

# The Truth and Reconciliation Commission: An Audience Perspective

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Kerry Kidd

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## Biography

Kerry Kidd was educated at Oxford. During the 1990s she spent time studying post-apartheid community theatre, in association with the Community Arts Project, Cape Town. Her Ph.D was in Audience Studies. She is currently a post-doctoral Wellcome Research Fellow at the University of Nottingham.

THE TRC IS going all around the country, like a road-show. It's due to hit Cape Town this week. In my corner of Newlands suburb, no one is particularly excited about it. Is it coming here again? We get enough of it on the news, people say. Fair enough. Compassion fatigue. But I am visiting, and want to go. I'm not working, so it is easy to arrange.

The University of the Western Cape is at the north end of Cape Town. As I arrive, students are hurrying between classes: sitting on lawns. Laughter in the corridors. I hear the sound of Xhosa being spoken. Also snatches of Afrikaans. No whites, though. As a formerly 'Coloured' University, the UWC has been the butt of jokes amongst the white community for years.

Looks fine to me.

I go up and ask the way to the Truth and Reconciliation Committee. Whilst I am crossing the campus, I do see a single white student: a young woman. She looks at me and smiles.

It shouldn't be the first thing you notice. But this is 1998, and the scars are still fresh. Mandela may be in power, but those who step outside their race community are still in a minority here.

The hall. It is an auditorium: Its usual use: Graduation. Prizes. Probably exams and lecturers, too.

But here we are today, come to examine the scars of a recent near-civil war.

Well, it was a civil war actually, just not one in which the country as a whole participated. You were in it by default, by virtue of your colour: you either got involved, took up arms on your own side, or you winced and sat on the sidelines.

A few people took up arms on other people's side, too.

Not far from here is Robben Island. It's not open yet. A few years later, I am taken around it by an ex-political prisoner. The audience of tourists, overwhelmingly white. The tours are crowded, hard to get onto. We refused to see for so many years. But once 'the struggle' was over, apartheid became popular. Tourists flocked to see where others had died. When Robben Island opened to the public as a museum, there is a waiting list.

To be an audience to another person's suffering is difficult at any time. But in the South Africa of the 1980s, all 'whites' were: the news of another township riot, bullying, lynching. Black on black violence, that was where the real trouble was. The ANC were thugs, lunatics, believers in black magic. They had whipped up the masses and destroyed all sense of decency, human values. So we were told, anyway. The trouble happened elsewhere. We sat and spectated, watched a war down the road. Boys went to war and came back, were forbidden to talk about it. But there were plenty of stories of what was happening in the townships: lynch-mobs, car-burnings, 'necklaces.' A lot said about black atrocities, nothing much about white ones. So it is a complicated matter, to come and listen to the TRC today: in my smug Western clothes, with my Western educational advantages. Am I not merely a passive, unthinking audience member? Standards are still terrible at this disadvantaged university: I know, studying in Europe, I have received a far higher standard of education than any of these people are likely to attain. Is it not an act of slight embarrassment, to come here and be an audience again, listen to the stories of others' agony? The victims are here to be heard. What are we, the audience doing? Is this, as it ought to be, a hosanna to a new republic? Are we seeking to expunge our guilt, if we are white?

I look around. A casual, 'mixed' audience. I have come, because I feel I ought to, I suppose: but it is clear, the Commission is doing its work to a regular audience and a mass one at once. What I sit through here for several hours will appear in gobblet form, on the six or seven o'clock news. Every night there is a moment, a few seconds of Desmond Tutu nodding sagely, a different victim's story. The South African Broadcasting Corporation's penance to the people:

after years of ignoring what went on in the townships, they dutifully return to it every night on the news.

Ironies abound. A tale of torture, victimhood and suffering: explained in carefully decorous English on a university stage. Outside, we are frisked and guarded by carefully dressed policemen: inside, the new citizens tell tales of what the same police did, many years before. Is this an exercise in nation-building, or a sifting through the remnants of disaster? Clearly Tutu wants it to be the former. "We want to thank the police here, who are different from the police we are talking about, and who are doing such a good job..." It is early afternoon. A sole woman police officer, inside the chamber. Politely, the audience applaud.

I want to be cynical about the TRC, but I cannot deny the worth of what happened there. A woman is telling the story of how her son was taken and beaten by the police. It is a murder story: we are, perhaps, hardened to it. There have been so many of them. But it is deeply moving. She cries, sobs and wails. The translators put her words into English, carefully and respectfully. What must it be like to do that, I think? To speak the words of another's suffering, day after day? The story goes deeper than I know how to handle: for the rest of the day, I am tired and frail. Just one story, just one woman. At the end, Tutu responds. He gives sensitive words of comfort. We must listen. We must heal.

Of course we must, but how? Is this a theatre, a memorial service, a re-play? Are we watching politicians, actors, judges or priests? The hall is quiet. Not packed out. We listen respectfully to a woman's tears. Later that afternoon, two policemen tell the Commission what the security forces did. They are stiff and formal in their explanations. Are they on trial or is this a form of public expiations? I try to feel for them, but find it hard to manage. Audiences can be two things: sensitive hearers and sympathisers, or mocking accusers. I think of the television audiences in the eighties, who were protected by strict reporting regulations. Overseas. The BBC. "We cannot show the scenes of violence that followed..."

Harrowing truths are better than false pieties. During the 1980s, the SABC audience watched a blank screen. Being an uncomfortable audience is better than being a blind one. It is better to come and listen. Even if I feel awkward. Even if I feel out of place, don't know what I am doing there. This suffering wasn't mine, I didn't live it. Is it not vicarious, even voyeuristic, to come and hear such things? To listen to a woman twice my age, sobbing about the death of her son on the stage? I have no answer. But later that night, I go home, switch on the television, and there, at the end of the news, she is. A microscopic head, sobbing out her truth. This

happened to me, and you were not there to listen to my cry. The new nation pauses, a moment, in quiet.

How many other voices?

Who didn't make it onto the TRC?

And how, without such public displays of agony, can a country ever begin to heal?

A woman's tears, on the nightly news.

Perhaps I have come to pay my respects, after all.