

A decade after
the TRC hearings
the translators
speak their truth.

INVISIBLE ANGELS

Ten years ago on 16 April, the first Truth and Reconciliation hearings were held in East London. No one knew what to expect, least of all the interpreters, who sat in a glass, soundproofed booth, translating on behalf of both victim and perpetrator for eight hours a day, five days a week. YVETTE HARDIE interviewed three women who gave voice to the nation's pain.

AS SOMEONE WHO HELPS PEOPLE FIND AND DEVELOP their voice for use in theatre and in life, I was fascinated by the TRC as it provided an opportunity for people to assert their humanity and dignity by speaking their truth. I had studied with Arthur Lessac, a leading voice and movement practitioner, in the States. When his son, Michael, asked me if I wanted to participate in making a theatre production telling the story of the TRC from the interpreters' perspective, I jumped at the chance. The Truth in Translation Project documents the experiences of three incredible women.

“We are all on the same page”

Nomusa Zulu was working as a researcher at a college when she saw an advertisement for interpreters in the paper. After an initial interview she was sent for a weekend assessment.

Nomusa’s training to become an interpreter for the TRC was largely theoretical, and involved interpreting taped pieces of dialogue. But, once in the field, she realised that nothing could have prepared her for the experience of giving voice to people’s trauma. Nomusa was expected to remain objective and professional, but inside she struggled with complex emotions. When at home – from Friday evening to Sunday afternoon – Nomusa felt like a soldier returning from the border, unable to express what she had experienced and feeling increasingly more at home in the interpreting environment than with her family. Nomusa says, “Friends thought that I was living the high life – flying all over the country and staying in hotels, but really, it wasn’t easy.” She exercised to keep herself sane, and like many of the interpreters, found drinking provided a means of escape: “We would go on drinking binges in the hotel bar. But we were always professional in the booth. We worked as a team, and if one person was tired or not coping, then another would take over. We had very supportive relationships amongst ourselves.” She was affectionately known as “Baby Zulu” by the other interpreters, because of her youth and her clan name “Mtwana,” which means *child*.

The Boipatong massacre hearing was the longest and most terrible for Nomusa. The perpetrators had killed and maimed many people and one man was asked why he had stabbed a 9-month-old baby. Nomusa describes how he very casually said, “A snake gives birth to another snake.” She had to translate those words. “I felt like I was dying. How can you have the nerve to justify killing a baby? I felt rage, but I also felt shame. He was Zulu and there is an affinity with people of one’s own culture. In one sense,

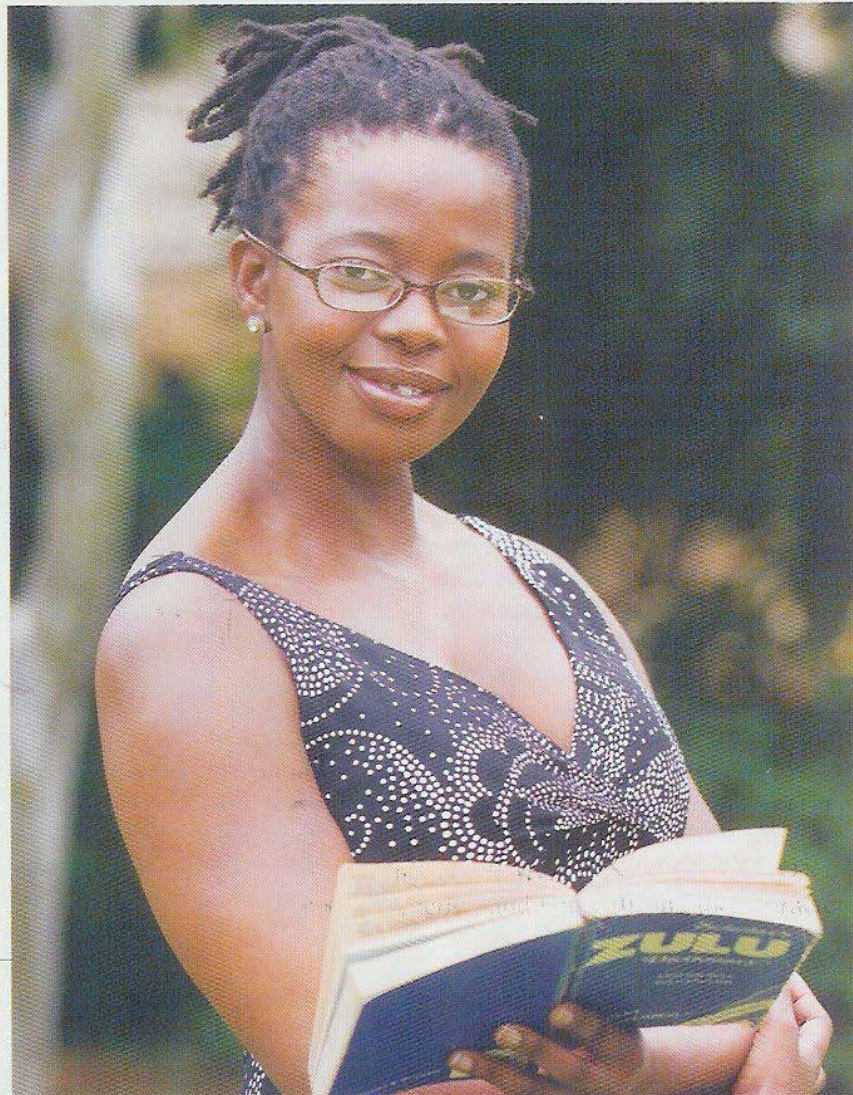
I felt personally responsible for what had happened. And I began to question what it means to be human.”

In trying to understand the perpetrators, Nomusa gained a deeper insight into human nature. They would often interpret for the same perpetrators for long periods, following them from one hearing to the next and getting to know them in the process. Some would be brought in early by their prison guards and would wait with the interpreters for the hearings to start. “They talked to us because they thought we were neutral. At first I was scared and uncomfortable. But I soon realised that they were not evil people. They had done wicked deeds, but in many cases, they thought they

were doing the right thing. I had the uncomfortable realisation that they were just like you or me and I was also capable of doing what they had done to other people.”

The experience of interpreting has made Nomusa deeply grateful. “I used to complain about what I had lost because of apartheid, but my life was a breeze in comparison to some of the stories I heard of people losing everything. And that leaves you in a much better position to appreciate what you have.”

“I think the most important thing that the TRC did, apart from bringing closure to so many people, was to open our eyes. It made all of us in this country privy to the same information. We no longer have any excuses. We can’t deny any more. We are all on the same page and how we respond to one another has to come from that place. It shouldn’t matter who or what we are, we are all citizens of South Africa.” >





“We are not broken”

Angela Sobey, although classified “Coloured,” was raised by her Xhosa mother in a rural part of the Eastern Cape. When the family moved to Manenberg in the Cape, Angela was often called derogatory names because of her heavy Xhosa accent.

Angela found interpreting challenging, as she felt that people assumed since she was Coloured, she was not qualified to interpret Xhosa. “But the commissioners and Archbishop Tutu knew I could handle the work, even the technical terms. In fact, I had a lovely relationship with the Archbishop. He would sometimes stand outside our booth and blow me kisses before a hearing started.”

Listening to the stories forced her to confront her childhood fear of the police. “When I heard what had happened to Steve Biko, it affected me very deeply. I was about six at the time. The adults were talking in hushed tones. I didn’t know anything about him, but I knew a terrible thing had happened.” When she moved

to the Cape Flats, she attended a politically active high school. It was a turbulent time and there were often run-ins with the police when they dispersed political meetings. “I was taken in for questioning once, I had no information to give them. I remember being slapped so hard that I saw stars!” Sitting at the TRC, she still carried that fear with her, and the details of police brutality reinforced her mistrust of the police.

Angela found it agonising to hear once-powerful men “parade the wrongs they did as if to make themselves heroes. They would go into graphic detail as if they were getting a sick pleasure out of reliving the whole experience. How on earth do you find it in your heart to forgive somebody

like that?” She was angered by the constant denials and excuses, “Over and over we would have to say, ‘I was following instructions; it was not my fault.’ And people would dance around the word ‘eliminate.’ No one was accepting responsibility.”

Stories became etched on the interpreter’s memory banks in a deeply personal way. “We were told to remain professional at all costs. Even with tears running down your cheeks, you did not interpret in a shaky voice. Yet, speaking in the first-person meant that you’d see yourself there. You were the torturer. You were the person dying. For a long time, those images wouldn’t go away.

Sometimes people didn’t understand the way the TRC worked, or the role of the interpreter. There was confusion around the use of the word *I*. Sometimes people would think that the interpreter was the one admitting to the crime, and confront them, shocked, in the corridor afterwards. Occasionally they would be offended when Angela or other female interpreters used words that they thought inappropriate. “The shock and horror on people’s faces as they turned and looked at you, the interpreter!”

During this period, she met her husband, Chief Mabizela, who was also working for the commission. “The fact that I was travelling so much put pressure on our relationship. Some people’s relationships fell to pieces. We had to work to keep things together. I was really grateful for my colleagues, who understood what we were going through. Some of them were real clowns and had the ability to make you laugh. Sometimes we sure needed to laugh.”

For Angela, it’s important to commemorate the TRC process now, 10 years on. “It wasn’t perfect, but we shouldn’t lose sight of the fact that it was the major building block of our baby democracy. It made me appreciate where we have come from and the fact that we are still standing. We may be battered, but we are not broken. And we are able to continue with life.”

“Forgiveness is an active concept”

Khetiwe Mboweni-Marais's nomadic lifestyle as a child exposed her to a range of languages and, as a result, she speaks all 11 official languages, which she describes as “looking at the world through 11 different windows.”

Khetiwe's approach to her job as an interpreter was that of an actor. “In interpreting you must convey emotions through the tone of your voice. Objectivity is a relative term. You can't just say, ‘My child was killed,’ without any emotion. You have to assume that voice. You have to assume that pain.”

For Khetiwe, that pain was easy to access as she had experienced years of police harassment and detention during her marriage to Steve Marais, a political activist, who had been imprisoned by the security forces for a lengthy period. Although she herself was detained twice, she sees her troubles as miniscule compared to those of the TRC victims.

She feels that the TRC finally helped her to heal. “In the struggle, we were always told that ‘the boers must never see you cry.’ When someone died, we would chant slogans like ‘their blood is watering the tree of freedom, *aluta continua*’ and we would stand

proudly while we buried them.” But at the TRC, Khetiwe was able to assist mothers in speaking their pain for the first time, and, by using their words, something released inside her. For the first time, she cried.

Khetiwe, like many, is critical of certain aspects of the TRC: It didn't achieve as much as it could have, it favoured the perpetrators over the victims and it was not followed by strong action in terms of prosecutions and reparations. Yet she feels that it succeeded in forcing us to see that gross human rights violations were not random aberrations, but the logical conclusion of what apartheid set out to achieve.

She believes that the concept of forgiveness is something we all need to grapple with. In her attempt to do so, she has applied to see Eugene de Kock in prison. For her he symbolises what the TRC was trying to do in terms of people sincerely confessing what they

had done. “So many others came and told lies, and we knew they were lying, but they still came and played a kind of charade. When I listened to De Kock's testimony, I thought that he is a man I could invite into my house to sit down with and share a meal. I think I can relate to him as a human being.” For Khetiwe, forgiveness – in the African sense – is an active concept. It is not simply letting bygones be bygones. “It begins when you share something together.” The Sotho word *tsbwarelo* illustrates this; it means forgiveness, but literally translated, its connotation is “hold this for me.” The implication is that if I am asking for forgiveness, I must give something back that I have taken from you.” ●

Talking to the interpreters has challenged and invigorated me. Their unique experience of daring to walk in other people's shoes has the capacity to speak to us at a time when the world is becoming less tolerant of people's differences. Through the process of interpretation, they became not just witnesses, but participants in the healing of our nation. These strong women were the conduits for the nation's pain and guilt. By always speaking in the first person they did more than listen to the voices of our country; they absorbed and became them.

All the interpreters agree that the TRC was not an end, but rather a beginning, and they have thrown themselves into continuing the process started there in their own lives. Their perspective deserves recognition and celebration. As Khetiwe said, “There are lots of other things we can look back at and laugh about now, the mistakes we made, the misunderstandings, the difficult circumstances under which we worked. But we need to pat ourselves on the back – we did it!” ●

The Truth in Translation Project, which acts as a catalyst for dialogue around reconciliation, will travel later this year. To find out more about the interpreters and the project, visit www.truthintranslation.org

