

Human Rights & Human Welfare

Volume 6 | Issue 1

Article 8

10-2006

Kimberly Lanegran on Telling the Truths: Truth Telling and Peace Building in Post-Conflict Societies. Edited by Tristan Anne Borer. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006. 316 pp.

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Recommended Citation

Lanegran, Kimberly (2006) "Kimberly Lanegran on Telling the Truths: Truth Telling and Peace Building in Post-Conflict Societies. Edited by Tristan Anne Borer. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006. 316 pp.," *Human Rights & Human Welfare*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 1 , Article 8.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/hrhw/vol6/iss1/8>

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Telling the Truths: Truth Telling and Peace Building in Post-Conflict Societies. Edited by Tristan Anne Borer. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006. 316 pp.

This collection, edited by Tristan Anne Borer, demonstrates that scholarship of transitional justice and truth-telling structures is reaching a new stage of maturity. This interdisciplinary group of scholars and practitioners confront and problematize a number of aspirational assumptions found in the discourse between both scholars and policy-makers about the utility of truth commissions. The authors explicitly question the value of truth telling for countries emerging from protracted conflicts, call for modest expectations of any single attempt to hasten reconciliation, and present nuanced interpretations of the complexities of truth telling and peace building.

The central question of the book is: “Will truth bring peace?” Thus, the authors integrate the literature of conflict resolution and peace-building with scholarship of transitional justice—a worthy and hitherto largely neglected task. Ultimately, as Borer states, their final answer is “an extremely modest ‘it depends’” (43). The authors’ passion, regarding the need for truths to be told, courses through their words. But they look with clear eyes on the complexities of the tasks confronting truth-telling efforts and the specific shortcomings of individual mechanisms.

A number of the authors explicitly reject the tendency toward vague and aspirational conceptualizations that weaken much of the transitional justice and peace making literature. Tristan Borer offers a theoretical chapter that defines concepts, central to her proposed research agenda, for carefully examining how truth telling may contribute to sustainable peace. Charles Villa-Vicencio defines and advocates a rather limited goal of “political reconciliation” in which forgiveness need not be achieved, yet victims and perpetrators do “learn to live together in pursuit of the common good” (60). David Becker similarly seeks realistic expectations for confronting truth. He condemns the “illusion of harmony” (231) for leading to false expectations of the scale and type of repair that can actually follow periods of wide-scale atrocities. He suggests that being realistic about healing a community means integrating anger, pain, and even lasting hate into a broad shared commitment to go on living together.

Other authors address more specific challenges to truth-telling projects. Debra DeLaet convincingly argues that truth commissions must demonstrate an ability to address the gendered aspects of violence and truth. Incomplete biased truths result from commissions that inadequately confront how women and men experience, perpetrate, and discuss violence in different ways. Brandon Hamber argues that truth-telling efforts must clearly link present conditions with past human rights abuses if the result is to actually make future violence less likely. South Africa’s culture of violence survived its Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and its human rights culture remains underdeveloped. He links this sad reality to the commission’s insufficient understanding of the impact of political violence, inadequate interpretation of the meaning and context of Apartheid’s crimes, and misguided effort to make a “break with the past.”

Three other authors highlight positive possibilities inherent in truth-telling projects. Jennifer Llewellyn presents a careful interpretation of restorative justice and argues that restoring relationships is the ultimate end of all justice. She feels that the restorative approach has been trapped into a limited temporal space by being so closely associated with transitional justice.

However, it is also possible that the visibility of restorative justice in the work of truth commissions will enable more people to see its potential value in formal judicial structures like courts. Pablo de Greiff offers an elegant hypothesis concerning how truth commissions may contribute to supporting the rule of law. He highlights the potential of commissions to promote both a richer understanding of the rule of law and trust in institutions, as well as stimulate public debates about the desired “good society.” Shari Eppel’s chapter is the only case study and the only contribution to eschew theorizing. She offers a fascinating story of one NGO’s peace-building efforts in Zimbabwe in which the community’s most pressing need was assistance for the aggrieved spirits of the murdered dead. Here, healing the community required healing the dead.

These authors do not seek to identify the specific factors or conditions that determine whether truth-telling structures contribute to sustainable peace. They find evidence of some failures, as in Haiti, and some successes, as in South Africa. Collectively they discuss cases and raise questions and hypotheses that can inspire a new research agenda into the relationship between truth and peace. This book’s careful arguments will doubtless help a specialized audience refine models of truth-telling and peace-building processes as it inspires further careful research and questioning. One hopes that policy-makers considering launching truth commissions will also avail themselves of the authors’ insights and cautions.

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October 2006