The Local Roots of the Global Politics of Reconciliation: The Articulation of 'Reconciliation' as an Empty Universal in the South African Transition to Democracy

Judith Renner
Technische Universität München, Germany

Abstract
Fostering 'national reconciliation' through public truth-telling processes has become a central objective of post-conflict peacebuilding. This article critically reflects on the global politics of reconciliation by illuminating its process of emergence in the South African transition to democracy. The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) is commonly seen as an authoritative template for reconciliation processes around the globe, and the South African reconciliation experience often serves as a legitimising myth for the global reconciliation project. In this article, I question the intrinsic moral value of reconciliation in general as well as its interpretation in terms of public truth-telling. Drawing on the discourse theory developed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, I argue that the term 'reconciliation' emerged in South Africa as an empty universal, a vague yet powerful social ideal, that could be embraced by the antagonistic parties of the ANC and NP not because of any intrinsic value, but rather because of its vagueness and semantic flexibility. The particular interpretation of reconciliation in terms of truth-telling was then articulated through the political demands raised by different societal groups, which constructed a reconciliation discourse that produced and naturalised truth-telling and healing as central components of a reconciliation policy. This discourse was eventually stabilised and institutionalised by the workings of the TRC.

Keywords
discourse, empty signifier, reconciliation, South Africa, Truth and Reconciliation Commission

Corresponding author:
Judith Renner, Department of Political Science, Technical University Munich, Arcisstr. 21, 80333 Munich, Germany.
Email: Judith.Renner@tum.de

Introduction

It is widely accepted today that 'national reconciliation' should be a central concern of post-conflict peacebuilding. In the past 15 years numerous truth and reconciliation commissions (TRCs) have been established in countries emerging from violent conflict, in the hope that they foster the reconciliation and healing of traumatised societies. National reconciliation processes thereby commonly rely on a more or less standardised procedure, in which the alleged 'victims' and 'perpetrators' of past human rights violations come forward and tell their personal stories to the wider public. This practice is assumed to contribute to the catharsis and therapeutic healing of individuals, possibly even to forgiveness, and eventually to national reconciliation.[1]

The global politics of reconciliation strongly draws upon the South African reconciliation process which was initiated in the mid-1990s during the country's transition to democracy.[2] The South African TRC, as several authors point out, serves as an authoritative template or 'indisputable *locus classicus*'[3] for the theory and practice of reconciliation all over the globe, as it is commonly assumed that it brought about the reconciliation of South Africans after years of repression under apartheid. In the academic literature, the South African TRC is often chosen as the primary case study from which 'knowledge' about reconciliation is generated,[4] and it set in motion a burgeoning interest in truth commissions more generally.[5] In the political practice, the South African TRC with its underlying assumptions and central practices has served as a model for several other countries, with the TRCs in, for example, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Burundi and the Solomon Islands taking the South African TRC as an authoritative example.[6] Overall, as Claire Moon points out, '[i]t is hard to overestimate the role of the [South African] TRC in the generation and proliferation of truth mechanisms and principles … The founding

1. Cf. Michael Humphrey, *The Politics of Atrocity and Reconciliation: From Terror to Trauma* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002); Claire Moon, *Narrating Political Reconciliation: South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (Plymouth, UK: Lexington Books, 2008).
2. Moon, *Narrating Political Reconciliation*.
3. Ibid., 1, emphasis in original. See also Michal Ben-Josef Hirsch, 'Agents of Truth and Justice: Truth Commissions and the Transitional Justice Epistemic Community', in *Rethinking Ethical Foreign Policy: Pitfalls, Possibilities and Paradoxes*, eds David Chandler and Volker Heins (London: Routledge, 2007), 194.
4. Tristan Anne Borer, ed., *Telling the Truth: Truth Telling and Peace Building in Post-Conflict Societies* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006); Robert I. Rotberg and Dennis Thompson, eds, *Truth v. Justice: The Morality of Truth Commissions* (Princeton, NJ, and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000).
5. Moon, *Narrating Political Reconciliation*, 1–2; Hirsch, 'Agents of Truth and Justice'.
6. For Sierra Leone, see Priscilla B. Hayner, 'Negotiating Peace in Sierra Leone: Confronting the Justice Challenge', in *December 2007 Report*, ed. Henry Dunant Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (Geneva: 2007), 19. For the Solomon Islands, see for example http://content.undp.org/go/newsroom/2009/april/archbishop-tutu-opens-solomon-islands-truth-and-reconciliation-commission.en (accessed 12 March 2013).

documents and declarations of truth commissions following South Africa echo intimately its mandate, principles, and practices.'[7]

This article sheds critical light on the global politics of reconciliation by questioning the truth claims and the normative authority underlying the South African reconciliation experience. I examine the emergence of the reconciliation discourse in the South African transition to democracy and argue that it was the contingent outcome of a political struggle that took place, predominantly, among the major antagonistic parties in South Africa, the African National Congress (ANC) and the National Party (NP). Rather than having some intrinsic normative value, 'reconciliation' took hold as a powerful ideal as it was emptied of its particular content so that both ANC and NP could embrace it and interpret it according to their particular political claims. The meaning of truth-telling and healing that is attached to reconciliation today was articulated later, when actors from civil society took up the vague reconciliation ideal and used it to justify their own political demands. Here, claims to create a truth commission for South Africa were articulated in the name of reconciliation and the TRC was established and institutionalised the reconciliation discourse as we know it today. Importantly, the rise to hegemony of the reconciliation discourse did not come without a cost but brought with it the exclusion of punishment, and thus of 'justice as we know it',[8] as a possible interpretation of or alternative to reconciliation in South Africa.

To unfold this argument in more detail, the article is organised in two larger sections, one theoretical and one empirical. I first develop the theoretical framework for my analysis, which is based on the post-structuralist discourse theory of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. Their approach makes it possible to shed light on the processes by which signifiers are reinterpreted and bestowed with new normative authority and new meaning in the context of political struggles and severe social crisis. I then apply that framework and reconstruct the articulation of a reconciliation discourse in South Africa. Throughout this analysis, I point out how the hegemony of reconciliation produced the exclusion of punishment as an immoral way to deal with South Africa's past. In the conclusion, I briefly discuss how the South African constructions of reconciliation could globalise after the transition and point at the more subtle and potentially problematic consequences that the global reconciliation discourse might entail.

A Discourse Theoretical Account of Meaning Production

Post-structuralist discourse theory offers a unique access to social phenomena as it denies the possible existence of a valid and given 'truth' about the world and claims that the 'truths' and 'realities' that we take as given are the contingent products of hegemonic discourses. Discourse theory is based on an 'anti-essentialist ontology' and an 'anti-foundationalist epistemology'.[9] Ontologically, it rejects the idea that social reality can be

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7. Moon, *Narrating Political Reconciliation*, 143.
8. Ibid., 5.
9. Jacob Torfing, 'Discourse Theory: Achievements, Arguments, and Challenges', in *Discourse Theory in European Politics: Identity, Policy and Governance*, eds David Howarth and Jacob Torfing (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 13.

fixed against a pre-given, self-determining essence and holds that reality is a social construction which is produced and stabilised through discourse. Epistemologically, it presumes that a given 'truth' about the world does not exist and cannot be discovered through scientific methods. Truth, rather, is 'conditioned by a discursive truth regime which specifies the criteria for judging something to be true or false'.[10] With these presumptions, discourse theory makes it possible to challenge and denaturalise sedimented knowledge structures. Instead of probing the truth-claims underlying these structures, post-structuralism aims at exploring how perceived 'truths' become hegemonic discourses. While discourse theoretical accounts have already been used in IR to challenge sedimented views on a wide range of global issues, among them the construction of migration[11] or terrorism[12] as security threats, the knowledge about 'effective' famine relief programmes[13] or hegemonic understandings of gender,[14] this article will use post-structuralism to critically examine the global politics of reconciliation by denaturalising its underlying truth-claims and uncovering how these claims came into being. For such an analysis, the discourse theory developed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe and the so-called 'Essex School'[15] is particularly fertile as it offers a set of concepts which help to analytically reconstruct processes of meaning production and to critically shed light on this meaning by emphasising how hegemonic discourses are articulated in a contingent process of struggle and exclusion.

The Constitution of Discourses around Empty Universals

Post-structuralist discourse theory proceeds from the assumption that language and meaningful practices are constitutive of social reality. While it accepts that there is a thought-independent 'world out there' which consists of a number of (natural) phenomena, it challenges their language-independent observation.[16] Humans have no possibility to access and describe the world objectively; they can only make sense of it through their existing socially constructed 'knowledge', which is centrally stabilised and conserved in discourse.

10. Ibid., 14.
11. Jef Huysmans, 'The European Union and the Securitization of Migration', *Journal of Common Market Studies* 38, no. 5 (2000): 751–77; Roxanne Lynn Doty, 'Immigration and the Politics of Security', *Security Studies* 8, no. 2 (1998): 71–93.
12. Alexander Spencer, *The Tabloid Terrorist: The Predicative Construction of New Terrorism in the Media* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010).
13. Jenny Edkins, 'Legality with a Vengeance: Famines and Humanitarian Relief in "Complex Emergencies"', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 25, no. 3 (1996): 547–75.
14. Laura Shepherd, 'Loud Voices behind the Wall: Gender Violence and the Violent Reproduction of the International', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 34, no. 2 (2006): 377–401.
15. See for example David Howarth, Aletta Norval and Yannis Stavrakakis, eds, *Discourse Theory and Political Analysis: Identities, Hegemonies and Social Change* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2000).
16. David Howarth and Yannis Stavrakakis, 'Introducing Discourse Theory and Political Analysis', in *Discourse Theory and Political Analysis*, eds Howarth et al., 1–23.

Discourse is the central constitutive category and ordering principle of social life, as it is in and through discourse that meaning is temporarily stabilised and social and physical realities become meaningful.[17] Discourses, as relatively stable arrangements of social meaning or 'structured totalities', interrupt the endless flow of meaning and temporarily arrange meaning and social identities in a system of relational signification.[18] According to Laclau and Mouffe, every discourse is constituted around a nodal point, which is represented by social ideals such as 'reality', 'nature', 'god' or 'justice'. Constructed foundations such as these are essential for the temporary stabilisation of meaning as they anchor a discourse, thus making it possible to temporarily stabilise all other meaning units in relation to the foundations themselves.[19] Laclau argues that ultimate foundations usually take the shape of tendentially *empty signifiers* or *empty universals* (both terms are used interchangeably here), which have no particular content on their own. They are vague yet powerful social ideals that cannot be clearly defined but are normatively charged. 'Democracy', 'order' and 'reconciliation', for example, are all powerful words that serve as social ideals and normative justifications and yet their content remains vague.[20] Empty universals only gain authority and a vague meaning because they represent a radical opposition to some current negative state of affairs. As Laclau puts it, the content of an empty universal cannot be grasped in all its positivity but 'it will always show itself through the presence of its absence'.[21]

Within a discourse, nodal points are 'privileged signifiers or reference points' and 'bind together a particular system of meaning or "chain of signification"'.[22] They structure social meaning through two different discursive logics: a logic of difference and a logic of equivalence. While the nodal point/empty signifier stands in a semantic relation of equivalence with each signifier of the discourse and binds them in a chain of equivalences, the signifiers themselves are associated with each other in a relation of difference.[23] Relations of equivalence and difference are thus the fundamental mechanisms through which meaning is produced and fixed.

Dislocation as a Catalyst for Social Change

While discourses make meaning possible in the first place, they are always contingent and can never reach complete closure. Rather, they are always undermined by the multiple possibilities of interpretation. Discourses, therefore, are only provisional and historically contingent institutionalisations of social reality and can be destabilised and change. Laclau and Mouffe conceptualise the destabilisation and failure of a discursive structure

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17. Howarth and Stavrakakis, 'Introducing Discourse Theory'.
18. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, 2nd edn (London: Verso, 2001), 105; Torfing, 'Discourse Theory', 15.
19. Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*.
20. Ernesto Laclau, *Emancipation(s)* (London: Verso, 2007), 36–46.
21. Ibid., 53.
22. Howarth and Stavrakakis, 'Introducing Discourse Theory', 8.
23. Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*.

as its *dislocation*.[24] Dislocation stands for the interruption of a discursive formation through events or experiences it cannot meaningfully accommodate and interpret according to its rules of interpretation. Not all social actors will conform to an identity category provided by the discourse and not all events can be classified according to existing understandings of what can possibly happen. Instead, each discourse will constantly be threatened by articulations which challenge its constructions through alternative interpretations of the world. Structural dislocation is the moment of the political: it shows itself through an 'organic crisis' of the discursive structure, in which the contingency of the hitherto 'valid' meanings and identities is unveiled and the ultimate contingency of the whole discursive structure is exposed.[25] The consequence of such a dislocation is the pressing need for the production of new empty signifiers that restructure the discourse and bind the meaning of other signifiers in relation to themselves.

Structural dislocation makes social change possible as it makes it necessary to reorganise the social around new empty signifiers. Here, the structural determination of social life is severely inhibited and there is no structurally fixed social ideal which could function as the *telos* of any social transformation and reorganisation. Dislocation therefore leads to absolute contingency in regard to the constitution of a future social order. As Laclau puts it, dislocation is the very form of possibility and freedom. There is now 'a set of new possibilities for historical action which are the direct result of structural dislocation. The world is less "given" and must be increasingly constructed.'[26]

Hegemonic Struggles and the Production of Meaning

The reorganisation of the social and the formation of new discourses after structural dislocation take place through an exemplary form of articulatory practices which Laclau and Mouffe call *hegemonic struggles*.[27] Hegemonic struggles are attempts to build a new discourse by advancing new signifiers as empty universals and positioning them as nodal points of a discourse.[28] What is at stake in a hegemonic competition is the occupation of the position of the nodal point with one particular signifier that unifies the discursive space in a hegemonic discourse. Importantly, hegemonic articulation is never neutral; the emergence of one hegemonic discourse is built upon the simultaneous exclusion of meaning elements that are opposed to the empty signifier as a radical Other. Hegemony, in other words, is built upon the construction of a 'threat', a 'constitutive outside' which stabilises the hegemonic discourse and makes it appear as 'a more or less stable whole'.[29] As Torfing points out, 'the hegemonic articulation of meaning and identity is

24. Ernesto Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (London and New York: Verso, 1990), 39–45.
25. Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 131; Laclau, *New Reflections*, 39–45; Torfing, 'Discourse Theory', 16.
26. Laclau, *New Reflections*, 40.
27. Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 135–42.
28. Torfing, 'Discourse Theory', 15.
29. Lasse Thomassen, 'Antagonism, Hegemony and Ideology after Heterogeneity', *Journal of Political Ideologies* 10, no. 3 (2005): 291.

intrinsically linked to the construction of social antagonism which involves the exclusion of a threatening Otherness that stabilises the discursive system while, at the same time, preventing its ultimate closure'.[30]

Hegemonic struggles are central to the production of new discourses in times of structural dislocation. However, they should not be understood as strategic action or planned decisions about the discursive structure. Rather, hegemonic struggles manifest themselves in a series of *de facto* political demands and decisions which step by step forge a new discourse around a new social ideal.[31] Hegemonic articulations thus manifest in a political struggle in which a discourse is articulated by one set of political claims which are unified around an empty signifier and gain hegemony at the cost of another set of political claims that is excluded from the hegemonic discourse through the drawing of frontiers which separate 'a discursive space into two antagonistic camps – the good vs. the bad, the Self vs. the Other'.[32]

For analytic reasons, the process of hegemonic articulation can be divided into three stages which should be thought of as closely intertwined. First, a signifier must be presented as referring to an absent state of society which marks a desirable difference from the present state of affairs. What makes one particular signifier credible as a potential empty signifier is its signification of a constitutive lack, something which is absent but seems highly desirable in the present. Second, a signifier must be accepted as a desirable social ideal by more and more political groups, i.e. it has to succeed in functioning as a general representative for their particular political claims.[33] This universalisation of the empty signifier builds upon the exclusion of other claims and meanings which are constructed as a radical Other to the empty signifier through relations of contrast and opposition. In the third stage of the hegemonic process, the empty signifier establishes a new discourse by binding as many signifiers as possible in a chain of equivalences so that a relatively stable meaning structure emerges of which the empty signifier is the nodal point.

Operationalisation and Method of Analysis

In the following, the concepts of discourse, empty universal/nodal point, dislocation and hegemonic struggles will be used to reconstruct the articulation of the reconciliation discourse in South Africa. I argue that 'reconciliation' was articulated as an empty universal which became the nodal point of a hegemonic reconciliation discourse. The emergence of this discourse was triggered by the structural dislocation of apartheid as the hegemonic discourse underlying the socio-political order in South Africa in the course of the transition. The dislocation of apartheid released a set of hegemonic struggles which advanced 'reconciliation' as a new social vision and forged a reconciliation discourse by

30. Torfing, 'Discourse Theory', 15.
31. Ibid.; Martin Nonhoff, *Politischer Diskurs und Hegemonie: Das Projekt 'Soziale Marktwirtschaft'* (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2005), 210.
32. Eva Herschinger, *Constructing Global Enemies: Hegemony and Identity in Global Discourses on Terrorism and Drug Prohibition* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), 23.
33. Cf. Nonhoff, *Politischer Diskurs und Hegemonie*, 214–15.

constructing relations of equivalence between 'reconciliation' and, eventually, meanings such as healing and truth-telling. This construction of the reconciliation discourse was stabilised by the simultaneous exclusion of calls for retributive justice and the punishment of the members of the apartheid regime, which were established as an immoral alternative way of dealing with the past.

In order to reconstruct the reconciliation discourse and its articulation, I conduct a discourse analysis which is based on statements and documents that were published before and during the South African transition and deal explicitly with reconciliation. The analysis of the early phase of the articulation process between 1989 and 1993 falls back on letters and statements which were circulated predominantly by the political leaders of the ANC and NP, as during this time 'virtually all negotiations were comprised of bilateral talks between the government and the ANC', and in particular between the political leaders of these parties.[34] The analysis of the second phase of articulation uses statements of civil society actors that were issued in two workshops held in 1994 that are often considered as important manifestations of the public debate at the time.[35] In a third step, I analyse the language used by the TRC in its documents and public hearings, and complement this with analyses that have been conducted by other authors.[36]

As regards methods, my analysis falls back on an examination of the semantic[37] relations that are established between 'reconciliation' and other signifiers in these texts. As Norman Fairclough points out, an examination of semantic relations helps to reconstruct the logics of equivalence and difference that bind the signifiers of a discourse together and are fundamental for the production of meaning.[38] The logics of equivalence and difference can be represented by two broader classes of semantic relations, which will be called here 'positive' and 'negative' semantic relations respectively. In order to find out how reconciliation is positively constructed, i.e. what signifiers are included within the reconciliation discourse and in its chain of equivalences, it can be analysed what signifiers are put in a positive semantic relation with reconciliation (= relation of equivalence) and fill the empty universal with meaning. Negative semantic relations, in turn, that are

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34. Johannes Rantete and Hermann Giliome, 'Transition to Democracy through Transaction? Bilateral Negotiations between the ANC and NP in South Africa', *African Affairs* 91 (1992): 516; Lynn Berat and Yossi Shain, 'Retribution or Truth-Telling in South Africa? Legacies of the Transitional Phase', *Law and Social Inquiry* 20, no. 1 (1995): 163–89.

35. Moon, *Narrating Political Reconciliation*, 31; Terry Bell and Dumisa Buhle Ntsebeza, *Unfinished Business: South Africa, Apartheid and Truth* (London: Verso, 2003), 288–9.

36. Claire Moon, 'Reconciliation as Therapy and Compensation: A Critical Analysis', in *Law and the Politics of Reconciliation*, ed. Scott Veitch (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 163–84; Moon, *Narrating Political Reconciliation*; Annelies Verdoolaege, *Reconciliation Discourse* (Amsterdam and Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2008).

37. 'Semantic' is not meant to refer to a predetermined meaning of signifiers. Following Fairclough, the construction of semantic relations denotes the process of creating equivalence and difference between signifiers and thus the construction of meaning. Cf. Norman Fairclough, *Analysing Discourse: Textual Analysis for Social Research* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 88.

38. Ibid., 87–98.

constructed between reconciliation and other signifiers can help to identify the signifiers that are constructed in contrast to reconciliation, that is, those signifiers that are opposed to reconciliation as an Other and stabilise the desirable idealistic character of reconciliation in opposition to themselves.[39]

The Articulation of a Reconciliation Discourse in South Africa

The Dislocation of Apartheid as a Catalyst for Social Change

In the early 1990s, South Africa went through a period of political transformation. The transition marked the end of apartheid as the hegemonic discourse in South Africa and has been interpreted by several authors as a process of structural dislocation.[40] Signs for the dislocation of apartheid surfaced already in the 1970s, as the formerly stable rule and the privileges of whites were increasingly challenged.[41]

On the national level, a perceived economic crisis at the end of the 1970s was responded to by the South African government by falling back on the black population as available labourers and potential consumers. The government gave Africans the right to settle permanently in or around the cities, thus challenging the strict distinction between the 'rural blacks in the homelands' and the 'urban whites' and softening the social categories underlying apartheid.[42] Second, resistance by black workers, in particular in the mining industry, and the increasing number of strikes in this sector was responded to by legalising African trade unions. Thereby the government unwillingly helped to establish the foundation for the legal political organisation of blacks and compromised the identity of blacks as a non-political class of foreigners.[43] Third, in 1983 the United Democratic Front (UDF) was founded in order to coordinate domestic resistance. The UDF was composed of delegates of all colours

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39. It should be noted here that different degrees of exclusion, or different kinds of discursive limit, can be constructed in different cases. In the analysis outlined below, the exclusion of justice from the reconciliation discourse does not fully resemble an antagonistic frontier in the Laclauean sense. Rather, it can be understood as a negation of a lesser kind, i.e. not an enemy Other but an immoral Other, which nevertheless represents a constitutive outside against which the reconciliation discourse can be stabilised. I thank one of the anonymous reviewers for this comment.

40. Aletta J. Norval, *Deconstructing Apartheid Discourse* (London and New York: Verso, 1996); David Howarth, 'The Difficult Emergence of a Democratic Imaginary: Black Consciousness and Non-racial Democracy in South Africa', in *Discourse Theory and Political Analysis*, eds Howarth et al., 168–92.

41. Howarth, 'The Difficult Emergence of a Democratic Imaginary'; Norval, *Deconstructing Apartheid Discourse*.

42. Howarth, 'The Difficult Emergence of a Democratic Imaginary', 170; Aletta J. Norval, 'Social Ambiguity and the Crisis of Apartheid', in *The Making of Political Identities*, ed. Ernesto Laclau (London: Verso, 1994), 125.

43. Cf. Leonard Thompson, *A History of South Africa* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 1995), 225.

and further transcended the racial categories and divisions that had structured South African society before.[44]

On the international level, the increasing violence committed by the apartheid state in the 1980s furthered the international condemnation of apartheid, which had begun in the early 1960s. The UN General Assembly increasingly criticised South Africa for its racist policies and imposed economic and diplomatic sanctions between 1977 and 1989 in order to enforce reforms.[45] Other public and private actors joined in, notably the US Congress, which passed the Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act in 1986, and several American companies withdrew from their South African enterprises in order to protest against apartheid.[46] While most of the international sanctions remained non-binding due to the bifurcation of the international system and the political stance in particular of the Western powers,[47] the international reactions nevertheless intensified South Africa's economic problems and further challenged the identity of the apartheid state as an efficient, progressive and 'dynamic regime of accumulation' and growth.[48] Finally, the end of the Cold War and the fading of the communist threat as a credible means for the construction of political antagonism contributed to the dislocation. As Norval points out, the social categories that formed the backbone of apartheid were articulated not only through racial differentiation, but to a considerable degree also through the construction of the black resistance movements, unions and 'the African' as supporters of communism.[49] The breakdown of the Soviet Union weakened political exclusions made on the basis of communists vs. anti-communists, thus further compromising the social divisions of apartheid.[50]

Due to the national and international developments, apartheid was severely weakened by the mid- to late 1980s. It could neither provide credible explanations or interpretations of the events nor authoritative prescripts as to how to overcome the crisis, and the stalemate between the government and the resistance groups could only be maintained by brute force. As David Howarth puts it, the crisis was organic in the sense 'that it could not be repaired within the confines of the existing system, but required a more fundamental restructuring of the state'.[51]

The Articulation of 'Reconciliation' as an Empty Signifier

The structural dislocation of apartheid set the stage for the emergence of 'reconciliation' as a new empty universal and anchor for social reorganisation in South Africa. Shortly

44. Ibid., 228–9; Howarth, 'The Difficult Emergence of a Democratic Imaginary'.
45. Audie Klotz, *Norms in International Relations: The Struggle against Apartheid* (Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press, 1995), 39–54.
46. Thompson, *A History of South Africa*, 233–4.
47. Klotz, *Norms in International Relations*, 48–54.
48. Howarth, 'The Difficult Emergence of a Democratic Imaginary', 170.
49. Norval, *Deconstructing Apartheid Discourse*, 101–73.
50. Thompson, *A History of South Africa*, 243; Adrian Guelke, 'The Impact of the End of the Cold War on the South African Transition', *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 14, no. 1 (1996): 97–9.
51. Howarth, 'The Difficult Emergence of a Democratic Imaginary', 169. See also Norval, *Deconstructing Apartheid Discourse*, 177.

before and during the regime change, 'reconciliation' was increasingly appealed to by politicians from all sides and articulated as a vague social vision and reference point for political demands. Of course, the term 'reconciliation' was not new in South Africa at the time, but had been provided by sedimented discourses in this predominantly Christian country. As a political vision, however, reconciliation was heavily contested in the period before the transition. In 1985, for instance, the so-called Kairos Document was published by theologians from different religious denominations as a comment on the political crisis in South Africa from a religious perspective.[52] The Kairos Document was utterly sceptical towards reconciliation and argued that in a situation as in South Africa, where the violent oppression of the weak by the strong was the dominant political practice, '[t] o speak of reconciling these two is not only a mistaken application of the Christian idea of reconciliation, it is a total betrayal of all that Christian faith has ever meant'.[53] Reconciliation could only play a positive role in South Africa, it argued, if 'true reconciliation' was pursued, i.e. if reconciliation was reached on the basis of justice, which meant that the members of the apartheid state had to repent of their sins and accept punishment for the wrongs they had perpetrated. The Kairos Document thus privileged punitive justice over reconciliation and held that 'no reconciliation is possible in South Africa without justice'.[54]

This interpretation of reconciliation changed considerably in the time to follow. The rearticulation of reconciliation began, roughly, with President Frederik Willem de Klerk's inaugural address in September 1989, in which he appealed to reconciliation as the only possible path to a peaceful South Africa:

> Protest regarding past injustices or alleged injustice does not bring us closer to solutions either. Nor do unrest and violence. There is but one way to peace, to justice for all: That is the way of reconciliation; of together seeking mutually acceptable solutions; of together discussing what the new South Africa should look like; of constitutional negotiations with a view to a permanent understanding.[55]

By constructing reconciliation as a clear contrast to South Africa's then present situation, which he describes in terms of 'protest against alleged injustice,' 'unrest' and 'violence', de Klerk establishes reconciliation as a positive counterpart, a desirable Other, to this situation. As reconciliation was constructed as the opposite of the negative present situation – and nothing more than that – it was privileged as a desirable state of affairs for South Africa. Simultaneously, de Klerk articulated the vision of reconciliation as a representative and justification of his political demands by elaborating reconciliation in terms of his demands for cooperation and negotiations with his political adversaries. The passage from de Klerk's speech thus clearly displays two of the central mechanisms of

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52. Kairos, 'The Karios Document', in *Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa: The Fundamental Documents*, eds Erik Doxtader and Philippe-Joseph Salazar (Claremont: Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, 2007), 50.
53. Ibid., chapter 3.1.
54. Ibid.; cf. Moon, *Narrating Political Reconciliation.*, 32–5.
55. Frederik Willem de Klerk, 'Presidential Inaugural Address, 1989', in *Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa*, eds Doxtader and Salazar, 66.

hegemonic articulation: a) contrasting the new empty signifier with the negatively conceived present in order to establish it as the representative of a lack, and b) articulating the empty signifier as a representative of his particular political demands.

Similar articulations can be found in Nelson Mandela's response to de Klerk's speech. In his 'Document to Create a Climate of Understanding', Mandela wrote:

> It is the Government, and not the ANC, that started civil war in this country, and that does not want reconciliation and peace. How does one work for reconciliation and peace under a State of Emergency, with black areas under military occupation, when people's organisations are banned, leaders are either in exile, prison or restricted, when the policy of apartheid with its violence is still being enforced, and when no conditions for free political expression exist?[56]

In this passage Mandela falls back on similar discursive strategies to those of de Klerk. He also articulates reconciliation as a desirable ideal which the ANC respects and desires. He constructs reconciliation quite differently from de Klerk, however. Reconciliation is here contrasted not to violence and unrest in general but, specifically, to government-led violence and the repressive apartheid legislation. Mandela thus uses the same signifier as de Klerk, reconciliation, to delegitimise the South African status quo and to call for reforms. Thereby, Mandela deploys reconciliation as a device to reinforce his political demands for an end of apartheid legislation and for negotiations and cooperation. In both passages the speakers privilege the vague vision of reconciliation over the violent situation of South Africa, thereby establishing reconciliation as a powerful signifier.

In the period that followed, the articulation of reconciliation as a powerful vision of the new South Africa and as a representative of political claims continued. Reconciliation came to function as a common representative and justification of a wide range of contested political demands, thereby being emptied of its particular content. This can be illustrated through the so-called CODESA talks,[57] which were held as multi-party negotiations in 1991 and 1992 and negotiated the future shape of South Africa.[58] The parties were divided over most of the issues that were debated, such as the organisation of the future state (centralism vs. federalism), decision-making mechanisms, minority protection (which essentially meant a veto provision for the white minority), possible power-sharing arrangements, and the question of how to deal with past human rights violations.[59] The ANC and the NP, still the major parties in the negotiations on whose compromise any settlement hinged, were caught in a power stalemate. De Klerk's NP lacked international support and credible black allies at the national level, thus being dependent on the ANC's consent to its central demand for a power-sharing agreement under an interim government.[60] The ANC, in turn, was weakened by ongoing internal divisions between

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56. Nelson Mandela, 'A Document to Create a Climate of Understanding: Document forwarded by Nelson Mandela to F.W. de Klerk on 12 December 1989' (Pretoria, 1989).
57. CODESA stands for Convention for a Democratic South Africa.
58. Berat and Shain, 'Retribution or Truth-Telling'; Bell and Ntsebeza, *Unfinished Business*.
59. Berat and Shain, 'Retribution or Truth-Telling'.
60. Rantete and Giliome, 'Transition to Democracy', 516–18.

those who promoted a negotiated transition and those who advocated revolutionary armed struggle.[61] The elites of both parties were therefore forced to look for compromises to keep the negotiations going and to reach their shared goal of a negotiated, non-violent transition.[62]

In the negotiations, the negotiators again fell back on vague calls for 'reconciliation' to found their political claims and to justify the compromises they had to make. The demand for a power-sharing agreement in the shape of a Government of National Unity advanced by the NP was controversial, as it was seen by the ANC as an attempt to maintain white power.[63] In his 'Statement on the Timetable for Further Constitutional Reform' of 26 November 1992, de Klerk reinforced his claim by constructing a causal link between a Government of National Unity and the goal of reconciliation:

> The immense challenge of national reconciliation and reconstruction can be successfully carried out only with the co-operation of all leading parties … To us power-sharing is a constitutional arrangement ensuring that all parties with significant support will have meaningful participation in all areas of government at all levels. A Government of National Unity is accordingly becoming a key concept.[64]

Similar discursive patterns can be found in regard to the contested issue of the release of political prisoners and an amnesty provision for human rights violations of the past. Throughout the negotiations, it had been a central demand of the ANC that the political prisoners, predominantly activists of the ANC or the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), be released as an important precondition for a peaceful transition. The NP, in contrast, had requested a general amnesty law for the members of the apartheid state as one of its most central demands. It increasingly seized upon an amnesty plan put forward by the United Nations and proposed that the ANC accept such a policy in exchange for the release of its members detained as political prisoners.[65] The ANC resolutely opposed a blanket amnesty, however, as well as the linkage between an amnesty provision and the release of political prisoners. Indeed, from within the ANC, as well as the PAC, voices had repeatedly been raised that demanded the most high-ranking members of the apartheid regime be brought to justice and prosecuted by holding criminal trials in the style of Nuremberg.[66]

Due to the deadlock between the parties, the difficult decisions were again taken predominantly by the elites of both parties. In a letter sent to Nelson Mandela on 24

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61. Ibid.
62. Ibid., 520; Berat and Shain, 'Retribution or Truth-Telling', 164.
63. Thompson, *A History of South Africa*, 247–9.
64. Frederik Willem de Klerk, 'Statement by President F.W. de Klerk on the Timetable for Further Constitutional Reform, 26 November 1992' (Johannesburg, 1992).
65. Berat and Shain, 'Retribution or Truth-Telling', 176.
66. Charles Villa-Vicencio, 'Restorative Justice in Social Context: The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission', in *Burying the Past: Making Peace and Doing Justice after Civil Conflict*, ed. Nigel Biggar (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2001); Berat and Shain, 'Retribution or Truth-Telling', 183.

September 1992, de Klerk finally announced that the NP government had decided to give in on the release of political prisoners, again in the name of reconciliation:

> We have given careful consideration to the matter and wish to inform you that the government has decided to do the following … the Government's position has been that all political prisoners have been released in terms of agreed upon and internationally accepted guidelines. In a spirit of reconciliation, we will now also release all prisoners falling outside those guidelines who have committed crimes with a political motivation … [the legislation] will deal aquitably [*sic*] with those prisoners whose release can make a contribution to reconciliation.[67]

In regard to the amnesty question, no compromise could be found in open negotiations so the issue was finally negotiated in secret talks, and thus, as Richard Wilson points out, 'eventually decided by an exclusive political deal between the NP and the ANC'.[68] In these talks 'reconciliation' was again an important linguistic device in the amnesty negotiations, 'with the major political players burying the issue under sweeping and generous notions of reconciliation'.[69] Appeals to vague ideas of 'reconciliation' were a means to avoid a new and massive crisis of the negotiation process and helped both parties to stick to their 'own idea' of dealing with human rights violations.[70] The secret negotiations led to an agreement on an amnesty provision which was fixed in a postscript to the Interim Constitution as a central step towards peace and reconciliation. While the agreement might be traced back to the 'limited powers of the ANC to call for prosecutions',[71] it could also have been the result of the more subtle threats of the security forces, who promised Mandela they would guarantee stability during the transition in return for the guarantee of an amnesty. Without such an amnesty provision, they claimed, stability would be impossible.[72] The postscript legitimised the amnesty provision with reference to reconciliation and articulated a close link between the two signifiers:

> The pursuit of national unity, the well-being of all South African citizens and peace require reconciliation between the people of South Africa and the reconstruction of society … In order to advance such reconciliation and reconstruction, amnesty shall be granted in respect of acts, omissions and offenses associated with political objectives and committed in the course of the conflicts of the past.[73]

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67. Frederik Willem de Klerk, 'Letter from State President F.W. de Klerk to Nelson Mandela President of the ANC, 24 September 1992' (Pretoria, 1992).
68. Richard A. Wilson, *The Politics of Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 7.
69. Jody Narandran Kollapen, 'Accountability: The Debate in South Africa', *Journal of African Law* 37, no. 1 (1993): 3.
70. Ibid., 4.
71. Moon, *Narrating Political Reconciliation*, 31.
72. Berat and Shain, 'Retribution or Truth-Telling', 182–3.
73. Interim Constitution, South Africa: http://www.servat.unibe.ch/icl/sf10000_.html, 1993 (accessed 12 March 2013).

The fixing of the amnesty provision in terms of reconciliation was an incisive step in the hegemonic articulation process. On the one hand, the Interim Constitution was an important caesura in the articulation process, as it marked the beginning of the institutionalisation of the South African reconciliation discourse and formally codified amnesty as a central mechanism of reconciliation. On the other hand, however, it thereby also implicitly formalised the exclusion of the calls for punishment from the reconciliation discourse in that it closed off the possibility to legitimately pursue punitive justice in South Africa. As reconciliation, the privileged ideal and empty signifier of the negotiations, was now firmly linked with the amnesty provision, amnesty was established as the central path to reconciliation and, accordingly, punishment was not a legitimate option anymore. As will be seen below, this exclusion remained a pattern in the construction of the reconciliation discourse; calls for the criminal prosecution and punishment of high-ranking regime members were silenced as punishment was articulated as the inferior Other to reconciliation.

The Articulation of 'Reconciliation' as 'Healing' and 'Truth-Telling'

After the Interim Constitution had codified reconciliation as the overarching ideal of the transition, the construction of reconciliation changed in a number of ways. It was now predominantly civil society that further articulated the reconciliation discourse, and the quality of the reconciliation discourse changed, as new and different meaning elements were articulated in relation to reconciliation. Reconciliation was now increasingly related to the meanings that are dominant in the global reconciliation discourse today, such as truth-telling and healing.

As Kollapen reports, after the Interim Constitution there was a wide-ranging consensus among diverse social groups in South Africa that the past had to be dealt with somehow, despite the amnesty provision. However, a common position was hard to reach.[74] Central for the public discussion were two workshops held in February and July 1994 where South African social elites came together with lawyers and activists from other transitional states in South America and Eastern Europe, as well as members of transnational NGOs, in order to reflect on possibilities for how to approach the difficult task of implementing the amnesty provision.[75] In this context, claims to prosecute members of the regime and bring them to justice were voiced by workshop participants, in parallel with demands for the establishment of a truth commission. Overall, three dominant claims were raised and justified in the name of reconciliation: forgiveness, punishment, and truth-telling and acknowledging the past.

The importance of justice and punishment for the achievement of reconciliation was emphasised, for example, by John de Bruchy, a Cape Town based professor, and by Juan Méndez, an important figure in Human Rights Watch. Trying to reinvigorate the

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74. Kollapen, 'Accountability', 6.
75. Moon, *Narrating Political Reconciliation*, 31. For the speeches and discussions from the workshops, see Alex Boraine, Janet Levy and Ronel Scheffer, eds, *Dealing with the Past: Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa* (Cape Town: IDASA, 1997); Alex Boraine and Janet Levy, eds, *The Healing of a Nation?* (Cape Town: Justice in Transition, 1995).

construction of reconciliation suggested by the Kairos Document, Méndez stressed that 'reconciliation can only be achieved after some measure of justice has occurred'.[76] However, such claims, which tried to establish justice as a central step towards reconciliation, were increasingly excluded from the articulation processes. Instead, punishment was articulated in a relation of contrast to reconciliation and opposed to it as an undesirable Other, whereas truth-telling and the acknowledgement of the past came to be established as central mechanisms of reconciliation.

José Zalaquett, for instance, a former member of the Chilean truth commission, stressed the moral superiority of forgiveness over punishment and justified this privileging by reference to reconciliation: 'Punishment or forgiveness are thus not ends in themselves … there is a long-standing tradition, both religious and humanistic, that establishes a moral superiority of forgiveness and reconciliation over punishment.'[77]

This contrast between reconciliation and punishment was reinforced by Kader Asmal, one of the later architects of the TRC, who further emphasised that '[t]he whole idea behind a Truth and Reconciliation Commission is that a punitive process against the perpetrators would not be the right way to go about dealing with the past'.[78]

Over time, calls for truth-telling and acknowledgement of the past in the name of reconciliation became the dominant claims raised in the workshops and silenced alternative calls for the punishment of perpetrators. The former ANC executive director Albie Sachs, for instance, articulated his claims for truth-telling in relation to reconciliation:

> the amnesty [of the Interim Constitution] is balanced out with the concept of reconciliation and reconstruction. It is not a reconciliation to bury and forget the past, which means to continue with the past; it is to assume responsibility for the past and correct the imbalances and injustices.[79]

The positive relation between reconciliation and the demand to reveal the truth about and acknowledge the past was established by a number of other participants and was repeated throughout the workshop. In the later stages, truth-telling and acknowledgement were replaced more and more by demands for a truth commission, which was soon generally referred to as a 'truth and reconciliation commission' whose role should be to bring about the reconciliation of South Africans.

At the end of the February workshop, the creation of a truth commission had emerged as the major demand of civil society, which was submitted to President Nelson Mandela in a letter, which again emphasised the necessity of such a commission for reconciliation in South Africa:

76. Juan Mendez, 'Prosecution: Who and for What?', in *Dealing with the Past*, eds Boraine et al., 92.
77. José Zalaquett, 'Commissions of Truth and Reconciliation', in *The Healing of a Nation?*, eds Boraine and Levy, 46.
78. Kader Asmal, 'The Challenge Facing South Africa', in *The Healing of a Nation?*, eds Boraine and Levy, 28.
79. Albie Sachs, 'South African Response', in *Dealing with the Past*, eds Boraine et al., 128.

> South Africa is a deeply divided society and a major aim for the new Government of National Unity will be to work urgently towards national reconciliation. It is with this central aim in mind that it is proposed that a Commission of Truth and Reconciliation be appointed as a matter of urgency. Its major purpose will be to give effect to reconciliation by seeking the truth and reality of South Africa's past.[80]

After Mandela had consented to the idea, a second workshop was held in order to further develop the concept of a truth commission. Here, in particular claims for forgiveness and healing were increasingly articulated in a positive relation to reconciliation. An exemplary statement in this regard is the opening statement by Minister of Justice Dullah Omar, who constructed reconciliation in these terms:

> we are fortunate in having a president who is committed to genuine reconciliation in our country … President Nelson Mandela believes, and many of us support him in this belief, that the truth concerning human rights violations in South Africa should not be suppressed or forgotten. Such violations should be investigated, recorded and made known. Therefore the president supports the setting up of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission … There is now a commitment to break with the past, to heal the wounds of the past, to forgive but not to forget, and to build a future based on respect for human rights.[81]

The demand for healing and forgiveness in the name of reconciliation was rearticulated by several speakers throughout the conference, and the ideas of healing and forgiveness became a common claim raised in the name of reconciliation. Mamphela Ramphele, from the University of Cape Town, prominently brought up the healing metaphor and emphasised the need to heal and to clean the wounds from the past in order to reach reconciliation:

> A medical metaphor best captures what I perceive to be the issue facing us in relation to 'appeasing the past'. An abscess cannot heal properly unless it is thoroughly incised and cleaned out. But the process of incision and cleansing is not without pain, even with modern anaesthesia. Pain is thus an integral component of the cleansing process which precedes healing … if the desired goal is reconciliation then the incision must be wide enough yet it must spare the vital organs.[82]

It is clear from the statements made in the workshops that the participants drew quite a different picture of reconciliation from that outlined by the major parties during the transitional negotiations. Whereas in the transitional negotiations reconciliation was related to a range of political demands such as the release of political prisoners, cooperation or an end to violence, the workshop participants raised more emotional and spiritual demands and constructed reconciliation in terms of truth and

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80. Alex Boraine, *A Country Unmasked* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 2000), 32.
81. Dullah Omar, 'Building a New Future', in *The Healing of a Nation?*, eds Boraine and Levy, 2–3.
82. Mamphela Ramphele, 'The Challenge Facing South Africa', in *The Healing of a Nation?*, eds Boraine and Levy, 34–6.

acknowledgement, forgiveness and healing. The significant change in the quality and content of the reconciliation discourse in this second phase again suggests that the term reconciliation in itself was sufficiently vague and flexible to be related to a number of different claims and meanings, depending on the context and the issue at stake.

The constructions of reconciliation that were articulated in the two workshops were eventually codified and institutionalised in the legal documents that inaugurated the TRC, the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Bill, which was enacted as the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act on 26 July 1995. Both documents codify and institutionalise the construction of reconciliation from the workshops. The Explanatory Memorandum to the Parliamentary Bill again stresses the interpretation of reconciliation as truth-revelation, forgiveness and healing:

> The purpose of the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Bill, 1995, is to bring about unity and reconciliation by providing for the investigation and full disclosures of gross violations of human rights committed in the past. It is based on the principle that reconciliation depends on forgiveness and that forgiveness can only take place if gross violations of human rights are fully disclosed. What is, therefore, envisaged is reconciliation through a process of national healing.[83]

The Stabilisation of the Reconciliation Discourse through the TRC

After the setting up of the TRC in 1995, the commission became the major site where the reconciliation discourse was further articulated, stabilised and institutionalised. The language used by the TRC reinforced the discursive links between reconciliation, truth-telling and healing, and, as Moon argues, the image of 'healing the wounds from the past' and the idea of 'forgiveness' were central elements of the TRC's language throughout its workings.[84] Of particular relevance for the further articulation and stabilisation of the reconciliation discourse were the TRC's Human Rights Violations Hearings, where the victims of human rights violations could come forward and tell the commissioners and the wider public about their suffering.[85] In these hearings a strong linguistic emphasis was put on the idea of reconciliation, healing and forgiveness, so that the hearings, with the practices of public truth-telling by victims as well as the commissioners' listening to and consolidating the victims, were discursively tied back to these terms. After listening to the stories told by the victims and asking questions, the commissioners often expressed their empathy and compassion for the suffering of the victims and pointed out the importance of the testimonials for the wider reconciliation process.

One illustrative example is a victim hearing held in Cape Town on 23 April 1996, where a woman named Nomvuyo Priscilla Zantsi told the story of her brother, who was shot by the police in a student riot. Having listened to Priscilla's story, the chairperson

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83. Explanatory Memorandum to the Parliamentary Bill, South Africa: http://www.doj.gov.za/trc/legal/bill.htm, 1995.
84. Moon, 'Reconciliation as Therapy and Compensation', 164.
85. Wilson, *The Politics of Truth and Reconciliation*; Humphrey, *The Politics of Atrocity and Reconciliation*, 111.

concluded the session with words of understanding and consolation and pointed at the healing effect of the testimonial:

> Priscila (*sic*) and you mamma thank you very much, we know that this – this revival of all this atrocities – we know that all these hurt. We hope that by doing this, that this is going to heal you too, all your wounds will also be healed. The reason why we tell all these stories is because we want our nation to know everything that was done in the past. So that what we have today, this new freedom, so that everybody should know that we got it at a very high price, thank you.[86]

The discursive link between reconciliation, healing and forgiveness was repeatedly articulated by the commissioners during the hearings, and statements similar to the example above can be found in other victim hearings. As Richard Wilson reports, several victim hearings would end with the commissioners stressing their hopes that '[t]he experience of coming before the TRC would "heal wounds" and smooth over resentments. Once individual suffering was valorized and linked to a national process of liberation, it was possible to urge victims to forgive perpetrators and abandon any desire for retaliation.'[87] Annelies Verdoolaege similarly writes that the commissioners 'sometimes urged the victims to speak out in favour of reconciliation – in particular having the testifiers *pronounce* terms such as "reconciliation" or "forgiveness" appeared to be of the utmost concern'.[88]

The extensive use of the reconciliation language during the TRC's victim hearings emphasised the role of truth-telling and the public testimony of victims as a central reconciliation practice, as it was this practice that was explicitly related to reconciliation. The language used by the commissioners reinforced and stabilised the discursive link between reconciliation, forgiveness and healing, as these discursive components were constantly emphasised.[89]

While the TRC thus stabilised the discursive construction of reconciliation as truth-telling, forgiveness and healing, and consolidated the truth commission as a central institution and practice thereof, it also stabilised the exclusion of punishment as an inferior or even immoral alternative means of dealing with the past. For instance, the TRC rearticulated the opposition between reconciliation and punishment by offering a reinterpretation of justice as a 'restorative' African kind that contributes to reconciliation, on the one hand, and a 'retributive' Western kind that is opposed to reconciliation, on the other. This distinction is made explicit, for instance, in the final report of the TRC, which argues that:

> Certainly, amnesty cannot be viewed as justice if we think of justice only as retributive and punitive in nature. We believe, however, that there is another kind of justice – a restorative justice which is concerned not so much with punishment as with correcting imbalances, restoring broken relationships – with healing, harmony and reconciliation.[90]

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86. This transcript, as well as the transcripts of all other victim hearings, are available at: http://www.doj.gov.za/trc/trc_frameset.htm (accessed 18 August 2009).
87. Wilson, *The Politics of Truth and Reconciliation*, 119.
88. Verdoolaege, *Reconciliation Discourse*, 61.
89. Moon, 'Reconciliation as Therapy and Compensation', 163.
90. TRC, 'Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report' (Cape Town, South Africa, 2003), Volume 1, 9. Cf. Wilson, *The Politics of Truth and Reconciliation*, 10.

With this dichotomy between reconciliation/healing, on the one hand, and retribution/ punishment, on the other, the TRC reproduced the discursive frontiers set by the reconciliation discourse and, as Wilson points out, created a strong polarity which 'close[d] down the space to discuss fully the middle position – the pursuit of legal retribution as a possible route to reconciliation in itself'.[91]

While forgiveness, healing and restorative justice were thus the hegemonic interpretations of reconciliation in the context of the TRC, they were not uncontested and several people tried to resist urges to forgive their former perpetrators. Lynn Graybill reports, for example, how numerous South Africans criticised the Christian overtones of the reconciliation discourse and complained about 'the imposition of a Christian morality of forgiveness'.[92] Fred Hendricks similarly reports how individual witnesses in the hearings refused to forgive for several reasons. While some pointed to their unchanged lives which still forced them to live in poverty, thus making it impossible to forgive, others simply refused to participate in the very process of forgiving.[93]

From South Africa to the Global Politics of Reconciliation

I have argued so far that the understanding of reconciliation that underpinned the South African reconciliation process was produced by a hegemonic reconciliation discourse that was the contingent product of the political claims raised by the protagonists of the South African transition. Rather than having an intrinsic moral value, the authority of reconciliation was founded on its privileging over justice and violence and its emptying out, as reconciliation was articulated as an empty signifier which served the antagonistic ANC and NP parties as well as some civil society actors in advancing their political claims. Furthermore, the current interpretation of reconciliation as healing through truth-telling is not based on a deeper 'truth' about reconciliation. It is one contingent understanding of reconciliation that was articulated through the particular political claims raised by some groups during South Africa's transition.

Despite its contingency, the South African reconciliation discourse has proliferated around the world and now functions as a template for reconciliation processes in other transitional or post-conflict countries. This global proliferation, as I elaborate in more detail elsewhere,[94] has been propelled by two developments. First, the South African transition and its reconciliation discourse were part of and fed into the global discourse on transitional justice, in the context of which the reconciliation discourse could globalise. The transitional

91. Wilson, *The Politics of Truth and Reconciliation*, 11; Moon, *Narrating Political Reconciliation*, 36.

92. Lyn S. Graybill, 'South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission: Ethical and Theological Perspectives', *Ethics and International Affairs* 12, no. 1 (1998): 46.

93. Quoted in Fred Hendricks, 'Jettisoning Justice. The Case of Amnesty in South Africa', in *Gathering Voices: Perspectives on the Social Sciences in Southern Africa. Proceedings of the ISA Regional Conference for Southern Africa*, eds Teresa Cruz María e Silva, Ari Sitas and María Luz Morán (Durban: Secrétariat du XIVe Congrès mondial de sociologie, 1996), 99.

94. Judith Renner, *Discourse, Normative Change and the Quest for Reconciliation in Global Politics* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013).

justice debate was triggered by the so-called 'third wave' of democratisation,[95] which began in the mid-1970s with the democratisation processes in Southern Europe and comprised the subsequent regime changes in Latin and South America, Africa and Eastern Europe. While in the early years retributive justice, i.e. the criminal prosecution and punishment of members of the previous regimes, was seen as the appropriate response to past injustice,[96] the meaning of justice and its position as a nodal point of the emerging transitional justice discourse were increasingly subverted from the late 1980s onwards. On the one hand, the legal basis of justice in times of transition was highly contested, as it was unclear whether this justice should be based on national or on international criminal law, on international human rights law, on humanitarian law or on some kind of natural law, as all were seen as potentially conflicting with perceptions of justice in transitional situations.[97] On the other hand, the normative claims of justice were contested, since justice was constructed by some in terms of 'backward-looking' justice, with a focus on the proportionate punishment of the wrongs committed in the past, and by others as 'forward-looking' justice, with a focus on the provision of liberal rule, peace and political stability in the future.[98] The dislocation of justice as an authoritative reference point of the transitional justice discourse created a space for discursive innovation and the articulation of alternative transitional ideals. After the South African experience, reconciliation was increasingly promoted as a competing transitional ideal to justice, and its understanding in terms of truth-telling and healing was rearticulated as an authoritative template of reconciliation beyond the South African confines.[99]

Second, the global success of reconciliation has been propelled by a coalition of agents which emerged as *entrepreneurs of reconciliation* after the South African experience. The authorisation of the South African reconciliation process went hand in hand with the emergence of South African individuals as influential experts on reconciliation in global politics. The TRC's chair, Archbishop Tutu, and his vice-chair, Alex Boraine, for instance, as well as other TRC members, are influential scholars of transitional justice research today and spread the 'knowledge' about reconciliation in the academic discourse.[100] They also sit on the boards of influential policy advice institutes, such as the International Center for Transitional Justice or the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, which have been involved in numerous reconciliation processes around the globe.[101] The rise of this expert force of reconciliation in global politics has been noticed by several

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95. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).
96. Cf. Ruti Teitel, 'Transitional Justice Genealogy', *Harvard Human Rights Journal* 16 (2003): 69–94.
97. Christine Bell, Colm Campbell and Fionnuala Ní Aoláin, 'Justice Discourses in Transition', *Social and Legal Studies* 13, no. 3 (2004): 305–28; Ruti Teitel, *Transitional Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).
98. Teitel, *Transitional Justice*; Teitel, 'Transitional Justice Genealogy'.
99. Cf. Teitel, 'Transitional Justice Genealogy'; Rotberg and Thompson, eds, *Truth v. Justice*.
100. See for example Desmond Tutu, 'Reflections on Moral Accountability', *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 1 (2007): 6–7; Alex Boraine, 'Transitional Justice: A Holistic Interpretation', *Journal of International Affairs* 60, no. 1 (2006): 17–27.
101. For example in East Timor, Sierra Leone or the Solomon Islands. See the website on the ICTJ's activities: http://ictj.org/our-work (accessed 12 March 2013).

authors, who speak about a downright 'reconciliation industry' that spreads the South African 'knowledge' about reconciliation in global politics.[102]

While the 'knowledge' that reconciliation can – and should – be pursued through public truth-telling processes is often accepted in global politics today, the argument offered here suggests conceiving of the global reconciliation project more critically than is often the case. I do not want to propose that there is a right way or a proper understanding of reconciliation that should guide global politics instead. What I want to suggest is, rather, that more attention should be paid to the more subtle effects of the global reconciliation discourse, which are easily overlooked if the truth claims and the normative authority of reconciliation are too readily accepted. Three potential problems shall briefly be sketched here. First, the almost automatic implementation of reconciliation in post-conflict societies tends to ignore resistance to and alternative interpretations of reconciliation that deviate from the globally dominant understanding. In Sierra Leone, for instance, many people did not interpret reconciliation in terms of truth-telling, but would have preferred a 'forgive and forget' approach in order to get over the past.[103] Resistance against the official reconciliation process culminated in the refusal of whole communities to participate in the truth-telling process and in the initiation of separate reintegration rituals which were, however, often interrupted by the TRC's official hearings.[104]

Second, the hegemonic understanding of reconciliation as healing through public truth-telling tends to privilege symbolic restitution practices over other kinds of restitution, in particular financial help for post-conflict societies. In South Africa already the TRC's relative neglect of financial help in favour of symbolic gestures attracted criticism from numerous people and finally led to a lawsuit by the Khulumani Support Group, which seeks to enforce individual compensations for victims.[105] Protests against the neglect of material restitution also surfaced in Sierra Leone, where many of those who testified before the commission expected payments or other kinds of material assistance for their participation and explicitly asked the commissioners whether they would get compensation for their cooperation.[106]

Third, the focus of global reconciliation politics on the restoration of community in divided societies tends to silence political struggles over the reorganisation of these communities and takes the restoration of community as given. As Andrew Schaap convincingly argues, '[t]he therapeutic or religious terms in which reconciliation is often construed presume the existence of unity and community, and have the effect "to depoliticize the terms in which the unity of the polity is represented"'.[107] The problem with

102. Moon, *Narrating Political Reconciliation*, 2; Hirsch, 'Agents of Truth and Justice', 197–201.
103. Rosalind Shaw, 'Memory Frictions: Localizing the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Sierra Leone', *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 1 (2007): 184.
104. Rosalind Shaw, 'Rethinking Truth and Reconciliation Commissions: Lessons from Sierra Leone', in *United States Institute of Peace Special Report* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2005), 8–9.
105. Moon, *Narrating Political Reconciliation*, 144–51.
106. Shaw, 'Memory Frictions', 197.
107. Andrew Schaap, 'Agonism in Divided Societies', *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 32, no. 2 (2006): 259.

this, according to Schaap, is that unity and community cannot be presumed in post-conflict societies. 'For the identity of the *demos* is precisely what cannot be taken for granted in divided societies but is what democratization aims to bring about.'[108] If reconciliation in its present interpretation is brought to a post-conflict society as a ready-made social vision, it deprives the population of the possibility to decide how and under what conditions a new society and a new social order are to be established.

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Author Biography

Judith Renner is Assistant Professor for Political Science at the Technische Universität München. Her research focuses on discourse theory, peace and conflict as well as human and animal rights.

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108. Ibid., 256.