We are never, Winter has remarked, the first people to know who we are. But if collective memory is the outcome of agency, in South Africa it may often seem that we need to approach the construction of memory from the other way round: Is it less, here, that private memories shape collective remembrance than vice versa? Does the challenge then become how we can create a collective memory that is multiple, flickering with the many meanings that individual experience can collectively bring to it?

Memories, like stories, can never be ‘free’. They will always be laden with meaning – less crudely ideological, always, than narratorial (which may nevertheless constitute a kind of ‘freedom’). But what I have meant to show here is just how difficult the ‘freeing’ of memory – not a ‘fullness’ so much as a more fully realized vision of the social and private dimensions of experience – is proving in South Africa.

Orality, memory, and social history in South Africa

The first half of 1996 was marked by significant events for the reworking of memory and the production of history in South Africa. Two such events, the start of the hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) into gross human rights violations, and the release of Charles van Onselen’s 649-page epic, The Seed Is Mine, occurred almost simultaneously. These separate events, on very different scales and in settings quite removed from each other, raise the issues of the relationship between individual testimony, evidence, and historical memory.

The TRC has been hearing personal narratives – presented as testimony – of the apartheid era from both victims and perpetrators. It is concerned to document these as part of the process of remaking collective memory of the past on an inclusive and national scale. Van Onselen’s life history is of Kas Maine, a sharecropper who lived on the Highveld. It is built upon the deep layering of oral testimony as biography, and is concerned with the cultural and social meanings of memory. The TRC, on the other hand, is concerned with a politics of memory in which the past is uncovered for the purposes of political reconciliation in the present.

The two processes, though seemingly unrelated, are not quite as much at odds as they might seem: The Seed Is Mine publicly places the social experience of black rural lives into a collective memory of cultural osmosis, interaction, and reconciliation; the
The historical narratives produced by South African social historians have relied on the idea of ‘lived experience’, as communicated through oral testimony, as a means of overcoming the silences of written sources. This approach saw oral testimony as the voice of authenticity, and memory as being transparent. Paul La Hauß, writing in *Radical History Review* in 1990, argued that the general character of South African oral historiography reflected the tensions between ‘life histories’, the recovering of ‘subjective popular experiences’ in rural and urban settings, and the retrieval of largely unwritten and non-literate ‘underclass’ experiences. The focus of social history in South Africa ranged across apparently diverse fields, from portraits of black lives on the Highveld to the ‘moral economies’ of urban mineworkers and squatter proletarians; from the local traditions of resistance amongst rural workers to migrant organization, criminality, and working-class life under urban apartheid. Yet La Hauß (1990), as well as much of the historical work he reviewed, was markedly silent about memory as either a theoretical or historical category.\(^1\)

Tim Keegan has been one of the few to point out that ‘individual memory is usually an indispensable source of evidence at the historian’s disposal’ but that ‘human memory is given to error, misconception, elision, distortion, elaboration and downright fabrication’ (1988, 159–62). At the same time, Keegan argues that ‘in the narratives of ordinary people’s lives we begin to see some of the major forces of history at work, large social forces that are arguably the real key to understanding the past’ (ibid., 168). Here the concept of memory represents more than individual experience and stands for collective social and economic experience, particularly as it relates to class.

In the 1980s the emergence of the *ANC* front organization, the United Democratic Front (UDF), saw the emergence of a perspective which collapsed national and class teleologies into one of ‘the people’. ‘History from below’ was ‘people’s history’ and was connected to struggles for ‘people’s power’ and ‘people’s
education'. Authentic 'voices from below' became those of nationalist leaders. More importantly though, social history came to be mobilized in support of building a national movement on the basis of the dominant resistance politics of the 1950s. Individual memory, sourced through 'resistance voices', recollected 'the memory of a people' and implied an unstated collective memory of resistance. The 'people', imagined as a visible, assembled body, were granted collective memory through the accumulation of their leaders' voices, through the integrity ascribed to the memory and identity of individual nationalist leaders.

Social historians, such as those involved in the History Workshop at the University of the Witwatersrand, became involved in popularizing the South African past and making academic knowledge 'accessible'. Three popular histories, written by Luli Callinicos, were produced. In addition, a series of popular articles for the weekly newspaper New Nation was published later as a collection, New Nation, New History. A slide-tape production on squatter movements in Soweto, called Fight Where We Stand, and a six-part documentary entitled Soweto: A History have also been produced. While Fight Where We Stand used actual transcripts it consisted of the motionless images and projected voices of actors; the video series, largely inspired by the model of the slide-tape, consisted of 'real people in motion', synchronized with 'real voices', conveying 'real experiences'. Here, oral history had been used as the 'voice of the people', or even the 'voice of the worker', authenticating academic research and the 'scholarly findings of the new school' (Bonner 1994, 6). In the place of national leaders, the previously submerged 'ordinary' voices and images construct the analogies of community and class identities as ideal and representative of collective memory.

South African engagement with social history in the 1980s took the form of two narratives. One was academic, based on culturalist notions of class and consciousness and the other popular, located within the cultural politics of nationalism. These were parallel and compatible resistance narratives. While social history claimed to draw its inspiration and its knowledge from the working class, its research was largely focused on the sphere of 'reproduction'. People's history produced a politics of history as weapon, tool, and vehicle for empowerment, as part of 'a broad project to develop an education for a post-apartheid South Africa'. Both narratives drew on the notion of the community as a metaphor for everyday experience, as the place for locating divergent strands of political consciousness.

The compatibility of these academic and popular narratives was demonstrated in Leslie Witz's Write Your Own History, produced under the auspices of the History Workshop. In its presentation of the relationship between 'critical history' and 'political activism', history as 'process' was promoted. Both narratives relied on constructing identities through the mobilization of an implicit politics of memory that assumed fixed practices of oral signification. Collective memories, we argue, were analogous to the remembrances of individuals, linked by the group experiences of race and class in communities and shared by the ideal memory and identity of these individuals. Multiple individual voices equalled collective memory and represented collective identity (Schudson 1995). Oral history was the connection between the past and political struggle, between historians and the voice of community, between social and political history, between the individual and the collective, between knowledge and power, and between memory and history (see Witz 1988; 1990).

This framework has continued to characterize most oral history work in South Africa. The main roads into the past remain those tramped by classes, communities, and organizations engaged in resistance in the form of a journey - a procession with an origin, a course, and a destination. In Johannesburg, resistance was 'orally' inscribed as a process of consciousness formation by classes and individuals; in Natal, it was recorded in biography as the agency and organizational careers of ordinary people, and in
Cape Town these two strands were brought together in a nostalgia of ordinary people's experience, constructed as a community splintered by state intervention.5

From the early 1990s, however, oral history as the 'democratic practice' of social and popular history in South Africa has come under increasing strain. Its assumption of inherent radicalism and transformative intent, in both method and content, predicated on its apparent access to the consciousness of experience, has begun to be questioned. Alongside this, the mythology of 'history as national struggle' and the partisan 'ventriloquisms' of people's history have implicitly begun to be questioned (Rousseau 1994, 82–119); Qotole and Van Sittert 1994, 3). We wish to suggest that social history in South Africa brought together modernist appropriations of oral discourses with nationalist and culturalist teleologies of resistance to generate a grand narrative of experience, read as 'history from below'. Unwilling to engage the issues of power embedded in the conversational narratives, South African social historians imposed themselves and their 'radical' methods on 'ordinary people', inscribed them into an authenticated historical narrative, and made them 'mere representative allegories of 'correct political [and historical] practice' (Rousseau 1994, 42).

There is a growing realization that in even more complex ways than has previously been the rule in new social history, apartheid did not always produce resistance, and that resistance was not always occasioned by apartheid. Rather, alongside difference and inequality lie more subtle forms of economic, cultural, and intellectual exchange integrally tied to the layers in which past and present are negotiated through memory, tradition, and history, both written and oral. Equally important is the sense in which the periodizations of resistance have begun to alter, but also to fragment the overall nationalist narrative as one no longer containing incremental modes negotiating modernity. The 'ordinary voices' do not fit the dominant narratives and it has become increasingly difficult to read history from left to right, across the page.

In some ways, social historians continue to produce studies full of vigour and insight. Rich and complex histories have been written that do not easily romanticize and essentialize the past through a simple dichotomy between apartheid and resistance. These histories have drawn on the 'many voices' of communities and classes, highlighting the dynamics of gender, race, and ethnicity, and of age, migrancy, and urban–rural spatiality.6 Those 'voices' within the state and its institutional 'presences' have also begun to receive attention (see e.g. Posel (1991); Lazar (1987)). The determining framework for most of these studies has, however, remained materially based. As Isabel Hofmeyr (1994, 181) succinctly puts it:

One result of this [social history] approach is that traces of economic determinism are always present. To have a detailed concern for words and their impact in the world in this climate is often difficult since one is seen to be speaking of issues which are far removed from, and so apparently irrelevant to, the major forces that shape people's lives.

A number of recent studies have begun to explore the pathways suggested by Hofmeyr. Bozoli with Nkotsoe (1991), Moodie with Ndatshe (1994), and Nason (1991), among others, all draw extensively on oral histories (or testimonies) as the basis for re-examining experience and unravelling constructions of resistance at the core of South African historiography. Bozoli with Nkotsoe, for example, point to the more complex and less coherent forms of identity and agency collected through peasant testimony among various women of Phokeng.7 Moodie with Ndatshe argue for a similar process of reassessment, drawing on the changed content generated through migrant testimony. The surprising aspect of this recent work is the continued limited engagement with the form, structure, and social processes of memory. An important exception is the work of Bill Nason.
(1992), which begins to address issues of oral remembrance and storytelling in relation to memory and tradition, myth, and legend, in the making of rural and cultural identities.

In an article prior to the publication of The Seed Is Mine: The Life of Kas Maine, Charles van Onselen (1993) reflected on the methodology of reconstructing a rural life (that of Kas Maine) from oral testimony. This piece is particularly interesting in its engagement with the ‘difficulties that come between the oral historian and his quarry’ and for the manner in which oral testimony and personal memory begin to be reassessed. Van Onselen identifies the difficulties of the changing ‘knowledge transactions’ between interviewer and interviewee over time, the differences of age, colour, class, and gender, in the issues of language and translation and those of subjectivity, memory, and reliability. In particular, Van Onselen points to the ways that language choice in a multicultural setting can influence the researcher’s effectiveness, and that when material is ‘generated’ in a second or third language, ‘the resulting product will in itself partly determine the voice and style in which the final historical presentation is made’. In the case of Van Onselen’s work on Kas Maine, this meant the ‘almost unavoidable’ need to ‘eschew cryptic quotation and revert to the third person’. He suggests, though, that Kas Maine’s ‘narrative skills’ did help ‘to shape and direct the resulting work’, albeit in a ‘remote and indirect fashion’ (ibid., 506–10). The other key point Van Onselen makes, in relation to the further refinement of oral history practice, is that more critical energy and attention should be focused on the theory and method of ‘data collection rather than interpretation’. He provides a fascinating example, drawn from the Kas Maine oral archive. Using an unusual, traumatic moment of recollection, spoken in a form uncharacteristic of Maine, Van Onselen argues that this moment ‘not only tells us about the state of the subject’s cognitive processes at the time of these events, but also reveals one of the codes that he had employed to store and retrieve the results of an important set of events’. While this is part of a wider defence of oral history as an indispensable and legitimate source for submerged histories, it also begins to probe language, memory, and history in important new ways in South African studies (ibid., 511–13).

In spite of this far more suggestive concern with issues of ‘how peasants speak’, these advances are not sustained in Van Onselen’s book. The story of Kas Maine does offer major new insights, drawn from detailed examinations of the black family, the sharecropping economy, and the gradual erosions, by the encroaching tide of capitalism and virulent forms of racism, of complex paternalistic relations. The most dramatic elements that attend to the form of personal memory, however, are largely internal to Van Onselen’s story. The ways that Kas Maine used memory as a resource, a storehouse of oral knowledge about prices, markets, contracts, and agreements, and about weather, movement, and family, is highlighted. Van Onselen appears less concerned with how this tells its own story of remembrance, forgetting, and narrativity than with a continuing conventional approach to memory.

This rests on the recovery of that ‘forever lost to official memory’ (hidden, submerged) and the difficulties of dredging personal and public memories through oral evidence into a ‘body of historically verifiable facts’. It might involve ‘rare ability, courage, dedication and vision’ on the part of the informants, as well as the powerful senses in which ‘history lives on in the mind’, as exemplified by Kas Maine himself, who ‘never once ceased to amaze with the accuracy, depth and extent of his insights into the social, political and economic structures that dominated the southwestern Transvaal’, but this does not significantly alter the dominant sense of memory as remembrance within social history. The implications of this approach are that memory remains treated as transparent, prior to history, and subject to tests of verification. Memory, in this view, continues to belong to the imprecise world of the emotional, the inaccurate, whose validity depends on the reliability of remembrance.
Van Onselen argues that 'Kas Maine's odyssey was but a moment in a tiny corner of a wider world that thousands of black South African sharecropping families came to know on a journey to nowhere'. Personal memory or memories stand for collective ones, sifted, checked, ordered, referenced and cross-referenced, evaluated, and processed by the historian into a construction of consciousness, the remembrance of real collective experience (Van Onselen 1996, 8–10).

We suggest, then, that the story of Kas Maine is much more Van Onselen's story. While he proposes that Kas Maine's own narrative - his voice and style - can be found in the shape and form of the resultant work, this may be difficult to sustain, even in a remote and indirect fashion. Memory, for Van Onselen, is not Maine's medium of history. For a 'laconic man... who was often almost monosyllabic in his replies' and who apparently relied on 'a short, clipped, economical style of communication that seldom gave clues to context, mood or emotions that he had experienced', the narrative voice that emerges is Van Onselen's (Van Onselen 1993, 510–13). It is his translation of the imagined and represented content of Maine's life history, drawn from testimony and the orality of memory, into 'totalising history', that marks this as 'a classic work' (Nasson 1996, 3).

The ironic consequence of many previous attempts to place categories of people 'hidden from history' at the centre of historical studies 'from below' was that these studies had deepened their marginalization and perpetuated their special status. The hidden and silenced were inserted into histories largely as a 'contextual device' (Rousseau 1994, 41). Kas Maine suffers a similar fate. Hofmeyr has argued that while there has been a lot of work based on oral historical information, this scholarship has tended to mine testimony for its 'facts' without paying much attention to the forms of interpretation and intellectual traditions that inform these 'facts' (Hofmeyr 1994, 9). More importantly for our purposes here, social memory continues, within finely textured accounts, to collapse oral interviews into historical realist narrative. Oral history becomes a source, not a complex of historical narratives whose form is not fixed. In this historical practice, it 'imposes as grammar the mathematics of history' in the South African context, and simultaneously 'makes things with words', and memory into a 'written layer' (Jewieswicik and Mudimbe 1993, 4–9).

The consequence has been a particular conception of individual and collective memory in South African historiography. Collective memory is seen as the collective meanings that belong to the political field, while individual memory is also seen to be primarily part of this field as it makes sense of historical details in direct relation to political legitimacy. This field is configured by the literate racial and class worlds of the modern South African state and its equally literate and modernist oppositions. All oral testimony becomes the vehicle for 'voicing' the collective memory of consciousness and documenting the collective experience of modernity. Tradition, memory, and orality cease to be arenas negotiating society's relationships between past and present. This is left to history and the written word.

In crucial respects, this history, whether in its intellectual or political manifestations, has structured the 'seamless continuity' and performed the 'cohering task' of defining public, urban, and 'modern' collective memory in South Africa (Minkley and Rousseau 1995, 4–16). Oral transcripts, their construction, and their re-presentation in history typically reflect a process of selecting, editing, embellishing, and deleting the material of individual memory into an identity intimately bound up with the stages of modern domination and resistance. The individual is inscribed into this collective memory as resister, or a variant thereof. Oral history has been less conversational narrative and more dramatic monologue which binds, affirms, and entrenches the collective memory of this history.
3 Forgiving and forgetting: the Truth and Reconciliation Commission


4 Cracked heirlooms: memory on exhibition


5 Telling ‘free stories’? Memory and democracy in South African autobiography since 1994


6 Orality, memory, and social history in South Africa


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