eighteen when he joined the anti-apartheid struggle. He was abducted, tortured, and killed by apartheid security police.”

It is ironic that the same factors that can ignite and perpetuate animosity, fear, and hatred – the love for those killed or maimed by “the other” – might also suspend those negative sentiments. By providing a way into the experience of the “enemy,” love and loss may provide a way out of violence. Ultimately, love and loss are what is common and thus in a sense are what is shared.

At the centre of this “love” is *ubuntu* – a deep sense of caring for the other that is embedded in most traditional African societies. The concept of *ubuntu* is an ethic based on the understanding that one’s subjectivity is inextricably intertwined with that of others in one’s community. From the perspective of *ubuntu*, all people are valued as part of the human community and worthy of being so recognized.

While acknowledging the role of the individual, *ubuntu* values a sense of solidarity with others – the individual always in relation – rather than individual autonomy.

The phrase, “I am because we are,” has been used in the literature to explain the essence of *Ubuntu*. But this expression gets its inspiration from the same source that is perceived to be its opposite. The meaning of *ubuntu* is best captured in the Xhosa expression *Umntu ngumntu ngabanye abantu*: “A person is a person through being witnessed by, and engaging in reciprocal witnessing of other persons,” or “A person becomes a human being through the multiplicity of relationships with others.” The meaning conveyed by the expression is twofold. First, subjectivity depends on being witnessed; the richness of subjectivity flows from interconnectedness with the wider community, and from the reciprocal caring and complementarity of human relationships. Second, the phrase conveys the kind of reciprocity that calls on people to be ethical subjects. Mutual recognition is fundamental to being a fellow human being, a relational subject in the context of community. A person with *ubuntu* “is open and available to others, is affirming to others. . . . My humanity caught up, is inextricably bound up, in yours” (Archbishop Tutu).

Even in ordinary everyday language, the language is that of recognising the other. For instance, greetings:

SAWUBONA → I SEE YOU

UNJANI?: → NDIKHONA [I AM PRESENT]

It is a recognition that goes beyond the self, beyond the one who is present, a recognition that invites a level of witnessing that calls to mind others who matter in the other person's life. The back and forth of witnessing of the other's life becomes an experience that allows entry in the Other's life in a way that makes it possible to reconstitute the other's experience into one's own. From the listener's perspective, the process then [the mutual witnessing] is not simply about "being listener", it's also not about the physical face of the other—it may not even be about the other's physical presence. But rather about something more subtle, less visible than any of these elements of the encounter. If you are the daughter of the security police who killed Nomonde Calata's husband, it is the kind of experiencing of the Other that may lead to pondering questions such as:

"I wonder what Father's Day is like for Nomonde Calata's daughter?"

It is recognition of the other not from the distance that bestows such recognition from a position of power, but one that does so from a place of proximity to the other's lifeworld, an "experience-near" (= psychoanalyst, Kohut) that opens up the possibility of an embodied experience of recognition that seeks to repair the brokenness of the Other—because now it has become [it is like] one's own brokenness.

Example:

- ***CHRIS HAN'S DAUGHTER & JANUSZ WALUS***

- *MOTHER OF THE MAN WHO KILLED AMY BIEHL: On Biehls' daughter's empty chair: "I wonder how they will enjoy their Christmases"*

Then introduce "inimba" → a sense of embodied care and concern:

As a metaphor, the notion of "inimba" challenges the very concept of Otherness.

In considering dialogic encounters in the context of violent histories, what is

perhaps necessary is shifting the lens from a focus on forgiveness and

reconciliation (concepts that imply a goal) to the more complicated notion of

"experience-near" a term I borrow from the psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut, but with

a vision that goes beyond the "observation" stance typical of clinical work: This is

a vision of reparative humanism, which emanates from the place of one's own

brokenness; it is a vision that seeks to repair at once the brokenness of the self and

of the Other— (complicated, enigmatic, muddy, elusive, and unpredictable),

because I think that much of what happens in these encounters remains implicit,

and the word forgiveness falls short of adequately capturing this complexity.

The lessons from the TRC remind us that these are not straightforward

encounters; people have been hurt and are still hurting. They have been done

damage to.

It seems clear that once people, even those who are adversaries, are faced with

each other, innumerable possibilities – both destructive and restorative and all that

cannot be reduced to these oversimplified categories – arise, both 'within' and

‘between’ bodies. I think one can accept that those encountering each other will be affected; whether they will necessarily be affected in a way that will move them to not only a new relationship but one that is desirable—a shared vision of what the future should be. The potential for the unexpected, unforeseen and thoroughly creative, endemic to the human condition is always present.

These are precisely the ideas that were embodied in the TRC, which was nothing less than an effort to imbue the realms of law, justice and politics with a relational cultural ethics of Ubuntu that recognised the humanity of victims and perpetrators alike, for the sake of a transformed conception of society.