

Truth, and the little red light

Book review

Krog, A (1998) **Country of my skull**. Johannesburg: Random House.
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Grahame Hayes
University of Natal
Durban 4041

Antjie Krog's book on her "close encounters" with the TRC has received a lot of attention. I would guess that it still is the most talked about, and written about, text on the TRC. What is it in this text that has attracted so much interest and critical debate? Are some of the answers to this question located in the multiple identities of its author?: Afrikaner; white woman; (radio) journalist; renowned poet. Surely so, and yet it is the complex interaction of these identities that mark Krog's reflections on the TRC.

Country of my skull is a multi-layered text that is simultaneously reportage (Krog covered the TRC for SABC radio), memoir, and political analysis. The analysis, or more accurately Krog's commentary, skilfully draws us towards the heart of many crucial socio-political issues, and yet she avoids the preachy tone of some other collections on the TRC. Even her style of presentation acknowledges the dangers of foreclosing the debate surrounding the TRC by invoking, *too soon*, a political discourse that simplistically moralises about the evils of South Africa's apartheid past. The issues facing us with regard to reconciliation, justice, reparation, and social reconstruction are far too important and complex to warrant anything less than protracted, open, and committed debate and discussion from as broad a range of ordinary citizens as possible.

In discussing the launch of Kader Asmal, Louise Asmal and Ronald Suresh Roberts's book **Reconciliation through truth**, she comments on some of (then deputy president) Mbeki's comments about reconciliation. For example, Krog writes: "Reconciliation will only be possible if whites say: Apartheid was evil and we were responsible for it. Resisting it was justified - even if excesses occurred within this framework. Mbeki says that if this acknowledgement is not forthcoming, reconciliation is no longer on the agenda. Although this political line is timely, it also freezes the debate in tones of black

and white and gives no guidance on how the individual can move forward." (p58). And then more in her own words / thoughts she continues by saying: "The hearings on human rights violations have forced the Truth Commission to formulate a different position on reconciliation - in a way which takes it out of the colour code and makes it available to all South Africans as a future guideline. The human rights of black people were violated by whites, but also by blacks at the instigation of whites. So the Truth Commission was forced to say: South Africa's shameful Apartheid past has made people lose their humanity. It dehumanized people to such an extent that they treated fellow human beings worse than animals. And this must change for ever." (p58). Whether or not one shares Krog's optimism that the TRC "took the colour code out of reconciliation", the issue remains about how we find a common humanity that transcends the frozen tones of black and white. It seems true that many white people, who watched the TRC hearings on television, and read the newspapers's accounts of human rights abuses, were deeply shocked and shamed by the atrocities committed during apartheid rule, and were moved and saddened by the stories of abuse and brutalisation suffered by ordinary black people. However, these emotions and reactions (in themselves) don't translate into practices of reconciliation, or form the foundation of a common humanity as South Africans.

Compassion and solidarity, as social processes, seem to emerge from contexts of engagement. It could be argued that the "success" of apartheid was to *disengage* whites from the psychological reality of black people. I say "psychological" because even though black and white people have been dependent and interdependent on each other throughout the history of this country, apartheid managed at the same time to constitute black people as *so other*, that whites literally didn't see them. Black people were made absent by being socially constructed as non-beings (for whites). These conjectures are not meant to imply a passivity on the part of black people, nor that these practices of subjugation weren't resisted. The point rather is to indicate what work lies ahead if we are to change the social and psychological disengagement so characteristic amongst white South Africans. It requires more than the current banal "confessionals" being proposed by certain guilt-struck whites that we should all apologise, say we are sorry, and cough-up some money for reconciliation! We can do all this, and *still* remain aloof, separate, and disengaged.

It seems to me that white South Africans have to "come home" really. Too many remain foreigners in their own country by distancing themselves from their past, our past, the apartheid past. The TRC was, and still *is*, a process that too many people distance(d) themselves from. Krog expresses some of these sentiments in the following way: "When the Truth Commission started last year, I realized instinctively: if you cut yourself off from the process, you will wake up in a foreign country - a country that you don't know and that you will never understand." (p131).

We all have stories to tell, and not only the "black victims" whose cries, pain, and anger we witnessed during the TRC public hearings. These stories clearly served many

important functions, like for instance revealing certain "truths" about past wrongs, and forming the basis for possible future reparation. Furthermore, the slogan of the TRC was that "revealing is healing", both at an individual level for the person telling their story, and for the nation as a whole in terms of reconciliation. Well it seems that the story-telling, the talking about the apartheid past, stopped too soon to achieve much healing and reconciliation. This is not a criticism of the TRC, as it had a rather specific brief with regard to the victim hearings, but more a plea for (further) engagement and dialogue about our shared histories and destinies. For ordinary people, us the citizens of this country, this has hardly begun. Other voices are heard, and tend to predominate, and as Krog rather cynically puts it: "... perhaps ... since the victim hearings ended, the Commission has become too loud - too many egos, too many squabbles, too much politics" (p264).

Krog certainly allows ordinary people, victims especially, a lot of space in her book. At one level it might be suggested that this is a "lazy" form of analysis; *just* allowing the victims to be heard. And yet at another level I would want to argue that unless we immerse ourselves in the stories, and the *lives* of people – black and white - who suffered at the hands of the apartheid state's security forces, we don't really begin to engage with what it meant to live and struggle during those shameful and dark years. These stories of South Africa's apartheid past are not at all easy to bear, neither for the storytellers themselves, nor for those who hear them. The anguish and distress of being so close to people's pain, and at times, often inconsolable loss, took its toll on the personal and emotional lives of the TRC "insiders" (reporters, interpreters, translators, statement takers, commissioners, and even members of the audience at the public hearings).

While a negative consequence of listening to the stories of the victims is to render, all but the most steely of us, psychologically vulnerable, this seems to point to our humanity rather than our inherent weakness and fragility as people. And maybe it is by opening ourselves up to people's unbearable suffering and torment that we might find within ourselves the capacity for empathy, compassion, and understanding. These are not just personal reactions and emotions, as to recognise something of ourselves in the unfamiliar experiences of the other, seems to be what defines sociality.

So much for the victims, but what about the perpetrators? The issues here are much more complex and vexed. Many victims, and the families and relatives of dead (killed) and disappeared victims are not interested in forgiveness, and want perpetrators charged in court. Others are looking to the state for (financial) reparation, so that materially, at least, they can start re-building their lives. Whereas, many politicians believe that granting amnesty to perpetrators, under certain conditions of course (!), paves the way towards reconciliation. Yet there has been far too little discussion of *how* we do this reconciliation with perpetrators: they are amongst us, they are our neighbours.

This "avoidance" of dealing *socially* with (reconciling with) perpetrators is rather dramatically recounted in the letter that Krog received from Tim, after he had read one of her TRC articles in the **Mail & Guardian**. After matriculating in 1980, Tim was called up for his two years's military service in the SADF. His time with the SADF in Namibia so affected him that he tried to desert, and escape to Botswana to join the ANC. He was caught, and "severely dealt with" by the security forces. In his letter to Krog, Tim writes: "Perhaps this is the most important role of the TRC. Not to extract confessions from F W and Magnus. No. *They must live with their own conscience. Fuck the perpetrators.* The point of the TRC is to enable healing to happen. And let it be said that here in me there is at least one person they have helped to reconcile: myself to myself." (p145, emphases added).

I am not sure that I quite share Tim's / Antjie's sentiments about the perpetrators. And yes, they must live with their own conscience, but how do we *live* with their conscience? Earlier (chapter 2), Krog, paraphrasing the Chilean philosopher and activist, José Zalaquett, writes: "Perpetrators need to acknowledge the wrong they did. Why? It creates a communal starting point. To make a clean break from the past, a moral beacon needs to be established between the past and the future." (p24). It would seem that perpetrators need to do more than *acknowledge* the wrong that they did. It is too easy to say that it is vengeful, unforgiving, to want justice. Mahmood Mamdani (1998) has convincingly argued that reconciliation is difficult to achieve without justice. For example, he writes: "To manage the tension between between reconciliation and justice *creatively*, do we not need to think of reconciliation as not just political but also *social*, and justice as not just criminal and individual, but also *social and systemic*?" (Mamdani, 1998:3, emphases added).

WE do need to think creatively about how we engage *socially* with the apartheid past, with getting hold of the truth of this past, with reconciliation, with justice, with forgiveness, with living differently in the same world. Antjie Krog's book makes us think about these things, without telling us to think about them. Antjie, the Truth Commission flâneur, thinks, questions, looks, lies a bit, weeps, strolls about, finds symbols, makes us laugh, and yet continually reminds us to be of this country.

And so, "For me, the Truth Commission microphone with its little red light was the ultimate symbol of the whole process: here the marginalized voice speaks to the public ear, the unspeakable is spoken – and translated – the personal story brought from the innermost depths of the individual binds us anew to the collective. What has happened to that? Has it all become politics?" (p237).

REFERENCES.

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