
THE IFAA SUNDAY FORUM

YOUTH DIALOGUE ON THE TRC REFLECTIONS AND POSSIBILITIES

Report by *Claire-Anne Lester*

The author is working towards an MPhil in justice and transformation at UCT. She is an intern at the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation and an IFAA associate member

Young South Africans considered the legacy of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) at a discussion jointly hosted by the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) and the Institute for African Alternatives (IFAA) on 11 August 2015

By six o'clock, when the event was to begin, every seat in the room was full and young people were finding places against the walls. A panel of four students was set to respond to the question, "Is the Truth and Reconciliation Commission a desirable model of transitional justice?"

Considering South Africa's current political and socio-economic difficulties, a discussion of the TRC might initially seem anachronous or futile – a topic with "a foregone conclusion", as Brian Kamanzi noted when he began his presentation. It was soon apparent that the nature and outcome of our negotiated transition in general, and the inner workings of the TRC in particular, remain fiercely relevant to the younger generations.



Although each presentation was unique, there was consensus on a few issues. All agreed that the TRC's conceptualisation of justice, as primarily retributive and restorative, was a decisive and fundamental flaw. That its inquiry was framed by the vocabulary of human rights also determined its neglect of socio-economic injustices that many South Africans continue to experience as a direct consequence of apartheid legislation. One example of such legislation is the Bantu Homelands Citizenship Act of 1970, which catalysed the legal classification of South Africans into citizens and subject races.

Mwinji Siame described the TRC as a "sanitised, legal-rational-ish process, couched in the biomedical language of healing and the authority of human rights". Abigail Branford noted that the TRC focused on "the visceral" – those "gross human rights violations" – which had the effect of shocking the audience while "the possibilities that existed within the TRC findings have been squandered by both the machinery of the TRC and the secondary and tertiary education sectors". Kayin Scholtz spoke of the dire economic conditions of poverty and unemployment in South Africa, linking the TRC's failure to assign criminality to economic

oppression with the view today that “we do not seem to think that economic injustice counts”. This has led to an unfortunate tacit acceptance of vast, racially defined inequality in contemporary South Africa. Despite the TRC’s focus on human rights, we remain plagued by unequal access to the law, to safety, and to the protection of basic human rights more than two decades into our new dispensation.

By individualising oppression, many complicit hands were washed of responsibility; but perhaps more importantly, young South Africans inherited an inaccurately constructed history that has bred a misunderstanding of our past and present conditions. Kamanzi spoke of people growing up in an “ahistorical context ... trying to deal with collective memory and intergenerational trauma in an individualised sense”, while many beneficiaries of the apartheid system remain ignorant of the cost of their privilege. There is a need to grapple with the negative heritage of the past if we are to forge a viable future. One cannot talk about nation building without recourse to multiple pasts, and in South Africa, it is necessary to understand that the systems of slavery, colonialism, and apartheid all make claims upon the present.

Each panellist presented a unique and sophisticated critique, showing that the decisions made during South Africa’s transition are being judged by a

new set of standards. Each speaker also suggested a practical way forward. For Branford, the TRC findings need to be harnessed into education programmes that encourage debate, reflexivity and critical thinking, rather than attempt to teach abstract concepts like “reconciliation” and “empathy”. Civic or peace education as currently taught, she said, is like reading a grammar book: “abstract rules that kind of make sense, but unless you see it in practice, you don’t really know what they’re on about”.



One cannot talk about nation building without recourse to multiple pasts.

Kamanzi urged us to steer away from the narrative of “South African exceptionalism”. If we rather understood our experience as an example of late colonialism, we could engage with central questions related to reparations and the colonial legacy within a global effort. In Siame’s view, we cannot begin to talk about truth and reconciliation when black people do not own their land – “the very way in which we hold our memories”. Scholtz had a very different take on ownership as “what exists in the

present”. If ownership is fundamentally dispossession that has been codified into law, while equality is intrinsically just, he said, then perhaps a society should be judged according to its level of inequality. Seen through that lens, South Africa is incredibly unjust. For Scholtz, to ensure equality we need to think seriously about issues around inheritance and estates to discern ways to distribute wealth in the most just way possible.

The question-and-answer session that followed revealed a further multitude of perspectives and anxieties regarding South Africa’s current socio-political moment. Emotional chords were struck as audience members reckoned with such sensitive issues. Ultimately, this proved to be a timely conversation, given the present calls for more radical transformation of institutions of higher learning. As TRC chairperson Archbishop Desmond Tutu wrote in the final report:

Others will inevitably critique this perspective – as indeed they must. We hope that many South Africans and friends of South Africa will become engaged in the process of helping our nation to come to terms with its past and, in so doing, reach out to a new future. [NA](#)

NOTE

An audio recording of the panel, “TRC Youth Dialogue Full Audio”, is available on YouTube and the IFAA Sunday Forum Facebook page, as well as some video.

ABOUT THE PANEL

Abigail Bradford is a transitional justice honours student at UCT and a Mandela Rhodes Scholar of 2015. Her research interests include truth commissions, gender politics and sanitation provision in informal settlements. Abigail manages and coordinates the Gender and Sex Project, which conducts workshops in high schools in Cape

Town and Grahamstown.

Brian Kamanzi is a Cape Town-based spoken-word poet, engineer, and a budding Pan-Africanist eager to form cross-cultural connections with others in the struggle.

Kayin Scholtz is a social worker, working primarily in educational interventions in Philippi. He currently manages the Impact Centre at

the South African Education and Environment Project.

Mwinji Siame is currently completing a master’s degree in sociology. She explores the promise of biography and literature to express and understand the experiences of black women. Her short fiction has appeared in *Munyori Literary Journal* and *Bluestockings Magazine*.