UCT anthropologists PAMELA REYNOLDS and FIONA ROSS dig deep into the TRC and urge journalists to question its assumptions, its choice of voices and the data it releases.

Traditions and truths

FRENCH philosopher Michel Serres says that after terrible events, "a written work, even an abstract one, cannot help remaining a distressed witness for a long time". Each of us involved in the TRC, observing it, reporting on the processes, is "a distressed witness". This calls for reflection on one's distress, on one's motives, on one's role as commentator.

Said one journalist of the massacres in Rwanda, "We learned something about the soul of man that would leave us shamed long into the future." Journalists occupy a strange territory of privileges and burdens.

What truth will we tell for the future? There is a focus on abuses that cancels out all possibility of heroism — we are unable to see that which was achieved. Images of pain offered through the TRC hearings and taken up by the media are of, archetypically, mothers in tears. There is little balance with stories of healing, surviving, battling, networking, growing over time, reordering every day. All that has gone on and will continue to go on.

We need to explore assumptions like "the truth heals". Critic Michael Ignatieff writes: "It is an open question whether justice or truth actually heals. But the truth will not necessarily be believed, and it is putting too much faith in truth, to believe that it can heal." He quotes Desmond Tutu on national unity, reconciliation and healing, and adds: "Laudable aims, but are they coherent? Look at the assumptions he makes. That a nation has one psyche, not many; that the truth is one, not many; that the truth is certain, not contestable; and that when it is known by all, it has the capacity to heal and reconcile." Ignatieff says these are less assumptions than they are articles of faith about human nature.

There are at least two other positions on the need to reveal the truth about the past. One comes from anthropologist Mary Douglas, who stresses the value of forgetting. Knowledge lost may be well lost. It is not necessarily good, despite what Freud says, to recall the past. Douglas says it is not wrong to forget, nor necessarily sad to forget. We should not strive to remember everything we ever knew. Time past, Douglas says, is remembered privately, or publicly, when it can be used in time present to control the future.

"We never calculate the cost of our methods. We believe they are free. Everything has its price — even clarity. It is paid for in shadows, or destruction, sometimes."
Michel Serres

The other position on truth and memory comes from Michel Serres, who talks about shadows. He says there are two strands in western thought. One is the Greek one, about bringing things into the light. The other one is Roman or Egyptian, about burying, concealing, hiding, or placing something in the shadows to conserve it. To wrench something from the shadows is often to destroy it. Serres says: "We never calculate the cost of our methods. We believe they are free. Everything has its price — even clarity. It is paid for in shadows, or destruction, sometimes."

I don't know who is correct. The point is we need to excavate the claims and raise the debate in public. Why aren't more assumptions, definitions and ways of seeing derived from Africa, rather than western thought, on the TRC?

As observers and commentators, we should value above all the creativity in the process of observing. This includes the willingness to hear that which we do not know and have not anticipated, the preparedness to question our own position and understanding. Not to forsake them, but to place them in a merry-go-round of possibilities. *Pamela Reynolds*

Is the TRC true?

THERE'S a sense of dissatisfaction with the kinds of stories that reporters are able to tell thus far about the Commission. Vena Das, an Indian sociologist, calls these "crystallised narratives". She says that stories crystallise around events, they make sense and have descriptive value. Then after a while, that descriptive value is lost somehow. There are ways we can move from those stories.

Stephen Laufer from *Business Day* has said that journalism is translation — that journalists take a mass of information and make it useful. "What do we do with all this information?" journalists ask. It seems to me that the public asks much the same question. They ask, what do we do with these nightly tallies of tears, with what Hugh Lewin, a TRC official, has called "the relentless repetition of horror"?

Who tells stories, and how innocence and involvement are represented, raise a lot of questions about the data which the TRC presents us with. Who is left out? What is left out? What stories don't we hear?

One of the things we can do is maths. I added up the number of cases of human rights violations that I heard last year — there were 377 of them. One hundred and fifty were made by men, and of those 150, 98 were made by men about themselves. The women's stories are different. Out of 227 stories told by women, only 29 were about themselves: the remainder were about their husbands and sons. So in other words, men speak of their own experience, and women speak of others'.

The Truth Commission process itself has shifted, because their narrative is not crystallised. At one point, there was an increasing emphasis on innocence. People were coming before the Commission and representing themselves as innocent. So out of those 29 women who spoke about themselves, 15 spoke about the way in which the state had opened fire on them when they were coming home from protest marches or from funerals, or when they had been standing in the streets waiting for buses.

Who tells stories, and how innocence and involvement are represented, raise a lot of questions about the data which the TRC presents us with. Who is left out? What is left out? What stories don't we hear?

There is a lot that is displaced or hidden by the way in which we think and write about the Commission and by the way that the Commission represents itself. There are absences — silent voices. There are people who don't speak. There are ways in which it is incredibly difficult to actually evaluate the Truth Commission data that we have.

Take for example the Truth Commission Interim Report. It is based on five hearings. It found that 82 out of 124 deaths were caused by the security forces. The other 42 deaths were caused by "other/unknown". What is this "other/unknown"? I went off and worked it out. Those entities were the homeland security forces, the police reservists, the vigilantes and the liberation movements.

We have a responsibility to ask very crucial, pushing questions about what it means to lump the liberation movements together with the homeland security forces in a category called "other/unknown". What kind of truth are we being presented with? Simply because it is the Truth Commission that gives us this data, doesn't make it true, doesn't mean it can't be interrogated, can't be questioned, can't be contested. *Fiona Ross*

Articles excerpted from presentations to the Media, Truth and Reconciliation workshop in Cape Town, February 1997.

archbishops & archetypes