



Book Review - Transitional Justice, Culture and Society: Beyond Outreach, International Center for Transitional Justice, Social Science Research Council **By Elize Ketelaars¹**

Abstract:

This article reviews *Transitional Justice, Culture and Society: Beyond Outreach*, edited by Clara Ramírez-Barat, International Center for Transitional Justice, Social Science Research Council, ISBN 978-0-911400-02-1 (pbk.: alk. paper)

Transitional Justice, Culture and Society: Beyond Outreach is the sixth volume in the 'Advancing Transitional Justice Series' of the International Center for Transitional Justice and the Social Science Research Council. The aim of this project is to 'address important gaps in scholarship and provide comparative analysis of transitional justice measures and the difficult contexts in which they take place'.² The relationship between transitional justice and other academic disciplines plays a key role in these publications. In this volume, editor Clara Ramírez-Barat has collected a large variety of essays which shed light on the public dimension of transitional justice initiatives.

In the preface, Paulo de Greiff argues that cultural interventions should be given more emphasis in the field of transitional justice. Referring to the traditional distinctions between the social, cultural and personal layers in sociology, de Greiff states that scholarship on transitional justice has traditionally given prominence to the role of social institutions such as courts and Truth and Reconciliation Commissions (TRCs) as catalysts of transformation in societies in transition. Though de Greiff acknowledges there are valid reasons for this institutionalist bias, e.g. that in essence 'transitional periods are deeply political ones in the life of nations, during which ... [t]he bulk of political activity is geared toward institutional transformation'.³ he is concerned that this exclusivist approach ignores the evidence that successful institutional change largely depends on transformations on the cultural and individual levels as well. Ramírez-Barat endorses this point of view. In her opinion the success of transitional justice measures depends not only on the accomplishment of their most immediate functions (i.e., finishing investigations, writing reports and delivering judgments) and on their political credibility, but also on the extent to which the public perceives these initiatives as legitimate. The public has to be well informed and actively engaged in transitional justice efforts if those efforts are to succeed.

Ramírez-Barat distinguishes outreach activities conducted by transitional justice institutions themselves, from efforts of the media, educational institutions, intellectuals and artists, to portray the processes that take place during the period of transition. Ramírez-Barat uses the concept of *public sphere* to capture the body of communicative interactions that take place between these entities and society at large without interference of the state apparatus. However, outreach activities and the different forms of communication that take place in the public sphere are not two completely separate phenomena; instead activities at the institutional level and in the social realm can interact like communicating vessels. As Ramírez-Barat puts it:

*'To the extent that well-crafted outreach programs can contribute to laying some of the conditions necessary to catalyze civic trust between citizens and official institutions, the myriad communicative interactions that take place in the social realm can in turn help to establish conditions for catalyzing trust among citizens themselves, while contributing to the societal articulation of new cultural values and norms.'*⁴

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² <http://www.ssrc.org/publications/view/9A29DC00-EDAD-DE11-9D32-001CC477EC70/>, accessed 17 September 2014.

³ P. De Greiff, 'Preface: On Making the Invisible Visible: The Role of Cultural Interventions in Transitional Justice Processes', in: Clara Ramírez-Barat (ed.), *Transitional Justice, Culture and Society: Beyond Outreach*, International Center for Transitional Justice (2014), p. 13.

⁴ C. Ramirez Barat, 'Introduction: Transitional Justice and the Public Sphere', in: Clara Ramírez-Barat (ed.), *Transitional Justice, Culture and Society: Beyond Outreach*, International Center for Transitional Justice, p. 35.

Nonetheless, the structure of the core of the book, consisting of fifteen chapters in which examples of the interplay between transitional justice initiatives and culture/society are discussed, sticks to a clear division between activities organized by the state and initiatives born in the public sphere. The first part of the book contains three case studies about outreach programs of three different tribunals and one chapter about involving children and youth in transitional justice processes. The second part of the book, which is dedicated to the role of the media in transitional justice processes, contains four case studies about the role of the media in different societies and one chapter about the way social media are used by international and hybrid criminal tribunals. The last part of the book contains only two case studies about cultural projects related to transitional justice initiatives in particular countries and contains four chapters on certain forms of artistic and/or cultural expression.

In essence, the book follows the traditional distinction between the social layer on the one hand and the cultural and personal layers on the other, as discussed by de Greiff. Few of the case studies in this volume give a comprehensive overview of the interaction between official outreach programs and initiatives related to transitional justice processes which are rooted in the public sphere. As a result, the reader does not gain any real insight in the ways in which communicative interactions that take place in the public realm can help to create more trust in transitional justice measures. The chapters which are dedicated to the role of the media in transitional society tend to be more informative in this regard, as these chapters focus more on the interactions between tribunals and media outlets and the difficulties which can arise. The fact that this volume is one of the first attempts to draw attention to the role of the public sphere in transitional justice processes, might explain the absence of a more thorough analysis of the cross-fertilization between institutions at different levels. Ramírez-Barat concludes her introduction by underlining that this volume is a 'preliminary exploration into the relations between transitional justice and the cultural and social spheres' and should be read as an invitation to researchers in this field to include 'considerations of the role of the public sphere ... in the transitional justice research agenda'.⁵

The book will interest not only professionals in the field of transitional justice, but also readers who do not have a background in the field of transitional justice but who would like to learn more about the cultural and artistic aspects of transitional justice initiatives. The book provides a comprehensive overview of a wide range of activities in the field of transitional justice and communication, enabling readers to become familiar with many different aspects of the topic. Moreover, the vast majority of the essays in this volume are very accessibly written, which means that readers do not need extensive foreknowledge to understand the topics discussed in it. Most of the chapters contain case studies which make it easy for the reader to form an image of the circumstances under which communicative, cultural and artistic projects function in transitional societies. Generally the authors also start with giving sufficient background information about the conflicts which have preceded the time of transition.

The large variety of contributions makes *Transitional Justice, Culture and Society: Beyond Outreach* both informative and an entertaining read, for experts in the field as well as for newcomers. However, this variety operates to reduce the coherency of the book. This problem with coherency is caused mainly by the fact that the contributions lack a clear common format. Especially when compared to *What happened to the women? Gender and Reparations for Human Rights Violations*,⁶ a previous volume of the *Advancing Transitional Justice Series* in which each chapter was written according to a fixed format, *Transitional Justice, Culture and Society: Beyond Outreach* is a hotchpotch of contributions. An explanation for this approach might be that by contrast with *What happened to the Women?*, *Transitional Justice, Culture and Society: Beyond Outreach* contains not only case studies but more general reflections on different forms of art and communication. Moreover, the authors of the contributions to this volume have very different backgrounds, ranging from academics to journalists to theater professionals. This is reflected in the diverse styles and degrees of difficulty of the chapters.

In the last part of this review, I discuss and compare two chapters, to show the very differing characters of the contributions to this book. Both of the chapters fall within part three of the book about art, culture and transitional justice. Chapter 11 'Reverberations of Testimony: South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Art and Media' by Catherine M. Cole⁷, is a case study of the way the findings of South Africa's TRC were depicted in media, literature and theatre. Chapter 12 'Photography and Transitional Justice: Evidence, Postcard, Placard, Token of Absence' by Eduardo González Cueva⁸ and M. Florencia Librizzi⁹ discusses the role of photography in societies in transition. Chapter 11 solely

⁵ Idem, p. 41.

⁶ R. Rubio-Marin, *What Happened to the Women? Gender and Reparations for Human Rights Violations*, International Center for Transitional Justice (2006).

⁷ Catherine M. Cole is Professor in the Department of Theater, Dance, and Performance Studies at the University of California, Berkeley.

⁸ Eduardo González Cueva is sociologist and director of the Truth and Memory program at the International Center for Transitional Justice.

focusses on one transitional justice measure – South Africa’s TRC – but discusses three different modes of representation of the testimonies which were given before the TRC. Cole uses the testimony of Father Lapsley, ‘a New-Zealand citizen but long-time resident of Southern Africa, and well known for his support of the South African liberation movement’¹⁰, who lost his hands and one eye after he had opened a parcel containing what he thought were religious magazines, only to detonate a hidden explosive device sent by the South-African Bureau of State Security. Lapsley’s testimony is used in several sections of the TRC’s final report, each time it is put into the service of some larger rhetorical point, serving as an illustration of a specific pattern of violence or a historical period. On top of that the media as well as authors and artists picked up his story and made their own adaptations. Cole discusses the coverage of Lapsley’s story in television, in the TRC Special Report, in the way his story was depicted in the memoir ‘Country of my Skull’ by Antjie Krog, and the adaption of his story into Philip Miller’s cantata ‘Rewind: A Cantata for Voice, Tape, and Testimony’. Cole gives a critical assessment of these three works, mostly focusing on the effect of the inevitable manipulations which are applied when a testimony is edited to feature in a television program or a piece of literature or theatre. In so doing, she gives the reader greater insight in the mechanism of image-formation while warning us to be on guard for false (artistic) interpretations; but she also concludes that this variety of interpretations teaches us an important lesson about truth and transitional justice processes:

‘[T]he independence of artists, writers, and journalists is key to building civil society in the aftermath of state-sanctioned terror and violence. Each interlocutor brings different expectations, biases, insights, and distortions. Each genre and medium also inherits particular terms of engagement that may or may not be negotiable. In the gaps between these various representations we come closest to seeing how the truths of any transitional justice process remain elusive, even when so many important facts and insights are revealed.’¹¹

In their chapter on the role of photography in periods of transitional justice, González Cueva and Librizzi choose a different approach to the topic. Instead of presenting a case study of the role of photography during a phase of transition in one particular country, they explain the effects of photography in times of transition against different national backgrounds. Like Cole, González Cueva and Librizzi put emphasis on the role that interpretation plays both when a photographer takes a picture and when a spectator looks at it.¹² By quoting Sontag they remind us that, ‘[a]s much as it is an act of intervention, photography can also be an act of nonintervention’.¹³ Having said this, they question the assumption that photography can be favorably consequential in a context of transitional justice. This assumption rests on the idea that ‘photography is a representation of reality that offers itself directly and with a sense of immediacy’.¹⁴ Subsequently, they discuss five examples of photographs and photographic collections of both a journalistic and an artistic nature to show the importance of interpretation. In this vein, the chapter contains two discussions which illustrate this point well. First, there is a discussion of the picture ‘Fikret Alic Behind The wire’, taken by a British journalist in a prison camp in Bosnia during the 1992-1995 war, and which became world famous because of the strong associations it evoked with concentration camps during the Holocaust and the controversy which subsequently emerged around it amongst ultra-nationalistic Serbs who claimed that the picture was a falsification. Second, there is the discussion of the photo series ‘Absences’ by Argentinean photographer Gustavo Germano, in which the power of interpretation is made very apparent. Germano has created a series of photos on the disappearances in his country during the 1976–83 military dictatorship, making the absence visible by showing an original picture of the victim with friends or family taken before the disappearance next to a recreation of this photograph in the exact same setting, with exactly the same people except for the victim. The power of this series is that the very absence of a person stimulates and strengthens the mechanism of interpretation. Although the structures of both chapters are very different, as are the modes of communication discussed, it is striking that both analyses lead to a very similar conclusion. Like Cole, González Cueva and Librizzi finish by saying that, although photography in a context of transitional justice always only offers ‘fleeting slices of a reality that cannot be fully grasped’, this might be an advantage:

‘As transitional justice becomes more juridicized, and possibly desiccated into sets of best practices, lessons learned, or normative principles, establishing a linkage to photography and other cultural practices may introduce a welcome, enriching destabilization.’¹⁵

⁹ M. Florencia Librizzi is a lawyer and a consultant at the International Center for Transitional Justice.

¹⁰ SA-TRC, TRC Report, 2:592–94.

¹¹ C.M. Cole, *Reverberations of Testimony: South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Art and Media*, in: Clara Ramírez-Barat (ed.), *Transitional Justice, Culture and Society: Beyond Outreach*, International Center for Transitional Justice (2014), p. 426.

¹² E. González Cueva & M.F. Librizzi, ‘Photography and Transitional Justice: Evidence, Postcard, Placard, Token of Absence’, in: Clara Ramírez-Barat (ed.), *Transitional Justice, Culture and Society: Beyond Outreach*, International Center for Transitional Justice (2014), p. 434.

¹³ *Idem*, p. 435.

¹⁴ *Idem*, p. 436.

¹⁵ *Idem*, p. 455.

As a first attempt to make a compilation of the activities that take place at the cutting edge of transitional justice and communication, culture and art *Transitional Justice, Culture and Society: Beyond Outreach* has succeeded very well. Although the consistency and comprehensiveness of the book sometimes suffer from the wide variety of contributions, the editor and authors are convincing in their belief that that considerations of the role of the public sphere should be included in the transitional justice research agenda. The previously discussed chapters are only two examples of the many thought provoking contributions that this volume contains and I see many new opportunities for interesting research projects - such as a more encompassing examination of the role of social media in transitional societies. Similar to the way in which art and culture can contribute to a more complete picture of 'truth' in societies in transition due to their destabilizing force, more research into this relatively new and exciting topic can contribute to the completeness of the study of transitional justice itself.

