Hospitality in a Postapartheid Archive: Reflections on There Was This Goat and the Challenge of Alterity

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ABSTRACT

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission helped to reconstitute the South African archive as more open, more self-reflexive, more hospitable to those previously marginalized by poverty and racial injustice, but its disciplinary and ethical framework produced new norms and exclusions. A recent book, There Was This Goat, co-authored by writer Antjie Krog, linguist Nosisi Mpolweni, and psychologist Kopano Ratele, investigates the “incomprehensible” testimony of Mrs. Konile, mother of a murdered ANC activist. In trying to imagine a new public drawn together in the spirit of ubuntu, it raises troubling questions about accommodating alterity. The fragmented nature of the book shows up the impossibility of achieving coherence in the name of hospitality. I reflect on the construction of what seems “strange” within the postapartheid archive and on the role of the archive itself in underwriting particular notions of citizenship and belonging. Greater openness may call for a relinquishing of certainty and sovereignty, and a willingness not to comprehend.

In articulating his vision of postapartheid South Africa after the close of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), Archbishop Desmond Tutu affirms that in democratic South Africa “all, everyone, everything, belongs. None is an outsider, all are insiders, all belong” (213). It is an inspiring pronouncement, rendered in the simple present tense as a statement of what already exists rather than of what might be. And yet, its incantatory tone signals that in truth “this seemingly utopian dream,” as he puts it, has yet to be realized in the body politic of turn-of-the-century South Africa (215).

Tutu’s call to radical inclusivity poses a challenge to the new South African archive in its endeavor to reconstitute itself as more open, more self-reflexive,
more hospitable to the marginalized and unfamiliar. Tutu’s affirmation reads as
an attempt to articulate afresh what it is to be human in the wake of apartheid.
In Tutu’s “theology” of reconciliation, the quality of being human is profoundly
relational. Difference becomes a matter of “rich diversity” rather than cause for
exclusion or marginalization: “[A]ll distinctions make for a rich diversity to be
celebrated for the sake of the unity that underlies them. We are different so that we
can know our need of one another, for no one is ultimately self-sufficient” (213–14).
“Interdependence” and “togetherness” are fundamental elements of being human:
“A completely self-sufficient person would be sub-human” (213, 214).

This interdependence has no prerequisites of conduct or identity. As Tutu
formulates it, the embrace of the “rainbow people” is enormous (64, 77). The “we”
of Tutu’s imagining includes even the perpetrators of almost unimaginable cru
elty, who in Tutu’s account are not “monstrous” (74) and “irredeemable” (75) but
“normal people like you and me” (111). For Tutu, sinners are at the center of God’s
grace (74–75). Human capacity for evil is not exceptional and all are implicated:
“We have supplied God with enough evidence for Him to want to dispatch us all,
to wipe the slate clean as He did before with the Flood” (111). Those previously
marginalized by an unjust and racist society and victims of abuse need particular
reassurance of their fundamental belonging and dignity: “[T]hose who for so long
had been consigned to the edges of society as voiceless and anonymous could
now emerge from the shadows and occupy, for a while during the lifetime of the
Commission, centre stage” (Tutu 87). For Tutu the right of belonging is derived not
from a particular identity or history, but from “our” shared humanity (35). And
yet, despite the archbishop’s all-encompassing pronouns, the ethical imperative
he presents—of being willing to forgive “seventy times seven—without limit” as
Jesus did (221)—installs into public culture subtle norms that privilege certain
ethical and political sensibilities and render others strange. The archbishop’s
magnanimity belies the challenge of accommodating what does not fit into the
ideal of forgiveness and the spirit of ubuntu.2

In the discussion below I follow the work of the three academics in interro
gating the TRC’s limiting interpretative structures within which the apparently
“incomprehensible” testimony of the mother of a slain African National Congress
cadre could be received. Their book, There Was This Goat: Investigating the Truth
Commission Testimony of Notrose Nobonou Konile, raises questions not only about
the place of what seems “strange” within the archive but also about the place of
the archive itself in underwriting particular notions of citizenship and belonging
within the nation generally celebrated as “new.” Their text offers a rich opportu
nity to reflect on the role of the archive in shaping public culture. The investigation
provokes further questioning of the way in which specific stories and knowledges
get installed in the archive. In its preoccupation with Mrs. Konile’s apparent
“strangeness,” the book brings into relief the problem of alterity in post-TRC South
Africa (100).

INVESTIGATING WHAT IS STRANGE: THERE WAS THIS GOAT

There Was This Goat is an intriguing, yet troubling work of creative nonfiction in
which three professionals—a journalist, a linguist and a psychologist—invoke
their disciplinary skills and their engagement with the South African Truth and
Reconciliation Commission to open the testimony of a bereaved mother to greater comprehensibility. The testimony is that of Mrs. Notrose Konile, the mother of one of the “Gugulethu Seven” men who were murdered by apartheid operatives in 1986. Though her testimony forms part of a prominent grouping of testimonies relating to the Gugulethu Seven incident, scheduled in the first month of the TRC, Mrs. Konile herself is characterized as an “unmentioned, incorrectly ID-ed, misspelt, incoherently testifying, translated and carelessly transcribed woman” (4). The task of explaining why it is “important to try to understand” Mrs. Konile is offered as the book’s central raison d’être (4). The endeavors of listening and understanding emerge later in the book as unambiguously connected to the “restoration” of the “personal dignity” of victims but not within a Western conception of the individual—the framework that the authors judge to have rendered Mrs. Konile “incoherent”—but within a hermeneutic framework that could recognize the significance of “the notion of African individuality within community” (62–63). “Restoration could only begin when the testimonies were ‘heard’ and ‘understood’, particularly those that fell outside the ‘norm’” of a framework that derives, at Mrs. Konile’s expense, from a Western model of subjectivity and citizenship (62). To hear and understand Mrs. Konile in her own terms therefore becomes an act of radical citizenship.

Mrs. Konile’s marginalization and invisibility is established as a problem within the first two sentences of the book’s introduction: “Although it is only the second day of the second week of the [TRC] hearings, this woman is already . . . falling through the cracks of the day’s overwhelming traumas. . . . Of all the Gugulethu mothers she is presented without a first name. She is simply Mrs Konile. Thinner and much darker of skin than the others, dressed in clothes that are visibly less expensive, she looks as if she could disappear at any moment among the other victims and survivors” (1). By the end of the authors’ account of this day of “vivid and visceral testimonies” in the “Introduction,” we are told that “Mrs Konile seemed to have disappeared” (4). In support of this conclusion: “On the website of the Truth Commission later, there was no trace of her name in the index. Under the heading of the Gugulethu Seven incident, her surname was given incorrectly as ‘Khonele’” (4). Her marginality is read from her body, from her voice, from the layers of signification offered in her own testimony, and from the official text with which she is presented by the apparatus of the TRC, her name misspelled. In the pages that follow, the authors set about not only to interrogate the ways in which Mrs. Konile has been received, but also to revision the hermeneutic landscape within which Mrs. Konile’s testimony has been interpreted in the hope of creating new possibilities of existence and self-understanding in a responsible, just, humane South Africa, that is to say, “by articulating a nuanced South Africanness that speaks of tolerance and diversity” (102).

The chapters form a multifarious and genre-stretching set of meditations on the problematic set out compellingly in its early pages. They include historical accounts, reportage, conversations real and imagined, transcribed testimony, both in the original Xhosa and in competing English translations, extracts from the official TRC Report, further reflections on the testimony, and an account of their visit to Mrs. Konile. The book ends with an imaginary letter to the late Mrs. Konile, followed by an epilogue in which the authors recount their reaction on hearing of the death of Mrs. Konile, some weeks after the fact, and their recognition of what she had come to signify for them.
One of the authors is prominent Afrikaans writer and poet Antjie Krog, best known for her efforts to make the TRC accessible and meaningful to a wider public through her book *Country of My Skull*, which weaves in excerpts of the testimonies of victims and perpetrators with autobiographical strands from her own life growing up under apartheid and from her experience as a journalist covering the TRC process. Both in her coverage of the TRC as a journalist and, later, in her independent writing, Krog has played the role of a kind of cultural interpreter, mediating between the TRC and a wider public. It is interesting, therefore, that in this new text she has been able to recognize some of the ways in which the TRC process is flawed—in its rigidity, as an institution, and in its insistence on a particular frame that has forgiveness and reconciliation as its end-point—so that it has not been able to achieve the ideals with which it began.

This later text is put together in her capacity as writer and critic, as one of team of three experts, along with psychologist Kopano Ratele and linguist Nosisi Mpolweni, Krog’s colleagues at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) at the time. As the authors recognize, Mrs. Konile is unlike the other bereaved mothers who testify at the TRC, in that she resists the recognizable narrative trajectory that affirms catharsis and “reconciliation,” both in her testimony and in her bodily presence. In reading her testimony obliquely—interpreting her sighs, for example—the authors acknowledge Mrs. Konile’s “radical step” of refusing catharsis in favor of insisting on her devastation at not being able to be a “person” in the terms prescribed not only under apartheid but also within the postapartheid moment of TRC-style reconciliatory politics. However, the writers are also disturbed by Mrs. Konile’s refusal to forgive, because it seems to them to suggest a refusal of ubuntu. Nosisi Mpolweni writes, “[It was] not that we felt she had to forgive, but we wanted to know how she reasoned this around the concept of ubuntu” (125). Mrs Konile’s refusal needs explaining, in terms of a set of values that, for the authors, are not up for questioning.

The authors’ innovation is to understand the “inaudibility” or “incomprehensibility” of Mrs. Konile’s testimony—that is, its “strangeness”—as a product of the limitation of the TRC’s particular archival endeavor (100). The text points to the need for new forms of “evidence,” not traditionally the preserve of the archivist, in order to read her story more accurately. It recognizes that narratives are “rooted” and suggests that the archivist needs to attend to the “ground” of Mrs. Konile’s narrative, and read her life, as a dispossessed, impoverished, rural woman devastated by loss, not just in her words but also in her silences, her sighs, her fantastical metaphors (46). To this end, the authors call for a more “communally-oriented, human-centred methodology” (46). The ability to read Mrs. Konile’s life and alienation more accurately becomes a matter of justice and, as they put it, “tolerance” (100):

These “strange” testimonies underline the importance of refraining from “unstrange-ing” the strange—to allow it to be strange—but within its original logical and coherent context. Accommodation of “strangeness” would keep the spaces of tolerance open for many people emerging from contexts of conflict and estrangement. (100)
The term “testimonies” carries an evidentiary weight here, in the idiom of the TRC. To accommodate strangeness within the postapartheid revisionist archive is an ethical gesture that goes beyond sentiment. It promises to mitigate “estrangement” by keeping open “spaces of tolerance” within the quasi-official record of the TRC. But the authors face an impossible challenge in their stated commitment to accommodating what is strange precisely because the “strange,” almost by definition, resists assimilation and comprehensibility within the given interpretative frame, so that their evidentiary and interpretative practices as committed investigators/intellectuals threaten to become ineffective and irrelevant to their own purposes. There seems therefore to be a fundamental antagonism between the stated aim of fostering tolerance of what is strange and the need, nonetheless, to render it comprehensible within a particular hermeneutic and ethical frame. Lying close to the surface of the discussion of Mrs. Konile, however, is a larger ambition, pursued on behalf of democratic South Africa, an ambition that might be thought of as archival.

ENGAGING THE NOTION OF ARCHIVE

The authors are focused not only on the particular archive of the TRC and its attempt to generate new accounts of previously hidden histories, but also on the reconstitution of what could be thought of as the archive of a transformed South Africa. In doing so, they foster the idea of the archive as an ethical domain, what Verne Harris has called “an ethical imperative” (“Derrida meets Mandela” 2). Viewed in this way, the TRC’s endeavor to invite new, previously hidden stories into the archive becomes a matter of justice, dependent on a more expansive understanding of “truth” than legalistic and fact-based “truth” would allow. In The Country of My Skull, published seven years earlier, Krog recounts her uncertainty at the start of the TRC process, of how the TRC would resolve the complex relationship between “truth,” “justice,” and personal “memory” at play in the TRC: “If its interest in truth is linked only to amnesty and compensation, then it will have chosen not truth, but justice. If it sees truth as the widest possible complication of people’s perceptions, stories, myths and experience, it will have chosen to restore memory and foster a new humanity, and perhaps that is justice in its deepest sense” (16). More than a decade later, Krog and her co-authors of There Was This Goat are able to affirm the TRC, ultimately, and its more open and complex approach to the truth as articulated in the final TRC Report in the chapter on “Concepts and Principles” where four different kinds of “truth” are identified (“factual or forensic truth, personal or narrative truth; social or ‘dialogue’ truth . . . and healing and restorative truth”). The TRC’s complex approach to the “truth” thus allows multiple and contested accounts and felt experience to be welcomed into the archive without necessarily having to answer to the evidentiary requirements of a forensic investigation. However, as Krog, Mpouweni, and Ratele recognize, the transformative potential of the archive and its availability for a reflection on the lingering effects of apartheid in contemporary life in South Africa depend also on how it can be worked with, how it is framed and monitored, and who is allowed to feel a sense of ownership and belonging. The question of the archive is placed at the heart of their approach to Mrs. Konile’s story.
Chapter 6, titled “Mrs Konile’s Testimony,” begins with an assertion of this revisionist conceptualization of “archive,” referring to Harris’s understanding of the work of an archivist as “intervention”:

Verne Harris, a staff member of the Commission working with archival material, said that as the Truth Commission was doing its work, it was engaging archive, rescuing archive, creating archive, refiguring archive. “It was, profoundly, an archival intervention. A work of memory.” (65)

“Archive,” expressed here as a singular noun, without an article, enters a realm of abstraction that allows it to hint at an investment in larger debates within public culture. The notion of “refiguring archive” addresses itself to the political in a way that goes well beyond the particularities of any given archive or archives. Elsewhere, too, Krog and Mpolweni speak of “refiguring” rather than simply opening up or expanding existing archives. Krog and Mpolweni, in their introduction to an article titled “Archived Voices: Refiguring Three Women’s Testimonies Delivered to the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission,” describe the TRC in these terms:

The platform on which victims/survivors narrated their experiences more than anything else turned the TRC into one of the most significant phenomena in South African history. . . . After being delivered with translations in public, the TRC archived these audio, visual, and transcribed English versions of the testimonies as part of its mandate to gather evidence of human rights abuses during apartheid. This archival material has since been used to refigure some of the archives of South African history. We want to explore the less obvious and more subtle refurrings that took place during the compilation of TRC testimonies. (Krog and Mpolweni 357; emphasis added)

It is immediately apparent that “the archive” is being used in two senses here: first, the specific archive generated by the TRC itself through its “mandate to gather evidence” and previously unheard testimonies and, second, the “archives of South African history” which are being “refigure[d]”—reconceptualized, challenged—through the work of the TRC (Krog and Mpolweni 357). The understanding of “the archive” here is a broad one, one which bears relevance to a much larger political project that has, at its root, the remaking of history and public life in South Africa and hence evokes the abstract sense of “archive” referred to above. The reading of an individual testimony carries this national and political frame.

The authors make the generation of a postapartheid archive not just a matter of accumulating more material and new voices by opening the archive to voices that were previously unheard and unvalued so that the archive becomes more “democratic” in its orientation. For them opening the archive is also a matter of reexamining the strategies for gathering material that the archival frame has traditionally not allowed and not understood. This approach understands the “inaudibility” or “incomprehensibility” of Mrs. Konile’s testimony as a function of the limited frame of the archival endeavor itself and the limitation of its strategies (such as translation, which has as its aim just literal translation rather than culturally sensitive rendering). The responsibility for comprehensibility is seen to belong to the archive and its interpretative frame, not just the speaker.
This is not just a question of identifying the failure of the TRC apparatus to manage Mrs. Konile’s testimony (failures such as inadequate translation and careless transcription)—though at times these kinds of things are the focus of the authors’ attention. Their critique goes further in that it questions the limited, logic-driven, individual-centered frame of the archival endeavor in operation at the TRC (see 44). A different set of questions and a more open methodology are called for in approaching the material of the TRC responsibly. In relation to the generation of testimonies, for example, we are invited to recognize that translation, narrowly defined, cannot deliver a faithful rendering without attention being paid to a set of concerns that are not readily accommodated within a rigidly circumscribed archive. There are the “cultural non-transferables” (45) that do not survive the translation process. Translation is not a neutral strategy. Moreover, the conditions under which translation occurred during the TRC make it absurd to refer to the infinite variations, contingencies, and momentary adjudications involved in the process of simultaneous translation during the hearings as “failures,” such as I have just done, above. The precision implied in a term like “translation” is called into question, indirectly, by the authors’ choice to include the transcription of a conversation that took place at a workshop at the University of the Western Cape in April 2006, between Antjie Krog and three TRC interpreters, Lebohang Mathibile, Kethiwe Marais, and Abubakr Petersen. The authors’ brief introduction immediately draws attention to the fact that “translation” is an inappropriate word for an endeavor that is better described as “interpretation” (103), a term that suggests hermeneutical openness and unavoidable imprecision. The chapter title, “The Interpreters,” foregrounds the human beings involved in this process, as opposed to the concept of interpretation, in the abstract. The structure of the chapter itself does not present a definitive position on the topic, but instead invites readers to listen in on a conversation between those who offered their voices and vocabularies to those testifying during the TRC process. As Kethiwe Marais puts it, “We were the originators of the vocabulary of the TRC in the indigenous languages” (107)—pioneers, working at the limit point of expressibility. Though the conversation does not leave the issue resolved, what becomes clear in this conversation is that the supposed “accuracy” of dictionary-perfect cleverness becomes irrelevant, at best, but more often offensive and insensitive—or simply wrong—when applied to the challenge of offering a faithful rendering of a testifier’s distress and the incoherence that at times confronted the interpreter (109). Marais describes the interpreter’s dilemma in this way: “Now you didn’t want to mimic them with your voice, but you wanted to bring across that incoherence without removing its integrity. So you tried not to be too clever with clever words and smart concepts that did not come from this person. This person is distraught and you have to bring across how this person also feels in this whole matter. So that was difficult to handle as well” (108–09). Under these conditions the notion of the “mistake” or “failure” becomes a misnomer. Nicky Rousseau expresses this most forcefully: “I endlessly hear people say that there are mistakes in the transcriptions, but the idea was never that they should be immaculate translations” (107).

Responsibility to the testifying survivor, however, makes it harder to dispense with the idea of accuracy, even when cognizant of the psychic and cultural complexities involved in translation under these conditions. Krog is reported as saying, in this 2006 conversation at UWC, that “sometimes when the testimonies
get emotional, the interpreting also seems sometimes to get inaccurate” (113). Indeed, when taken as a whole, There Was This Goat depends upon a notion of accuracy as a means to understand better Mrs. Konile’s meanings and honor her story. NosiSi Mpolweni’s “Retranslation of Mrs Konile’s testimony” forms the basis of the book’s new insights into what otherwise seems “incomprehensible,” precisely because her particular linguistic attentiveness is able to make sense of—find sense in—what the authors fear has been overlooked as the sighs and confusion of an old woman. There are two significant elements to this identification of meaning in Mrs Konile’s testimony: first, the pain Mpolweni “immediately picked up” in her “voice . . . heavy swallowing and deep sighs” and, second, her location as a rural woman, read in “vocabulary that placed her in a rural area with its own particular dialect and pronunciation” (66). What is radical about this more careful attunement to Mrs. Konile’s testimony is not necessarily the methodology itself. Rather, the more precise deployment of analytical techniques by professionals whose location and ethical sensibilities allow them to be better readers of Mrs. Konile’s story leads to the recognition of the radical alterity of poverty itself. As I discuss at some length below, their analysis confronts us with Mrs. Konile’s inability to play the recognizable figure of the mother-of-the-slain-hero for a public poised to receive her as their familiar. This is not because her suffering and loss are not considerable, but because her extreme poverty and her location as a rural woman are not readily accommodated within the public discourses surrounding the work of the TRC.

This is arguably where the power of the book lies: when we meet Mrs. Konile on her own terms, in her own space, we are invited to recognize the radical alterity of poverty itself, as a mode of being that is not easily “translated,” as it were, or made visible through the mechanisms that are available in a formal institutional context such as the TRC. The inability to tolerate public representation of poverty arguably derives from the limitation of a public culture that privileges a more familiar urban, multilingual and sufficiently resourced citizenry. While the journey at the heart of There Was This Goat (quite literally, from Cape Town to Indwe and back again) yields this insight, the book’s multivoiced structure is inconsistent in its approach to Mrs. Konile’s perceived alterity, an alterity that, at times, is understood as a “lack” on the part of Mrs. Konile (96). What can be seen and understood of Mrs. Konile will also be a function of the systems of knowledge at the disposal of the TRC, and the way in which they are deployed.

The authors of There Was This Goat are right to affirm the epistemological openness of the TRC and its commitment to protect witnesses from having to conform to restrictive, legally binding conceptions of “truth.” But what is harder for the text to acknowledge is the normative nature of this institutional context and of its narrative trajectory that seeks to produce national heroes, reconciled communities and forgiven, transformed perpetrators. The testimonies that cannot easily be accommodated in the national story, as with Mrs. Konile’s testimony, risk being put aside, falling into oblivion. The authors describe how difficult it was to access the audiocassettes; the translation and transcriptions were flawed. But they are also referring to an oblivion that has more to do with invisibility within the discourses surrounding the work of the TRC. Mrs. Konile’s testimony did not receive prominence in the way that the testimonies of some of the other mothers, such as Christopher Piet’s mother, Cynthia Ngewu, have done. The authors point out the number of Google hits for a “Cynthia Ngewu” search and, more significantly, the
repeated citing of Mrs. Ngewu’s stance on forgiveness in the media: “[T]here is no doubt that Mrs Ngewu has . . . become one of the key formulators of perceptions on forgiveness and reconciliation” (12). By contrast, in this account Mrs. Konile emerges as inarticulate and overwhelmed: “[I]t is within this cluster of finely articulated, convention-challenging and visceral voices, that Mrs Konile had to make her contribution” (12).

This characterization of Mrs. Konile (and not just her testimony) as “strange” seems to call for further reflection, however (100). In the discussion that follows I begin by examining at some length Mrs. Konile’s visibility and the visibility of the bereaved mothers in the discourse surrounding the TRC, by exploring the archive of visual footage, media coverage, and other writings about the TRC. I then consider more closely the authors’ endeavor to facilitate greater understanding of Mrs. Konile and the implications of their courageous interrogation of their own certainties and methodologies as intellectuals. The authors’ endeavor invites us to reflect on the problem of alterity and the discomfiting challenge certain forms of alterity present to what is familiar and certain—in public culture and within the academy. The endeavor to render Mrs. Konile comprehensible and recognizable takes place at a moment of particular self-scrutiny within a changing South African public culture but it is also part of a long history of staging resistance to apartheid. Mrs. Konile’s visibility, or not, is therefore a matter for further inquiry within the context of that history.

THE BEREAVED MOTHERS

The visibility of the bereaved mothers, as bereaved mothers, at the TRC hearings and in the media reporting on the hearings, follows the patterns of commemoration and resistance during the fight against apartheid. Media reports at the time of the hearings recall media reports in the immediate aftermath of the Gugulethu shootings in March 1986 and demonstrate the prominence of the category “the mothers” in public discourse. Another bereaved mother was invited to speak at the combined funeral of the Gugulethu Seven in March 1986, as reported in *The Argus*, a prominent local daily newspaper, on March 13, 1986, under the headline “ANC man’s mother guest at funeral”: “Mrs Martha Mahlangu, mother of Solomon Mahlangu—the first member of the African National Congress’s military wing to hang in South Africa—will be a guest speaker at the funeral of the seven men killed in a shootout with police in Guguletu last week” (Staff Reporter, *The Argus*, March 13, 1986). Here, the self-evident link between women mourning the loss of their sons becomes a powerful mechanism with which to link and therefore render politically significant seemingly isolated deaths. At the TRC, the women who testify about the death of their sons are frequently referred to collectively as “the mothers.” For example, during the follow-up hearings on the Gugulethu shootings on November 27, 1996, Archbishop Desmond Tutu addresses the women directly as “you mothers” in paying tribute to their courage. He moves directly from a comment on the “strength of our womenfolk” to an acknowledgement of “you mothers.”

I recognize that Mrs. Cynthia Ngewu was especially vocal and, through an extraordinary exchange with the self-confessed perpetrator of her son’s murder, the subject of a number of interviews offering key sound bites for reproduction
in local and international news reports and international documentaries such as *Long Night’s Journey into Day* (2000) and *The Gugulethu Seven* (2000). Even so, Mrs. Ngewu’s visibility is not necessarily evidence of Mrs. Konile’s invisibility. At least, her visibility arises in some ways from her role as spokesperson for “the mothers” and might be said to include them, if in a limiting, supposedly representative way that has the opposite effect, too, rendering dissenting voices indistinct. But a review of archival footage and news reports yields moments of powerful articulateness on the part of Mrs. Konile, within the official structures of the TRC and in media reports during the immediate aftermath of the shootings. At the time of the shooting, Mrs. Konile is quoted directly in an article appearing in *The Argus*, one of two prominent local daily newspapers, defending the innocence of her son (he “was a good boy and has never [been] in trouble with the police”) and naming the enormity of her loss (“Who will help us now that he is gone?”). Mrs. Konile admittedly emerges as naïve in her disavowal of any possibility that her son was politically active (“As far as I know he was not a member of the ANC or any other political organisation”), but the article does establish a strong sense of familial belonging and attachment, rendering both Mrs. Konile and her son immediately familiar and Mrs. Konile recognizably vulnerable in her out-of-town unknowingness (“We live in the Transkei and I don’t know where he was working but he sent money every week”). In a report appearing under the strong headline “Mothers demand shooting probe,” Mrs. Konile is given the final word, in effect a demand addressed to the State: “Mrs Elsie Konile, 56, mother of Mr Zabonke John Konile, 30, said: ‘The inquiry must be held while the shootings are still fresh in people’s minds.’”

This is not unlike an article appearing in the other prominent daily, *The Cape Times*, also in the immediate aftermath of the shootings, in which Mrs. Ngewu is quoted at length (in her capacity as mother of Christopher Piet and identified as “Mrs Piet”). The article includes a large and affecting photograph of Mrs. Ngewu with her granddaughter, now orphaned as a result of her son’s death. The headline immediately establishes her representative role as part of the collective (“Mothers of ‘guerillas’ speak”) but the article does her the honor of identifying her by name and allowing her to speak in her own voice. Through the distancing gesture of the inverted commas, the headline calls into question the State’s version of events that damns the victims as “guerillas” and lays the ground for the presentation of an alternative version. So we read in some detail of Mrs. Ngewu’s experience that day, of her belief in her son’s innocence and of her anger: “Why did they do that to my son? I will never forgive them. They just shot my child. . . . God will punish them for the blood of my child.” Her outrage is powerfully expressed in terms that reinforce Christopher Piet’s familial place (“my child” as opposed to “guerilla”) and in language that invokes scriptural gravitas (“the blood”) and the wrath of God. To speak as “mother” creates a powerful moral authority that seems to transcend the partisan spin on the events of March 3, 1986, both in the news reports at the time of the ambush and two years later at the time of the official inquest, where the deceased are referred to as “militants or terrorists,” as opposed to men “innocent of any transgression,” one of whom “was shot and killed by police after attempting to give himself up.” The events themselves appear variously as “planned ambush of a police vehicle,” the more neutral “shootings,” and a possible “murder,” though the charge of “murder” was supposedly investigated
by the police themselves, in the implausible logic of the apartheid “security” system.16 Within a month of the incident, the Parliamentary opposition party, the Progressive Federalist Party, had called for an inquiry, quoting eye witnesses and the mothers of the of the victims to powerful effect.17 But the discursive position of “mother” can be disabling, even as it grants women who have been marginalized by poverty, racism, and the systemic violence of apartheid the power to speak.

Fiona Ross traces some of “the patterning of testimonies” at the TRC and the impact of gender in shaping what could be said at the TRC. In her study, Bearing Witness: Women and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, Ross describes the work of lawyer and gender activist, Ilse Olkers, who in the early months of the Commission “castigated the Commission,” as Ross recounts, “for its assumption of a ‘gender neutral truth’ . . . accusing the Commission of rendering women ‘invisible’ except in stereotyped roles as victims and mothers of victims” (Ross 22).18 In fairness to the Commission, Ross acknowledges its attempts to address this troubling effect through the TRC’s establishment of the “special hearings on women” towards the end of 1996,19 but Ross questions the TRC’s faith that the mechanism of the (duly expanded) hearings could achieve a kind of totality, the “whole” truth.20 The TRC’s overt and much-stated commitment to uncovering “truth” and to establishing “reconciliation,” paradoxically, may have hindered its openness to accounts that seem not to advance either.

It would not be fair of me to resort to the rhetorical shorthand in which “the TRC” figures as a single, coherent entity or event. Whatever the enabling Act might say,21 the hearings themselves were multifarious and changing. In a nuanced reading of the TRC process, Mark Sanders identifies how the TRC “altered its course in response to the testimony that it led” (9) and that this was an effect of the open structure of questioning which, unlike legal cross-examination, allowed witnesses to speak, also, of what they “felt themselves to have lost” (10). “Witnesses testifying as victims were ceded considerable leeway to tell their stories as they chose” (10). This does not acknowledge the normativity of a set of implicit expectations that manifest only obliquely in questions that shape testimonies by inviting and even suggesting an answer. Even so, Sanders is right to insist that the TRC was more fluid than its detractors might acknowledge and that from the outset it was imagined as a more malleable form of truth telling in order to accommodate difference—if not “strangeness.”

Certainly, the understanding of “reconciliation” in operation at the TRC was not fixed or even agreed. Tutu resists the idea that “reconciliation” could be fully realized through the work of the TRC: “Reconciliation is a national project. All of us are meant to be involved in it. The Act says, the ‘promotion of national unity and reconciliation.’ It doesn’t say the ‘achievement’ of it.”22 When security police captain, Wilhelm Bellingham, one of two amnesty applicants in relation to the Gugulethu incident, lays claim to the values of “reconciliation” it sounds hollow: “it was actually worse than a normal court case. I mean, we’re talking about reconciliation here. I think it was like a war out there.” Indeed, advocate George Bizos, renowned for his role as legal representative of Nelson Mandela during the 1963–64 Rivonia treason trial, is unapologetic about the need for what Bellingham calls “war” in the work of the TRC: “You can’t reconcile with a person whom you and your clients don’t believe. So, yes, it is confrontational.”23 But others are suspicious of the politics of the TRC: for example, in contrast to Bizos, Nyameka Goniwe,
widow of Matthew Goniwe, dismisses the TRC’s facilitation of forgiveness and reconciliation as operating in service of conscience-stricken perpetrators: “I’m not going to absolve him. I mean, if he wants to feel lighter, I’m not the person for that. He can use the TRC for that.”

Mrs. Goniwe’s rejection of the narrative trajectory of forgiveness and reconciliation, here, is offered in the context of an independent interview in Long Night’s Journey into Day. Her submission at the first East London hearings on April 17, 1996, too, bespeaks a highly articulate woman who is able to draw on her education and work experience as a social worker in Cape Town to produce a coherent account (read out in English) of her husband’s life and her longstanding attempt to understand the circumstances of his death. When asked to comment at the TRC on how she feels about the amnesty process and the possibility that she might meet her husband’s killer, her response is less undermining of the TRC and its methods than her earlier comments: “Well I look forward to that. I mean I know it’s difficult after suffering such pain and trauma. But we need to know what happened and who they are, and also, I mean they have to need to show some remorse.” In the context of giving testimony, Nyameka Goniwe, along with her audience, is able to imagine the possibility that her husband’s killer would show evident “remorse.”

Mark Sanders offers a nuanced interpretation of the way in which “forgiveness” operates within the TRC, and the way in which it is altered, irreparably, as a result of Tutu’s invocation of the “radical” “reciprocity” of ubuntu (96). In Sanders’s reading, forgiveness itself becomes “no longer simply Christian, or even religious” (96). Tutu’s caution that “[u]buntu is very difficult to render into a western language” is well taken (qtd. in Sanders 95–96). Even so, the imperative to forgive is without doubt a powerfully normative lens through which testimonies are received. But is this lens powerful enough to render a resistant testimony invisible?

There Was This Goat does not offer a consistent answer. The authors’ various strategies for understanding Mrs. Konile make sense of her resistance differently. It is worth considering carefully how their own strategies for opening up her testimony to greater comprehensibility allow it break out of the shape of the “bereaved mother” whose loss might be refigured through the TRC process to facilitate national reconciliation; it is also important to reflect on the way their pursuit of a better understanding of her testimony will come to shape Mrs. Konile and their own relationship “towards the world in which we live” (212).

The authors deploy strategies of their own for reading her pain, her poverty, and her location as a rural woman. They demonstrate in their reflections that the opening of the archive involves not only including new stories but also developing new interpretative strategies. The authors go some way towards developing new reading strategies, from a position, initially, of uncertainty. For example, in discussing an especially strange moment in Mrs. Konile’s testimony, when she recounts being pinned down by a rock, Antjie Krog is able to affirm that “Was there really a rock?” is entirely the “wrong question” to be asking (89–90). Instead, Krog is able to read in Mrs. Konile’s account of the rock and her plea to drink the urine of the other women, the marginalization and devastation that Mrs. Konile insists on, discomfiting the forum that is set up, explicitly, in pursuit of “Truth” and “Reconciliation.” Their disciplinary tools offer the authors a way through what is most unsettling and allow them a sense of efficacy in re-translating Mrs.
Konile—that is, not just her testimony, which they are able to interpret despite the problem of logic and coherence, but also Mrs. Konile herself and her resistance.

**STRANGENESS AND HOSPITALITY**

But there is something troubling about the way in which the authors, first, identify in Mrs. Konile an evident “strangeness” and, second, garner their disciplinary tool kits, while declaring the importance of refraining from “un-strange-ing the strange” (100). This calls for further interrogation—that is, both the idea that Mrs. Konile emerges as “incomprehensible” and the expectation that their disciplinary expertise might produce greater clarity. Their expectation of a definitive answer is evident in the language of verification and authentication, posed initially as a question before an answer is found in the Xhosa testimony: “Kopano tried to verify whether Mrs Konile’s strangeness was authentically hers or was she ‘made strange’ by the Truth Commission’s framework, possible incompetent briefing and/or simultaneous interpretation” (101). They write with striking confidence that the “original Xhosa version established that, despite some slippages, Mrs Konile’s strangeness was entirely her own” (101), which then allows them to recast the archival intervention of “accommodating strangeness” as the promotion of “tolerance and diversity” and “a more nuanced South Africanness” (102). Accommodating strangeness, in other words, is here a matter of national identity. “Mrs Konile’s strangeness” itself is not under dispute; as readers we are expected to take their word for it.

Psychologist Kopano Ratele quotes A. C. Jordan—“The task of the intellectual is to be an advocate for that which is strange” (99)—in a gesture that seems to announce a disavowal of interpretation and analysis in favor of charitable service. In fact, the embrace of what is “Other” seems to promise an answer to a political history of alienation—“How do we overcome a divided past in such a way that ‘The Other’ becomes ‘us’” (43)—though to pose this as a question suggests that for Ratele it is not at all self-evident how best to achieve this coming together and that, for all his affirmation of the importance of resisting the urge to “un-strange the strange,” his model for a transformed society involves the absorption of “The Other” into an expanded version of “us” (43).

But Ratele’s reflections on why he could not “readily understand Mrs Konile” (96), offered under the heading “Reading of psycho-cultural rupturings,” bespeak an even deeper investment than the objective of social and political cohesion. This question, he writes, “sat at the heart of my engagement with her,” a question that “always troubles [him] in engaging with African people when [he fails] to understand them easily” (96). He acknowledges, here, his expectation of a race-based affinity at the heart of his revisionist work, an expectation that, unmet, is deeply troubling to him. He tells us he “felt terrorized by [his] incomprehension because of what it suggested about a shared history of oppression, African culture and understanding itself” (96). “Terrorized” is a strong articulation of the distress he feels at the threat to the idea of unity—admittedly a unity not simplistically based in race or even culture but in an imagined “shared history of oppression.” “Terrorized” suggests an enormous personal investment in being able to experience himself as kin.
But rather than asking the question of himself, Ratele’s initial response is to look for an answer in Mrs. Konile’s testimony. He asks: “What prevented me from readily apprehending her sense of things—her relationship with her son, the commissioners and audience, with herself? Was it because she was psychologically disturbed?” (96). Answering that, no, “she did not seem to suffer from any recognizable psychopathology,” Ratele goes on to ask whether it was because she was from a rural area or because she was elderly. Here we glimpse his recognition that he is implicated in her incomprehensibility, in that it is a matter of their relative difference—she is elderly and he is a younger man. But even so, his articulation of the problem lays it at Mrs. Konile’s door: it is a matter of her “lack of being readily graspable” (96). His diagnosis is formulated in the language of the psychoanalytical clinician: “[W]hat could be retraced was what might be loosely called ‘a psycho-cultural rupturing’” (96). The verbs are tellingly passive and in the subjunctive voice (“could be retraced”; “might be . . . called”)—the voice of the disinterested diagnostician, spoken at a remove.

In their preoccupation with Mrs. Konile’s relative invisibility and audibility and in their need to make sense of what the official TRC mechanisms are not able to place correctly, the authors of There Was This Goat overlook elements of Mrs. Konile’s self-presentation, which, viewed afresh, show a greater degree of efficacy than their characterization of her presence at the TRC would suggest. One of the book’s corrective gestures is to allow Mrs. Konile’s meaning-making as a rural woman to signify more clearly. Nosisi Mpolweni, as a Xhosa-speaking linguist, offers a more sensitive, informed re-translation that is able to acknowledge more fully Mrs. Konile’s particularity and the nature of her loss. Mpolweni’s new transcription fills in the blank space of the official transcript when Mrs. Konile softly mumbles the name of her village. When we understand Mrs. Konile’s location as a rural woman, her testimony makes sense, the authors argue, and the extent and shape of her loss become visible and less a matter simply of negation, easily overlooked. In fact, when the authors identify themselves individually, Mrs Konile’s “strangeness” dissipates somewhat. Kopano Ratele recognizes that his co-authors are more attuned to Mrs. Konile’s meanings: “Nosisi’s Xhosa cultural embeddedness enabled her to access the way rural women talk,” and Antjie Krog, “after some input from us, departed from what we could label ‘a white place’ and seemed also not to have further problems ‘hearing’ Mrs Konile” (98). He, himself, however, found “both a familiarity and a stunning strangeness to her testimony” (100). He finds in her sentences “a dreamlike quality, an element of magic and hallucination” that become comprehensible only when he reads their images as “at once literal, metaphorical and metonymic” (98). Reading metaphorically enables Ratele to conceive of Mrs. Konile’s meanings not so much as embedded within her historical location, at some distance from himself—for he recognizes the danger of making damning or patronizing assumptions when endeavoring to read “the historical racial-cultural positions found within South African disciplinary inquiry” (99)—but, more significantly, as emanating from a place that is not his, a place whose mysteries and metaphors he may not have access to. This recognition calls for a certain humility and circumspection on the part of the one who purports to know. Mrs. Konile’s “elusiveness” and the “curious” nature of her story results in this discomfiting recognition—that is, that the intellectual/investigator may only ever arrive at a partial understanding and that the subject of his or her inquiry
may remain “both familiar and strange” (99). Herein lies the salutary challenge of this text, which, for all its inconsistencies, reaches towards the problematic of alterity that confronts postapartheid scholarship without claiming to have found a definitive answer.

However, one might well question whether Ratele is justified at all in talking of the “stunning strangeness” of Mrs. Konile’s testimony (99). Though her perceived alterity might be explored with sensitivity, circumspection, and self-questioning by the authors, the pronouncement (that the testimony is strange and incoherent) warrants further probing as the book’s premise. For although the authors are able, also, to contradict their own provocative characterization elsewhere in the book by acknowledging that “within a postcolonial context a woman might appear either incoherent because of severe suffering, or unintelligible because of oppression—when, in fact, she is neither” (63), the characterization of Mrs. Konile as “incoherent” (1), offered with conviction on the very first page, establishes the parameters within which Mrs. Konile might be received.

There is striking evidence to suggest that Mrs. Konile’s presence at the TRC was anything but inconspicuous and incoherent. Footage of Mrs. Konile’s second testimony, available in the Visual History Archive in Cape Town as raw footage, shows an articulate woman giving clear testimony, supported by the testimony of her son-in-law.25 Mr. Tsherden Mbenyana identifies himself as the man who brought Zabonke to Cape Town and found him a job. He speaks in a strong, clear voice about the circumstances of his brother-in-law’s murder and the days immediately following. Right at the beginning, immediately following the oath, Mrs. Konile is asked to identify her place of origin, and she answers clearly, “I stay in the village Indwe” (my own transcription of the simultaneous interpretation). A little later she explains, “I’m not sure exactly the names of the townships because I don’t stay here.” This is a woman who is able to locate herself clearly within a sympathetic exchange. The acknowledgment this testimony receives from the commissioners, in particular Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela and Desmond Tutu, is generous and sober. In acknowledgement of her tears, Tutu offers his story, as listener:

I have very many moments when it is difficult to restrain tears. I’ve tried very hard not to cry because I don’t want to have other cartoons, but I hope actually the people of this country will listen to the stories and let these stories touch their hearts because these people who look so normal and ordinary, walk about with a very heavy burden on their hearts and we hope so much that people in this country will know the price that is paid for forgiveness. That, I mean, these mothers who come here, it’s now seven or eight years since this thing happened, but when they recall what happened they weep.

It may be that for Tutu what renders Mrs Konile “so normal and ordinary” like the rest of “these mothers” is the possibility of forgiveness despite the “very heavy burden on their hearts,” a possibility that can only be an assumption and a generalization, in the absence of clear evidence of Mrs. Konile’s choice to forgive. But my point is a more limited one, that is, that this second testimony, just a year later, is in no way incoherent or strange, so much so that the Archbishop responds to her testimony by referring to those “who look so normal and ordinary” despite having suffered immense loss. With Mr. Mbenyana at her side, Mrs. Konile does
not seem overwhelmed or diminished by the occasion at all. When asked what help she would like, Mrs. Konile is utterly clear: “My request is that I would like a tombstone for my son and I also request you to assist me concerning Zabonke’s child and that I don’t have a place to stay in the village and I would like you to assist me about that” (own transcription).

Surprisingly, the transcription of this second testimony appears as Appendix 1 of There Was This Goat (225–34) but is barely commented on the book itself. Sideline in this way, its potential to counteract the initial depiction of Mrs. Konile and to change the question at the heart of the book is lost. What does, finally, move Mrs. Konile from “strangeness,” considered at a remove by the “curious” researchers (124), into an engagement between people who are mutually different, is the authors’ visit to Mrs. Konile’s home, in which her rural poverty is rendered familiar, no longer a fearsome specter of alterity and alienation, as seen from the remove of an urban orderliness.

THE SHATTERING OF CERTAINTY

This sense of distance and the objectivity it implies paradoxically threatens to remove Mrs. Konile from view, at least at this moment in the book’s narrative. The problem of Mrs. Konile’s incomprehensibility, as presented in this text, is at first a matter requiring investigation across the chasm of reason. Only later does the pursuit of Mrs. Konile’s apparent “incomprehensibility” lead to an unsettling but ultimately meaningful engagement between mutual outsiders, brought together in the intimacy of a kitchen, bare but nonetheless intimate. Towards the end of this investigation into Mrs. Konile’s “strangeness,” the language of the text positions the chief protagonists quite differently and it is worth paying attention to the nature of this linguistic distinction in order to understand better the way that alterity functions in this text (100).

The diagnostician’s remove is undone when the authors visit Mrs. Konile at her village in Indwe. What they demonstrate and, indeed, celebrate in their account of this visit is the development of a sense of compassionate interconnect-edness with Mrs. Konile and, indeed, a coming closer, as is clearly demonstrated if we trace Mrs. Konile’s shifting terms of address, from the “Prof” of her first greeting (129) to “Mama,” to “Sisi,” and finally to “my children” and “son” (137). This drawing closer to Mrs. Konile allows the authors new tools with which to understand not only their subject but also themselves and their intellectual endeavor, but only by disconcertingly undermining the certainties with which they initially set out. For example, Antjie Krog recognizes that “I don’t think I have the tools to hear poverty” (177; emphasis in the original). Poverty breaks down the “safety and objectivity of the analytical theories . . . [exposing] how powerless intellectual activity often . . . is to translate effectively, and to change actively, the lives of the marginalized” (176). But entering Mrs. Konile’s world also has a profoundly unsettling effect, as Krog explains. We know that reading her testimony has already had this effect, to an extent: “Every time I read the passage where Mrs Konile rejects the Boers I feel strangely unsettled” (197). Being in Mrs. Konile’s home as a woman who self-identifies as an Afrikaner intensifies for Krog this sense of unsettledness:
The interview with Mrs Konile brought us out of our “own place”, the place from where we engage with the world. We found ourselves in a space where we felt different—“loose” or “unmoored” were perhaps the closest words we could find to describe the feeling. It was as if the moment was filled with a sudden rush of risk: not only of becoming, but also of loosening our race-anchored selves. The theoretical equality between Mrs Konile and us, had been thoroughly shattered by the economic inequality. (170–71)

What is “shattered” are the certainties that these researchers have as the ground beneath their feet, anchored in race and the veneer of equality that the academy and its knowledge systems seem “neatly” to offer the well-intentioned researcher. By Krog’s own acknowledgment, in Mrs. Konile’s bare, cold kitchen, the certainties governing race- and class-based identification and knowledge production are toppled so that even, or especially, access to self becomes disturbed. This occurs most powerfully when the medium of communication becomes isiXhosa, a language that excludes Krog and exposes her difference in ways that render her ignorant and disempowered:

The language sorted out all attempts to hide the differences. Within the language a new hierarchy was established and I was nobody. I came with them. I had no power. I had no control. And to both my delight and anger, neither of my colleagues even once tried to interpret anything to me or include me in the discussion. For them it was unimportant that I should understand what was happening. They didn’t even look my way. (132; emphasis added)

In this context where she is out of place and excluded, Krog has become invisible, so much so that she seems negated (“nobody”).

THE TROUBLE WITH “HOSPITALITY”

Krog’s self-reflexive acknowledgement of her profound unsettledness, offered later in the moment of writing and therefore with the ability to access a wiser, more generous self, is articulated in terms that invite reflection on the effects of openness to alterity for her own subjectivity. Is this “unmooring” the kind of interruption of self that Derrida would recognize as “hospitality”? In his speech at the funeral of Emmanuel Lévinas, published as Adieu to Emmanuel Lévinas, Derrida asks, “Is not hospitality an interruption of the self?” (Adieu 51). For Derrida, hospitality will always constitute an act of “violence” (Hospitality 55)—either violence to the “guest,” if the hospitality is somehow conditional or conceals an expectation of reciprocity, or to the “host,” who will need to relinquish sovereignty or certainty if her hospitality is to be truly open and without leverage of any sort—if it is to be, in Derrida’s words, “absolute hospitality” (Hospitality 55). The problem with “hospitality” is precisely this paradox, this aporia—it is impossible to be open to the Other without giving up sovereignty oneself, that is, without re-entering one’s own home as a guest and therefore without the authority that comes with ownership and with certainty. Hospitality asks of the host an unmooring—to use Krog’s words. But this is intolerable—or at least only tolerable for a moment, before the need for some kind of re-mooring becomes urgent. This is how Krog describes it, after the “shattering” that took place in the face of Mrs Konile’s poverty:
We no longer had the wholeness and familiar separateness we had arrived with, we were no longer sufficiently detached and, among the shelves of food [in the grocery store], it felt as if we could feel her standing in her empty kitchen with a grandson coming home on a Friday morning, shivering with cold . . . we chose within a combination of imagining and practical knowledge, but it gave us both one of the most liberating moments of the whole research trip: we were closer to Mrs Konile than any research had brought us. We cared. Her narration and her life filled us. We were somehow re-anchored differently—more of her, less of us. (171)

To be “re-anchored” in this way (“more of her, less of us”), to feel liberated from the distress of encountering poverty (and one’s own devastating ignorance) bylavishing groceries, and to experience pleasure at imagining a new reality for Mrs. Konile, albeit short-lived, is not necessarily as radical and life-changing a shift as the text’s epiphany seems to suggest. At least, this is not a giving up of sovereignty (“more of her, less of us”)—though it does involve a categorical rejection of the empty certainties of the academy (“so neatly described in the contract of ethical research”). Instead, after the “unmooring” of an initial openness to the unfamiliarity of Mrs. Konile as a subject, the authors seem to flee towards the generosity that the economic inequality allows them—further into the designation of “host.” I do not mean to suggest that there is an inappropriate expectation of reciprocity on their part—on the contrary, the authors mean to ease Mrs. Konile’s burden of poverty from their own position of plenitude in an act of warmth and generosity that is admirable and not out of place. What gives one pause is the weight this encounter carries and the work to which it is put, on behalf of the troubled researchers. What they receive in return is a source of great relief—an opportunity to find their footing again, as subjects, as hosts serving a new public. It may be that the difficulty lies with the notion of hospitality itself and with what Derrida describes as its “aporia”: to relinquish sovereignty in an act of truly self-effacing generosity is well nigh impossible, despite the imperative to do just that.

The text is caught up with trying to find common ground in order to create a new public drawn together in the name of ubuntu. But the fragmented nature of the book shows up the impossibility of achieving that coherence in the name of hospitality to what is strange, or in the name of democracy, or ubuntu, despite the authors’ best intentions. Or perhaps it is precisely because of these best intentions that the project falters. At the book’s close, the authors give up on the challenge of finding voice to their understanding of Mrs. Konile: “What are the phrases, which are the theories, what is the hypothesis within which we can truly capture Mrs Konile changing for us as she changed our ways of observation?” (212). It remains a question, unanswerable. Phrases, theories, hypotheses—these are not the things that offer a glimpse of a way to “capture” a changing Mrs. Konile and a changing society—and not even a changing practice of “observation” (212). The authors are only able to imagine a just and humane future in a South Africa that can embrace Mrs. Konile, in the person of her daughter Thandeka, who “in her cream and ochre blouse and pencil skirt, looked positively golden, soft and beautiful,” “when she smiled, she was a younger Mrs Konile. A radiant Mrs Konile” (214). It is not so much her entry into the “middle class” that is astonishing, but the fact “that she could be so humane. That is the miracle this book never captured” (214). In a
performative abdication of the book’s own endeavor to make sense of Mrs. Konile, this ending offers instead an epiphany—a “miracle,” a moment of “enchant[ment]” that, although moving, does not, in fact, address Mrs. Konile’s alienation.

When engaged as experts, the authors seem unable to imagine new interpretative strategies beyond those offered by their particular knowledge formation in order to be able to open this archive to an alterity that refuses easy accommodation. Their own interpretative practice relies on precisely the exclusionary logic of traditional evidentiary modes, though these are executed with more care in their reconstitution of Mrs. Konile’s meanings. Using the disciplinary techniques of their respective fields, the authors render Mrs. Konile’s testimony comprehensible and Mrs. Konile herself recognizable within the discursive framework that undergirds the archival work of the TRC, effecting Mrs. Konile’s embrace of forgiveness.

The difficulties with this particular act of recuperation on the part of the authors is that in trying to open the archive to new texts, new experiences, and subjects previously marginalized by poverty and racial injustice, the authors cannot help but affirm the very particular notion of forgiveness as normative, or even requisite, for postapartheid belonging. Their disciplinary tools reproduce an orientation towards history, evidence, and disciplinarity that affirms an archival legacy that has its roots in colonial relations of dominance, where the subjectivity of the investigator/expert is affirmed in a commitment to attentiveness, even as they recognize the need for “caution about what we claim to know about each other” (99) and to be open to the possibility that they will not understand, thereby allowing Mrs. Konile space in a postapartheid archive on her own terms. The authors’ explicit desire to mediate—to be an advocate for Mrs. Konile—is set up as a corrective gesture that affirms the values and methodologies of the TRC even as it shows up their inevitable fallibility.

The kind of feel-good politics prevalent in the discourse surrounding the TRC depend on notions of tolerance that are themselves problematic. A reconceptualization of the archive demands an unflinching acknowledgement of its interests, its politics, its technologies, and its participation in a public discourse that is able to reference the archive in the hope of securing an imagined future. Reconceptualization acknowledges that the archive is not a fixed, authorizing foundational narrative upon which to establish a new national identity, but that the constitution of the archive is itself an act of interpretation. The impulse to render the archive more open, more hospitable to what is strange or incomprehensible or marginalized may work to affirm the voices of the already-heard. Greater openness calls for a relinquishing of certainty and sovereignty and a willingness not to comprehend. A public culture that constitutes itself with reference to an archive dedicated to history by consensus and identity wrought in post-struggle togetherness risks not only exclusion but also hypocrisy and a deeply troubling politics.

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NOTES

1. Tutu writes: “Ubuntu means that in a real sense even the supporters of apartheid were victims of the vicious system which they implemented and which they supported so enthusiastically. Our humanity was intertwined. The humanity of the perpetrator of apartheid’s atrocities was caught up and bound up in that of his victim whether he liked it or not. In the process of dehumanizing another, in inflicting untold harm and suffering, the perpetrator was inexorably being dehumanized as well” (35).

2. The principle of ubuntu asserts a relational approach to personhood and, in doing so, renders compassion and humanity central to an African polity. This ethic or philosophy is articulated more fully in the traditional Xhosa maxim “Umntu ngumntu ngabantu” (“a person is a person through other persons”). Its popularity is evident in the fact that African elder statesman Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu are quoted by international politicians to powerful effect. An uncritical, sentimental invocation of ubuntu seems to forestall critique. For example, in her swearing-in ceremony in June 2009, American Department of State Special Representative for Global Partnerships Elizabeth Bagley was able to invoke ubuntu in describing American foreign policy and its purported commitment to “Ubuntu Diplomacy,” that is, to the recognition that “[w]e are truly all in this together” (Bagley). Tutu’s own explanation of the concept of ubuntu is more alert to the responsibility invoked in the concept of ubuntu: “What dehumanizes you, inexorably dehumanizes me” (35). See also Tutu’s comments on 53, 154, and 213–15.

3. The “Gugulethu Seven” were a group of seven members of Umkhonto we Sizwe, the armed wing of the African National Congress, who were ambushed by South African security forces in Gugulethu, a township of Cape Town, on 3 March 1986. A memorial near the site of their killing was unveiled in March 2005.

4. Krog is a much-published, award-winning Afrikaans poet and essayist who covered the TRC hearings as a journalist working for the major public broadcasting corporation in South Africa. Her subsequent publications have charted new territory in literature and public culture in South Africa, earning her international recognition. Her best known work of prose, Country of My Skull (2002), did more than simply chronicle the events of the TRC: interweaving victims’ testimonies with reportage and personal reflections on the experience of reporting on the TRC, it offered a genre-defying and deeply affecting exploration of the implications for South Africans of the TRC’s exposure of the pain of victims of apartheid’s gross violations of human rights. Her subsequent work has taken these probings into postapartheid cultural life still further. In A Change of Tongue (2003), she charts the first ten years of democracy in South Africa, drawing on a range of literary forms to reflect on the shifts and resistances in South African cultural and political life that register, also, on the levels of the personal and particular. In Begging to Be Black (2009), Krog tells the story of her inadvertent involvement in a 1992 murder case involving members of her local branch of the African National Congress, and the perplexing questions of identity and political belonging it raised for her.

5. Harris has been an unwavering voice for a reconceptualization of the archive as an act of activism, most particularly in his book Archives and Justice: a South African Perspective (2007). More recently, in “Jacques Derrida meets Nelson Mandela,” he has argued that the “archivist is not an impartial custodian—rather, the archivist is a memory activist, either for or against the oppressive system” (2).

6. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report, vol. 1, ch. 5, paragraph 29. Some commentators and critics have variously affirmed the nuanced and open approach to truth as enabling while others have critiqued the distinctions as merely rhetorical, their impact on the notion of “truth” as it figures in the work of the
TRC nonetheless weak. For example, Deborah Posel argues that “truth” in the TRC is built upon “a very wobbly, poorly constructed conceptual grid. The grounds for differentiating the four types of truth are poorly specified and remain rather opaque” (155). Adam Gearey, on the other hand, credits the TRC’s distinctions as usefully complicating of the binary relationship between “subjective” and “objective” truths, and judges the Act’s “modest” definition of “forensic truth” as nevertheless “backed up by social theory” and its articulation of “personal or narrative truth” as enabling of “an approach to the past, a particular expression of memory, an oral tradition” that is not simply “the truth of individuals.” Rather, it “is the undoing of silence, and the recognition of voices that have not been given a chance to enter into the archive and the record” (52–53).

While I appreciate Gearey’s willingness to weigh up the legal, political and narrative significance of these understandings of truth, his conception of “the archive and the record,” in the singular, is less productive.

7. “One of the things that I do want to say is just how much we in this country owe to women, that we probably would not have won the struggle for peace and justice and equity had it not been for the strength of our womenfolk and I just want to pay a very, very warm tribute to them. We say, you mothers. We thank you very much. Because if it was not for you, for your strength and the power you had” (Own transcription of video footage accessed at the Visual History Archive, Cape Town, December 2010).

8. “Guguletu shootout: Men not part of ANC, say relatives” (*The Argus* 11 Mar. 1986). Mrs. Konile’s version of events is given considerable space:

9. Yesterday Mrs Elsie Konile, mother of Mr John Konile, 30, of New Crossroads, Mrs Maggie Mfabo, mother of Mr Themba Molifi, 30, of Nyanga Bush, and Mr Andile Govo, nephew of Mr Zola Swelani, 22, of Nyanga Bush, said their relatives had not been members of the ANC or any other political organization. . . . Mrs Konile, 56, said her son, a migrant worker, had supported her and her two daughters. “We live in the Transkei and I don’t know where he was working but he sent money every week. He was a good boy and has never [been] in trouble with the police. As far as I know he was not a member of the ANC or any other political organization,” Mrs Konile said. Her husband died “a long time ago”. She said John had gone to work in Cape Town to keep his sisters at school. “Who will help us now that he is gone?”


12. This is the phrase used by South Africa Police Major Dolf Odendal in his affidavit, quoted by an *Argus* report on the inquest, dated 14 November 1986.


19. Ross gives an account of the TRC’s attempt to address this limitation, quoting Commissioner Mapule Ramashala’s recognition after the first round of hearings that “women witness stories about other people, and are totally removing themselves. Part of this has to do with the male-dominated structure of the Truth Commission, and the lack of probing questions. . . . Women are articulate about describing their men’s experiences but are hesitant about themselves. . . . The pain expressed has been the pain of others, not of themselves. Are we colluding by not providing space for women to talk? . . . If women do not talk then the story we produce will not be complete” (Mapule Ramashala, qtd. in Ross 23).
20. In her report on “Gender and Reparations in South Africa,” Beth Goldblatt offers a measured account of the importance of the special hearings on women: “The special hearings on women garnered a lot of media attention and changed, to some extent, the way in which women were seen in the TRC process—their agency was better understood and the gender-specific violations they suffered were exposed” (2).

21. In her account of the death of activist Victoria Mxenge (who figured in the TRC only as partner of activist Griffiths Mxenge), Nozizwe Madlala-Routledge argues that, for all its achievements, the TRC was complicit in tolerating the “deafening silence” in relation to women’s experiences apartheid: “the truth has been misrepresented in that it excludes women’s direct experiences of the widespread violence that engulfed our country” (63). Even so, Madlala-Routledge acknowledges, it “is impossible to know the whole truth about the struggles of women” (65).


23. Interviewed in Long Night’s Journey into Day. See also Tutu’s comments in No Future without Forgiveness: “The Commission was . . . meant to promote not to achieve those worthwhile objectives [of national unity and reconciliation]. [But] it is incumbent on every South African to make his or her contribution” (126–27).


25. I have discussed the effects of the TRC’s quasi-religious institutional frame and its subtle imposition of a narrative trajectory that anticipates forgiveness and reconciliation in an article entitled “Narrative and Healing in the Hearings of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission.”

26. I thank Craig Matthews and Grace Coates of the Visual History Archive in Cape Town for making their considerable materials available to me while doing research for this article.

27. See Derrida’s account of this in Of Hospitality, where to “give place” to the stranger involves a giving up (25): “This other becomes a hostile subject, and I risk becoming their hostage” (54).

WORKS CITED


The Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act 34 of 1995.


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