



Horror Unmasked: Truth or Fiction?

By Lars Buur and Eric Harper

A review of *A Country Unmasked: Inside South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission* by Alex Boraine. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001. 448pp.

Introduction

A Country Unmasked: Inside South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission by Alex Boraine is yet another description from one of the commissioners of the role the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) played in the peaceful transition from apartheid to democracy. Boraine, the Deputy Chairperson of the TRC, comes from an Afrikaner, religious (head of the Methodist church), and political background (he was a member of one of the white oppositional political parties in the days of apartheid) and is considered to be one of the pioneering architects of the TRC, both in its creation and daily functioning.

Boraine is a proponent of the TRC and its usage within a wider global context. Following the (alleged) success of the TRC, he established an organization involved in promoting world justice. Prior to this, he visited Belgrade in 1999 to share the success of the TRC process in SA and its possible application in the former Yugoslavia. As such, for Boraine, the TRC is not simply a local initiative but needs to be part of a greater historical process.

A Country Unmasked provides us with some understanding of the distinctive methods and workings of the TRC, as well as the difficulties that were confronted along the way. The text places the TRC within a historical domain, namely, a process that drew upon the lessons learned in Latin America—particularly the establishment of a commission in Argentina in 1983 by President Raul Alfonsín to address the wrongs of the previous repressive regime. As such, Boraine's TRC can be seen as the historical continuation and refinement of a quest for justice in the wake of horror. Unlike the Argentinean commission, however, the TRC testimonies included *both* victims and perpetrators

of human rights violations. Another modification involved making the testimonies public, including being transmitted on national radio and television.

A Country Unmasked outlines the commissioners' goals of the TRC process, namely, to heal the wounds of apartheid in the spirit of Nelson Mandela, who embodied an ethic of reconciliation and forgiveness. According to Boraine, the commissioners wanted to drive the TRC process of transformation away from retributive justice and instead to embrace reconciliation between the different cultural and ethnic groups through unmasking the painful truths of apartheid. Whilst Boraine is aware that truth does not necessarily lead to reconciliation, he is of the opinion that without the truth it is less likely that reconciliation would be as successful as it often is. He further argues that truth telling gave the victims and survivors the encouragement needed to put the past behind them and to reclaim their lives. This reclaiming of their lives took place through overcoming the shadow of the past – the loss of dignity and recognition.

Boraine will go so far as to argue that truth telling contributed to a national process of accountability, acknowledgment, and responsibility, thereby allowing the possibility of reconciliation not only for individuals, but also for the nation. It needs to be noted that the underlying assumption of the text is that unmasking the truths of apartheid is the formula for peace and reconciliation. But is this claim correct? Does so-called truth have anything to do with reconciliation?

“The truth” is linked to claims as to the state of the world. With inductive empirical knowledge, a contingently truthful statement requires that the state of affairs in the world, justified by direct or circumstantial evidence, matches or corresponds with the claim being made; whilst with deductive logic the conditions for an argument to be sound is that its premises are necessarily true. The truth, while appearing as a totality, encompasses a series of errors and contradictions, which are essential to the final product. Such is the nature of any truth, and it is the task of the critic to unravel these oversights and slippages (Harper and Ntsime, 2000).

While the TRC might be seen as offering a new interpretation of the past, that is, offering a provisional version of the truth in which there is a sense of emancipation from the past, the reading that is offered here is one in which the TRC functioned in part as a truth-production machine. This truth-production machine attempted to construct a new nationalism—the rainbow nation—based on the creation of new idioms and metaphors—for example, through terms like “forgive,” “forget,” “reconciliation,” “trauma,” and “healing”—with which people could identify. However, outside the framework of these new idioms and metaphors—the commissioned text of the TRC—the truth-statements from the “victims of the TRC” created a picture that broke down the new assumptive reality.

A critical reading of one of the “commissioned texts” will show that the TRC is not a homogenous institution. On the contrary, it falls prey to many conflicting agendas which speak not only of its aims, but which mirror an unregulated society in a state of transition. Within this montage of conflicting agendas, the TRC found itself walking several tightropes, some more apparent than others. For example, how was the new government to establish a sense of justice without either granting blanket amnesty or prosecuting everyone who had committed human rights violations? This tension is exacerbated by the fact that the liberation movements—for example, the African National Congress and Pan African Congress—were seen to be fighting a morally justifiable war,

and, as such, wanted the human rights violations committed by them to be seen in this light (Harper and Ntsime, 2000).

This essay pursues two main arguments. Firstly, it explores what is at stake in the process of trying to make public the horror of the past. It would appear that in thinking about the horror of the past, the TRC resorted to an over-simplification and distortion of what transpired. The TRC gave everybody an easy escape, be it the African National Congress (ANC), most apartheid operatives, and maybe most importantly the White/Indian/Coloured beneficiaries. This is the real paradox of the TRC process. On the one hand, the construction of the big two: apartheid versus the ANC; bad versus good; evil versus heroic; past versus future. On the other hand, the language, images, and metaphors used redeemed everybody, because the “real” was secret so we could not have known (Buur, 2000).

Secondly, the essay will explore the way in which two sets of victims have emerged. These two groups include: first, those who have been affirmed by way of work opportunities and important positions in society—which makes it possible for those individuals to make worthy contributions to South Africa’s future; and second, those whose life circumstances have changed very little. The relation between these two groups, or rather, what happens in the spaces between them, needs to be considered. Is this a space for shared experience and support between former comrades? Or perhaps it is a space for alienation and phobic disgust, as the abject desperation of the second group serves as an unwarranted reminder of something that is too painful to remember (Harper, 2000).

The Commissioned Truth

A Country Unmasked is one of the many publications to have come out of the truth and reconciliation process, and not the first book to be written by someone working for the TRC (see for example W. Orr (2000), W. Meiring (1998), D. Tutu (1999), C. Villa-Vicencio and W. Verwoerd (2000), W. James and L. van der Vijver (2000), and A. Jeffery (1999)). The TRC has provided a publication venue, as well as a platform, from which various commissioners of the TRC have established new organizations within South Africa and the USA. The merits of this process, still to be seen, need to be argued in terms of the future products of these institutions.

Alex Boraïne’s book forms part of an over-production of insider texts when placed alongside the lack of published texts from those who actually handed in statements. The latter group is not only made up of individuals who are without literary skills, but also highly skilled writers whose attempts to publish have been turned down. What is common to both of these “writers” is that they function as the “outside” that needs to be listened to.

A Country Unmasked speaks beyond the designated space (description) that unfolds within the TRC. It does in fact speak to a larger process, the creation of those on the inside commissioned to legitimate the TRC process and those on the outside without a voice. In addition to focusing on the establishment of the TRC, Boraïne does what most other writers of the TRC process do. First, they tell the story of the “limited” mandate —designating what the TRC should have done—and then follow this up presenting the work done along this line *as if* this were what happened. Second, there is the retelling of the same 10 to 20 high-profile cases. These cases include Biko, the Motherwell bombing, Basson, The Prime Evil (the hidden apartheid state), Botha, de Klerk, ANC submission,

Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), etc. In fact these stories seem to have become the chronology of “mother” cases, which are also found in Antjie Krog and Desmond Tutu’s books.

The point to stress here is that these commissioned texts are the reproduction of the “mother” story – what one finds in the Final TRC Report. The writers thereby participate in the production and fixation of a new official history based on a range of “founding or foundational myths” of what the struggle was; who the good and bad guys were. This gives the struggle a new language presenting it as a notable fight for human rights, producing a history of re-conciliation.

It is via this construction that the rainbow nation can read the past as sisters and brothers separated by the apartheid state while in fact being united/“One”—which of course is based on a teleological understanding of nationhood. The struggle of the past is no longer about enemies killing each other but about brothers and sisters alienated from each other due to a few evil doers. On the one hand, it became a story about mutual victims of human rights violations. On the other hand, it was rephrased time after time as a tale of “brother fighting brother,” both betrayed by the former apartheid state which had used, “turned,” and seduced them into doing things they would not otherwise have done. By rephrasing the past conflict as a conflict between people who did not at the time think of themselves as fellow citizens, the TRC inscribed itself in one of the common paradoxes related to national imagination. The effect of this “tropology” is, as Benedict Anderson has spelled out with regard to France, to figure past episodes as “reassuringly fratricidal wars between”—this time not “fellow Frenchmen” as in Anderson’s (1991:200) example—but fellow South Africans.

What is at stake is the legitimacy of not only the TRC, but also the new South African state. The TRC was one of the symbolic and material vehicles, as stated by Boraine, for reconceptualizing the state as benevolent in a range of concrete meetings by taking statements from people, listening to their testimonies and deciding on future entitlement to reparation and rehabilitation grants. The benevolent impression of the new state, which Boraine saw as an important aspect of the work of the Commission, can easily become corrupted by not fulfilling its, or in fact the TRC’s, promises.

The Truth Gamble

The TRC both opened and closed the space to think about the past as there was no language for talking about the gray areas, for example that most policemen were Black, Coloured and Indian—not white, as one would suppose. The system of apartheid and White rule in South Africa was not only about hidden and secretive operations, but also about structural violence and part of the dirty politics of the Cold War. The latter has not been written into the new construction of the past.

In attempting to get around this complexity, the TRC placed its bet on the telling of the truth. If the truth were told, then all would be O.K. After speaking the truth, there was an assumption that even ex-hit squad men would undergo a sudden transformation into reformed souls. A truthful confession, akin to the primary cathexes of past troubles, would cleanse the psyche and heal the nation’s wounds. Truth thus could become equated with revelation.

Behind the public scenes of revelation, findings took on a different dimension. From the 22,000 statements received from victims of human rights violations, approximately 10% appeared in public

hearings, while the remaining 90% were processed behind closed doors. Yet the public face is what people focused on: the charismatic, high profile individuals, and the media struggle over representation of the past. The inside face involved a bureaucracy made up of many burned-out and overwhelmed individuals. In fact, it was the task of this group to collect the stories and to categorize them, which included the processing of data about human rights violations with the aim of accumulating a comprehensive historical database. The method was governed by a scientific, positivistic ideal. It was a bureaucracy that simplified complexity.

The TRC came about as a negotiated settlement and form of political compromise, and found itself pulled and pushed in different directions. The TRC negotiated the push-pull factors in finding sanctity and institutional legitimisation through legal and religious discourse that became the frame to picture the pain of the past. The “rule of law,” including the invocation of human rights as the measurement of “universal justice,” gave the TRC credibility. This rule of law included amnesty legislation, the judicial power vested in the power to subpoena people. In addition, there was the revocation and framing of the work of the TRC within international law and, in particular, the Geneva Convention of 1949.

One irony of the TRC was that every hearing would begin with the claim that “this is not a court of law.” However, the way the hearings room was set up—with commissioners and committee members, applicants, victims and lawyers placed as if it was in a court room—made it difficult to distinguish it from a court (Buur, 2000).

Representation of the Truth

With the implementation of the TRC process, it became evident that the task was bigger and more complex than what had been planned for. Furthermore, what haunted the TRC process, as well as the living history of South Africa, is the enormity of what is at stake in the process of trying to make public the horror of the past. It would appear that this complexity was masked through an over-simplification of what transpired.

The look of the past—the gaze of horror—is akin to a frozen image on a screen that disrupts the process of representation, in this case, the image of the new and beautiful rainbow nation. The look of horror disrupts and freezes time and space. Stated differently, the TRC formed part of the image-building process that the nation was engaged in. This is a process in which what is visible is believed to be a representation and the property of somebody, in this case those commissioned to write the history of apartheid via the TRC. The image of the rainbow nation—what Anderson calls the “imagined community”—is a defense against a fragmented and violent past. This violent past is both historical time and repetition—the present. This new “imagined community” is the property of the TRC. It is a process that is constructed via an “Othering;” the construction of a positive identification with what the “new” nation-state is, compared to the “old” apartheid state. The result is a clear cut “black and white picture” in which the bad can be personified.

The Marginalized Truth

It is only fitting that the mainly unpublished texts on the process of transformation, truth, and justice by those not commissioned to speak get referenced as the “outside” voice, which is constantly re-emerging in the changing landscape of the new South Africa. It is at the same time our modest hope that references to these “outside” voices will cast new light on the TRC process and will—in years to come—form an understanding of the TRC process.

When Lars Buur interviewed people who had been part of the TRC process in 1996 and 1997, they often referred to themselves as “victims of apartheid.” In 1999, there was a subtle shift, namely, “I am a victim of the TRC.” This signifier can mean two different things. On the one hand, it refers to the way the TRC defined victims of gross human rights violations. On the other hand, it refers to people who felt betrayed and abused by the TRC.

The experiences of people who handed in statements and engaged in the TRC’s public hearing process—where they were given the opportunity to speak and thereby have their stories documented in an official state setting (Wilson 1996:16)—were generally positive. There are many examples of how people felt relieved after giving public testimonies (see for example Krog 1998; Tutu 1999; Villa-Vicencio and Verwoerd 2000). However, this scenario changed considerably when the promised “substantial compensation” for their efforts in the struggle were declined by the ANC-led government. In contrast to the experience of these individuals, the commissioners and high-profile staff members of the TRC have been celebrated all over the world and have taken up lucrative positions in the state apparatus. Furthermore, the majority of South Africa’s socially marginalised population has not experienced any real change in their socio-economic situation.

Promises were made even before the question of financial reparation began to surface. For example, during hearings, commissioners often guaranteed victims proper investigations into what had happened to them or to their missing relatives. These pledges were not kept and served only to unrealistically and unnecessarily raise victims’ expectations. In response, people formally identified as victims by the TRC have begun to organize themselves and make their voices heard. They are claiming their right to the promised compensation through petitions and demonstrations.

Those who handed in a statement alleging that they were victims of gross human rights violations were systematically subjected to scrutiny as to whether their statements were “within mandate” or “out of mandate.” In order for individual apartheid experiences to be deemed gross human rights violations, they had to fit an established taxonomy. This taxonomy involved a process of objectification, which was organized and structured by what is known as the information management system (Buur 2000).

Although the well-known public hearings of the Commission were considered to be a huge success (Wilson 1996), far fewer victims than expected came forward to the TRC. At the outset, around 100,000 statements were expected. In the end, approximately 22,000 people came forward. However, this was still more than the TRC has been capable of documenting adequately.

With the amnesty process, which began in 1996 and involved multiple hearings, questions about compensation and reparation became more insistent. In the media, as well as in the TRC, it was proposed that the government provide monetary compensations to victims—not only in the form of urgent relief, but also proper financial reparation. The rationale behind the demand was ostensibly

morally anchored. It was believed necessary to counterbalance the amnesty processes, which included protection against civil claims from victims. In addition, many of the amnesty applicants secured state funding for legal representation in amnesty hearings. For victims, even though they were promised the restoration of their dignity and self-respect from the process of telling their story, truth-telling would not change the actual conditions under which they lived.

Criticism has been mounting against the ANC government's reluctance to pay out the reparation grants promised by the TRC. Among the fiercest of these critics are the former Chairperson of the Commission, Desmond Tutu, and Anglican Archbishop Njogunkulu Ndungane, who accused the government of "betraying those who fought apartheid" (Njogunkulu Ndungane quoted in Steven Mann, 11 May 2000).

At least two fairly well-organized victim/survivor groups have emerged on the scene. One is the "Ex Political Prisoners and Apartheid Human Rights Violations Survivors" group based in Cape Town; another is the largest and oldest group (having started before the Commission was implemented) known as "The Khulumani Support Group." These two groups joined together in 2000, with the "Ex Political Prisoners and Apartheid Human Rights Violations Survivors" becoming the Western Cape branch of Khulumani. These groups have tried by various means to keep a dialogue open with the TRC and the government over the issue of reparation.

For example, on 12 April 2000, after half a year's planning, the "Ex Political Prisoners and Apartheid Human Rights Violations Survivors" held a march to parliament in Cape Town. During the march, they handed over a petition to representatives of President Thabo Mbeki's office. The first demand of the marchers was concerned with the failed reparation grants. The message was short but clear: "The final reparations promised to us by the TRC and the government must be paid out." The second demand was also concerned with the work of the Commission. Here reparation was also a matter of concern, but the aim was to change the representational process: "Not all of us were afforded the opportunity to give a statement to the TRC. This opportunity needs to be extended and the additional people deserving reparations be included" (Ex Political Prisoners and Apartheid Human Rights Violations Survivors, Newsletter No. 12, 2000:1).

There is an important feeling of solidarity or joint ethos expressed in the second demand of the "Ex Political Prisoners and Apartheid Human Rights Violations Survivors" concerned with the people who were not afforded the opportunity to give a statement to the TRC. One of the most intriguing aspects of giving voice to emerging groups of "proper victims" in South Africa has been the simultaneous fragmentation and diffusion of wider claims of people living on the margins of the nation-state. It should not be forgotten that in the world-wide celebration of the TRC, the group of people formally entitled to reparation represents only a small section of all the victims of apartheid.

The dilemma is that "state systems, representative democracy and conceptions of justice and development rely on the identification and representation of communities, but no such stable community exists. The crisis is not resolvable simply by devolving power to lower level collectivities" (van Beek 2000:36). The ANC seems to be aware of, and at the same time in pain about, what to do with regard to allocating resources and entitlements according to the "representation of communities" emerging from the work of the TRC. In the ocean of possible victims of apartheid the total of 22,000 seems very small indeed (not to forget that approximately 4,500 of the statements submitted ended up not qualifying as a proper victim). The ANC is trapped

between doing something for everybody and, as Mamdani (1996) puts it, doing a lot for the few. The dilemma is that the most coherent proper representational grouping which has emerged on the scene is the one emerging from the Commission process.

It is of particular interest here that even though the TRC and the ANC are in conflict over the status of the “victims” objectified by the TRC, they share the same grammar for allocation and representation. Neither the TRC nor the ANC questions that the right knowledge about who the victims really are can be obtained. It is only a question about “getting it right,” counting the numbers differently or rethinking the victim criteria. Thus for both parties there is a trust in practices of representation on the imputed stability and irreducibility of identity and the “group-ness” it supposedly reflects. What is problematic, in this sense, is not the grammar, but the surface product.

Conclusion

While Boraine criticizes the failed payment of reparations and further notes that the published recommendations made by the TRC have been ignored by the ANC government, he does not bemoan the lack of prosecutions, as he feels that not everyone can be prosecuted. Instead, he is of the opinion that the TRC was a miraculous triumph and promotes it as a system for solving the conflict in the Former Yugoslavia, as well as other places in the world. In fact, promoting the TRC as a model for solving other conflicts is something he is attempting to pursue with the establishment of his new organization.

The issue of prosecutions is historically more complex than Boraine would have us believe, and has been a tricky issue since World World II—raising the question of how nations, communities or societies can live together in peace after horrendous atrocities, genocide, or years of civil war and conflict. The problem, in other words, is how to establish a new foundation for social togetherness and nation-state building, based on a new set of shared collective representations, while continuing to address the past. The sense of a shared national past is, as argued by Anderson, the basis for asserting or visualizing a shared national future (Anderson, 1991). However, as Mary Douglas points out: “Collective representations depend on what is held to be sacred, as shown by the patterns of accountability” (1991:8). The paradigmatic post-World War II trials at Nuremberg and Tokyo set a precedent for using the courtroom to settle patterns of accountability. The trials became a means of revising national history and establishing a new foundation for democratic societies, i.e., its New Law. At the same time the victors passed judgment on the practices of the losers. Over the years, three options have materialised: (1) the use of traditional court systems to punish former leaders and human rights violators; (2) the use of national and international tribunals; and (3) since the first official commission in Uganda 1974¹ and, more profoundly, with the first internationally well known commission in Argentina in 1984, official commission work has become more and more prevalent.

The TRC is not immune from the tensions surrounding this debate. As stated above, the TRC was the result of political compromise and promised more than it could deliver: namely, truth about

¹ The commission was implemented in order to investigate the accusations of disappearance at the hands of the military forces during the first years of the Idi Amin Government (Hayner, 1994:611-612).

what really happened, the healing of national and individual pain, and reparations. The TRC statements of human rights abuses opened individuals' painful memories, but offered no containment or closure. However well intentioned the agenda of the TRC, it has produced secondary victimization, recycled abuse and further psychological damages, as has witnessing perpetrators' amnesty (as a form of reparation).

The TRC wanted to create a ritual for forgiveness, but clearly not everyone can (or should) forgive those who committed the atrocities of the past. Why should someone who has been brutalized offer redemption to his/her perpetrators because the word "sorry" is used? Yet, in fact, forgiveness was expected. As Richard Klein (1999) suggests, however, "forgiveness" should be replaced by the word "pardon." In the first instance, to forgive is Biblical, to pardon is legal. Forgiveness requires a signifying apparatus that produces a meaningful narrative so that there is an evacuation of excess discomfort (*jouissance*). The aims behind granting pardon are more modest. To pardon also requires a signifier, but *jouissance* is not necessarily evacuated. There may be rancor long after the subject has given his pardon. After forgiveness, rancor falls. Forgiveness is something that can only take place between the perpetrator and victim, yet, the act—word and deed—of asking for forgiveness is what the victim awaits.

The merit of the TRC is that it opened a space to talk about past horrors and reinserted the role of ritual. It can be argued that thanks to this process, people are now able to talk about other taboo issues, such as rape and child abuse. However, the TRC overextended itself and lost sight of the particularity of each individual's suffering in the call for national healing and reconciliation. This process may be contrasted with the work of Laurie Vollen in the former Yugoslavia, who created a ritual in the aftermath of war—namely the excavation of mass graves and the returning of the dead to their respective families. These kinds of rituals force a global witnessing of the horror inflicted, as well as ensure that the particularity of each individual's suffering is not lost. So saying, a more modest endeavour on the part of the TRC may have in fact taken the process a lot further.

Note

The present article is based on ethnographic fieldwork carried out by the first author in South Africa in 1996, 1997, and 1998. The second author worked with human rights survivors in the Western Cape, some of who went through the TRC process.

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