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How do we talk about truth in South Africa?

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Tine Destrooper: Welcome to *Justice Visions*, my name is Tine Destrooper and I am the regular host of this podcast. And in this season of the podcast, we take a closer look at what certain theoretical concepts mean for the practice of transitional justice and for the daily lives of victims of human rights violations. And today we will talk about a concept that lies at the heart of many transitional justice interventions, which is truth. And we'll explore this notion by taking a broader look at the multiple meanings of the concept of truth. And with us today to talk about this is Antjie Krog, an internationally renowned journalist and writer who I think self-identify as most strongly as a poet. She kindly accepted our invitation to examine the question How do we talk about truth in South Africa? Welcome.

Antjie Krog: Thank you.

Tine Destrooper And I believe that most of our listeners are probably at least to some extent familiar with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa that was established in 1995, as well as with the horrendous crimes that it was dealing with. So I propose that we're not going to talk about that too much to start. What I meant to ask you instead, is if you could say a bit more about your role because as a reporter for the South African Broadcasting Corporation, you covered the proceedings and hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. And when I read your writing, it's quite clear that this commission also profoundly impacted you personally. And I was wondering if you could say a bit more about why it is that this commission was had such an impact on you personally.

Antjie Krog: I think it would be arrogant and false of myself to suggest that either I personally was affected or that I played a role because it was such a huge South African operation. I had a team of journalists that reported from different languages, so we were a team of between 8 and 12, sometimes 15 people. We had two people who just fed the news bulletins for radio. We had another group which did Q&A's about what is happening. We had another group who did small packages and then we had another team who was broadcasting 24 hours the hearings. So it was a vast operational setup only for radio, and all of us were effected. Also the truth commissioners themselves around ... after a week some of them couldn't walk some of them had bodily pains, some fell. And the briefers and psychologists who debriefed people were ill, and then I noticed that in my own team, people were falling apart, so it was, it's not easy not only to listen to victims, but it's very difficult to feel this desire to do it well, to do justice to what you hear. You see the pain and you experience the sacrifice that was behind this story with his words. And you want to do justice so people worked extraordinary hours and we supported one

another and also across journalistic genres, the TV journalists, the newspaper journalists. We were like, you know: this one will bring coffee that one will comfort that one who was crying. So yeah, it's, it was an unexpected trauma for all I would say.

Tine Destrooper: You're talking about different genres, and what I find interesting is that indeed, you are not only reporting, radio reporting about the commission, but then you also wrote about the commission and you also wrote poetry about the commission. And maybe also as a start to this conversation, I wanted to ask you if you would be so kind as to read one of the poems that deals with this topic of the truth commission.

Antjie Krog: I will read '*Litany*' that deals with whiteness as the perpetrator.

here along the long line shadow
 where I thought where I thought I'd leave the litany
 of locust
 of locust and death I'll always hear the litany of
 sound
 here along the long white shadow
 where I grab lustre grab honour that once was
 lustre and white
 the truth I've heard and how to molest it
 that I travel I travel along the corn or chaff of my
 past
 that my past crawls forth on its deadly knees with-
 out once looking up
 that I claw on my knees claw to that place
 that light place that does not want to dim
 here along the long white shadow of mortal and
 molested truth
 we buried many we buried without shroud or ritual
 many we buried and from the graves it sprouts
 the shadow sprouts of lustre, burdock and wheat
 the locusts of sound
 here along the long white shadow
 and my past sits so well in its teeth all along
 its teeth sit well in the shadow of sulphur and lime
 it's time
 the time of the assassin and shame and tin
 I keep slipping out of truth
 while next to me along the long white shadow
 walks the shudder
 that I was walks the long white shudder of ash
 set me I who keep slipping in the long white
 shadow
 out of time out of random and lies I want slipping
 from the shudder
 along the emptiness of litany and shadow
 set me set me from revenge and loss

from ruin set me from the long white scar the lichen and ash set me free into remorse oh my hand my hand grabs the sheet like a throat.

Tine Destrooper: Thank you. Thank you so much for sharing this and also for illustrating so wonderfully how you turned to poetry to, I think, what you just mentioned to do justice to this experience. And I think you don't only turn to poetry in your work, but you also use fiction to relate this experience, these facts. And I wanted to ask you a question about that because in the book *Country of My Skull*, I think in the afterword you write: I have told many lies in this book about the truth. And so in the book, what you do is in a way, you interweave these fictional and factual elements and you say that you give the testimony of the victims and keep that intact, but you also deliberately fictionalised certain events and certain characters in the book. And I wanted to ask you about your decision to proceed in that way to combine facts and fiction in this work.

Antjie Krog: You know, when the book was written and published, it was a big discussion should it be marketed as a fiction or as non-fiction? And then it was said, you have this literary non-fiction. Nowadays, that debate is old and stale, because suddenly everyone is busy with autobiographical, autobiographical fiction literary autobiography, so the genres have become so mixed and the discussion on South African literature by someone like De Cock then rated *Country of My Skull* as actually a door that was pushed open after which several books followed this same kind of pattern, or not pattern but style. And then in the end, it's quite silly to think: 'Yes, I used fiction, Yes, you have characters, Yes, I have catharsis, Yes, I did a story, so it cannot be, it cannot be a report because the reports exist.' I have reported my own reports, they exist as reports. So there's no use in redoing that. But doing the book, I felt it would be immensely selfish to just have the victims stories, and I, as a white perpetrator, just stand back because it's my people who have done that and pretend I'm not involved, pretend that I'm not there. I'm just telling this story, or I'm just giving the story that was in public to make. It feel to me dishonest. And the difference between reporting and writing a book like that is that you ... weather reporting is what was being said. I'm not interested in your opinion, although you opinion is, of course, always there in your choice, what you give, what you present, how you present it. So basically, there isn't such a thing as neutrality, it's a fantasy. So I don't know. I wouldn't even say that I've included fiction in that book because it was fictional elements. And you had, and there was also a lot of literary and also academic work that I studied, about trauma, about telling about perpetrating about it. I had interviews with psychologists, with political analysts, with academics, and all of that is manifesting in the book, but a word here and a sentence there. Nowadays you would have to get clearance from everyone: May I use that word? May I use that same time? Thank God it wasn't there that time, but in a way you also need to, to be truly honest, also about the perpetrators, you need some, some protection when they were analyzed cruelty. Anyway, so I would disagree and say, you know, it's there's is not really fictional elements, it's just a yeah, a rather ... better way than reporting.

Tine Destrooper: Reporting is then your choice to proceed in this specific way. When you say you were talking about also talking to people about trauma, etc. is

the choice to proceed in this way in the book also inspired by this idea that by proceeding in this specific way, you can create something which is truer than true in a sense that trauma can never be known and can never be completely understood. If we only report the facts because it's so vastly different and so outside of our realm of the imaginable. Do you feel that the genre that you adopted by introducing certain characters or fictional elements, if you will, or narratives that it allowed us as a reader to have a better access to the truth?

Antjie Krog: I would say so because, for example, the academic literature that you read ... Or let me take a step back. There's a lot of writing now suddenly about real life everywhere. And we have several workshops and these conferences where people bring their work and then it's very interesting work. And the moment they move on to academic theory, it dies, it dies just there because the language is different, it's not personal, it's not attached; it's just there. And so it kills the theory and it kills the very good story. So some of the arguments that I have is, is arguments that are busy in theory. But you make these arguments, say between me and my husband, so that you immediately tone the language down to an ordinary language, you do connect it to what you are talking about, and so you make the theory, or not make the theory, you use the theory to explore the depth of what you have just heard. The story of the shepherd, yeah you know, you could just report on it and you could. But if you really, truly want to understand it, you have to bring in all the unbelievable elements that are out there. So I would say it depends on the motive perhaps.

Tine Destrooper: That's interesting, because what you're seeing also, I think, it reminds me of also one of the achievements I think of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was precisely that they distinguish between these four kinds of true forensic and factual truth being the first one and then social and dialogical truth, healing, restorative truth and narrative truth ... Is what you're seeing also related to that, to these various ways of understanding truth, do we need these various understandings of truth, and I would also add, are they important to victims as well to distinguish between these various kinds of truth?

Antjie Krog: It is crucial. Not only for victims, it's also for perpetrators. I say in the book somewhere, some of the journalist said: 'Antjie that didn't happen like that.' And I say: 'For me it did.' So there is validity. I mean, as the two of us sit here, you will hear another interview than I am hearing. And yours is not invalid or mine is not invalid. So there has to be space, even if you lie, even if you lie. And I think that's extremely important. I've learnt this with the writing of abuse that people write about themselves being abused and in some instances it didn't happen. It actually doesn't matter whether it happened to you. If there in a court case, that's something else. But if that person feels in a way violated, then it did happen. It did happen. And even the perpetrators, the fact that they felt safe to do it and the fact that they felt heroes doing it or received orders, I think it's an important contribution to context.

Tine Destrooper: I think that's very relevant. I think it also goes to the argument to vote or I would want to ask you what you feel about the argument that the fact that telling happened at all at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission is more important than what was being told there.

Antjie Krog: Yeah, by far, by far. It was a tsunami of truths, thrown, washing over the country. And none of us has ever been the same after that. And they say technically, theoretically they say the amount of lies and being listened at... It's not that, it's is that. Is that, you know, some things went terribly wrong. And that we'd like to forget that even now, we would like to pretend that our country is going down the drain, not because anything we did in the past as white people, because black people cannot really, you know, run a sophisticated government. Which is not true, you have not only colonialism and apartheid for three hundred years, but you have a continent of slavery where slaves were torn from. That is, that is the haunting horror of Africa, to try and find your feet, find stability, deliver genius giftedness, remarkable leaders, etc. While you have been so thoroughly attacked in a way by Europe, especially Europe,

Tine Destrooper: You speak of the tsunami of truth and no one really being the same anymore after that. When I read you, I also feel that there is a skepticism in terms of the potential of healing of such a Truth and reconciliation commission. Am I correct that you were skeptical about the commission's potential for healing?

Antjie Krog: I'm not skeptical because I've seen it happen. But what more, how can I say it, irritated with is when people suggest that the job of the truth commission was to bring out truth and reconciliation. And it wasn't its job. It started as the door to a democracy. So in a period of transitional justice, an interim constitution was written, so in which you could predict the police, the civil service, the army and promised them they will be a structure after, in democracy that will not hang them, chase them so that they can ... Because they were white and they were all part of the old guard and they had to protect this frail day of election. And if they knew that they were going to jail them, they wouldn't, they would undermine it and blast them. So the job of the truth commission was to give that strategy, to give the perpetrators a process through which they could apply for amnesty. Now, when you look back, you could see they hardly give any they in terms of I think they received over 9000 amnesty applications, of which they've given not even a thousand. And Thabo Mbeki; our second president, said: 'You, you left us in a mess. We wanted you to get rid of all these former perpetrators by giving them amnesty so that we can continue. And you didn't.' So it was very difficult to get amnesty. So the fact that some truths also came out, the fact that a forgiveness happened, that was actually the, the unexpected.

Tine Destrooper: That's interesting, because it makes me wonder what it does now that we are increasingly institutionalising in a way that link between truth and reconciliation, because from what you're saying, you were calling it an unexpected outcome. But I think increasingly within the transitional justice architecture, we're assuming that truth necessarily leads to reconciliation. And I guess you would find that problematic then, that almost cementing that in those two notions?

Antjie Krog: My problem with most of the other truth commissions and commissions is that it's a one sided affair. You either have only the victims, you never have the perpetrator story, or it's behind closed doors, which is to have a report. As if truth is only for victims, you know. It is all you are interested about: 'Let them tell their sad stories, you know, we won't listen to it and they will feel

better afterwards and. Yeah. You know, and the real perpetrators, we will have behind closed doors.' Or mostly they give them blanket amnesty. So I don't necessarily see, there's not a natural connection, but I did see it happen. That and it's not necessarily the truth that brought the reconciliation, but the truthfulness of the looking each other in the face.

Tine Destrooper: Would literature and art also have played a role in this, would you argue, because there is a truth commission on the one hand, but then you've also spoken about how a lot of actors actually took up the testimonies that were given at the truth commission and in one way or another, tried to do justice to them. Has this also played a role in facilitating an expected or planned reconciliation and healing?

Antjie Krog: The amount of material, literary material that came out of South Africa, as well as documentary material, is slim. All the documentaries came from overseas. Even the Japanese made a documentary, the Russians, the Israelis, the Irish, there's several wonderful documentaries on the perpetrators by the Dutch. We didn't make. And there's that famous one that came from New York on the Amy Biehl killings. I think South Africans were so washed out after the commission and your work also, I mean, I never wrote a poem about, about that happening. Or I've taken a testimony and decided I'm going to do a poem about this because it is impossible. You, don't. You can't get it right. And what do you want from it? Must there be beauty? Must be. It's so. It is a part of some books, and some plays, you know. After a long time, there was a very, very good film called Forgiveness about a perpetrator going back to a family of colour to say sorry. And I think that's about the only text that I've seen that has a lot of nuance and not just the perpetrator is a monster and the victims are the angels, and that is the end of the story, which most of the. Yeah. Which is often the favourite meme.

Tine Destrooper: I would like to go on about this, but I'm also aware of time, so maybe going to ask you if we can have a last question about the truth commission itself. I would be interested in hearing your opinion about whether you feel that this commission has been a success. And I know, of course, that implies questions about, you know, whose parameters are we using and who is this a success for? But I think it's an important question because we see Truth Commission is becoming increasingly popular, not just in post-apartheid post conflict, post authoritarian states, but also in consolidated democracies. And so on the one hand, we see this boom in truth commissions. And on the other hand, we see a lot of critical literature about what a truth commission can and cannot do. Also a lot of critical literature about what the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission has done. And I'm interested in hearing your assessment about whether or not this was a successful commission and whether that's sufficiently acknowledged also, if so.

Antjie Krog: Yeah, I'm not the right person to ask about that. I know it said it has failed. There's a lot of criticism against the commission and it has many failings. The one is the amnesty, the other one is the reparation. But I can't imagine the country without it. Even those who cut themselves off from what is happening there, it has reached them in a way, and it is because of the stories of the victims, together with the stories of the perpetrators. I think it's important to have both. And I do not

think literature can do the work, that work that a truth commission did. Literature can look afterwards, literature should work before. Because I was asking myself, I was well-read about all South African literature before the truth commission, I read newspapers, I know things happened, but I hadn't imagined the depth, the width of the depravity. And I felt left in the lurch by literature. Why? I mean, you know that individuals were bad, you know, but that it was at that scale? And I still can't point to any book written before in literature that indicated that unless it's symbolically, you know that all people are evil or that the evil is any way everywhere and so on, but not that meticulous torture and killing and destruction of people, beyond the ordinary apartheid, if I may say so.

Tine Destrooper: If I may, I would like to ask you a very last question that we asked of all our interviewees on this show, which is about where you find inspiration and where you see hope and especially if we're talking about this issue of truth telling truth hearing truth, listening, truth seeking. Do you see some initiatives, some tendencies or dynamics that make you hopeful in terms of how we can do this right, how we can do this better?

Antjie Krog: I thought the whole night about that. And I'm afraid I No, I can see, I see no way. It is as if truth commissions have become a kind of commodity. You just have to have it. You know, it doesn't need to do anything, but you just need to have it, to say you've had it. I don't see the justice, I don't see. ... And even, even also in South Africa, the justice is not there. And then I have to say this terrible thing, that the last big restorative process was done by the Germans, with the money they've given to Israel, with the pensions they've paid, at least I know, I know that the Jews would say that: 'How can you ever restore that? How can you ever make up? How can you ever give justice?' It is true. You can never. But that gives most countries and most people a blanket cheque, no not a blanket You don't need to do anything because you cannot do anything that. So don't do it. At least there was an attempt. It was thought through and it was exercised, and I remember Finkelstein, a writer, and telling an audience in De Balie in Amsterdam that the only security in his life as a child of two parents that survived Auschwitz, was the monthly cheque from the German government. Yeah, I wish I could say the same to South African victims, that there is at least their security. Where is the justice right? I'm sorry, I don't see it.

Tine Destrooper: And instead, I think, of ending on a hopeful note, we'll end on a cautionary note for those countries now installing truth commissions, making sure that they are not just empty boxes and not just labels. And then I'm just going to thank you so much nevertheless, even if you haven't given us a hopeful or happy note to end, thank you so much for this conversation, for sharing your insights for reading the poem and for our listeners we will also make sure to post a poem in our show notes so that you can go back to it. Thank you so much.