

Oral History, Community, and Displacement: Imagining Memories in Post-Apartheid South Africa

by Sean Field. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, 240 pp, hardbound, £61, \$90.

Review by Helena Sheehan

Sean Field believes that oral histories are not recovered or collected but created. Indeed, they are co-created through inter-subjective dialogue. This complex process requires reflection and theorisation. This book encompasses a series of oral histories of tragic displacements, but also an extended reflection on the processes involved in the production of those oral histories.

This entails a reflexive approach to knowledge, revealing the historian's active role in the production of historical knowledge. Seeing it as an ethical imperative, Field makes explicit aspects of his own life experience that reveal his entanglement in the history he is interrogating. He interprets his own subjectivity as he is interpreting the subjectivities of others. He tells his own story without egocentrism, not allowing it to overshadow the stories of others, whose lives he approaches with insight, empathy and humility.

Apart from a period of postgraduate study in Britain, Sean Field has lived and worked in Cape Town, which is also the locus of his work in the field of oral history. Born in 1961 in District Six, he grew up in Maitland, areas designated white, but close to areas designed coloured and black, thrown into upheaval thorough forced removals. After military service, he entered UCT, University of Cape Town in 1982, where he became active in anti-apartheid politics. Specifically, he criss-crossed the Cape Flats, driving workers from factory gates to union meetings to township homes, during which those driven spoke of their lives, their work, their communities. He went from an abstract interest in Marxism to experience of it as a lived theory. Prioritising struggle over studies, he began falling behind in his studies and went to his research supervisor and told him that he was leaving university to devote himself to the struggle. Hi supervisor urged him to complete his degree. With respect to an assignment coming due, he suggested that he abandon his original topic and write about the strike that was obsessing him. What about sources, Field asked. His supervisor replied that he should write about what workers were telling him and call it oral history.

Thus this career, and more than a career, in oral history began. He got his first degree and continued his postgraduate work doing field work on forced removals, while living in a coloured area against apartheid law in the increasingly violent atmosphere of states of emergency as the regime fought though its violent death throes. In 1988, he was recruited into MK, ie, Umkonto we Sizwe, the armed wing of the ANC (African National Congress). Doing academic fieldwork provided useful cover for his underground assignments of providing couriers and safe houses. He narrowly escaped detection and detention, due to the fact that his MK comrade who was arrested and tortured revealed no names. In 1991, while exiles were returning, he fled South African to avoid call up to military camps and widened his experience and intellectual influences in London and Essex. During the rampant rage following the assassination of communist leader Chris Hani in 1993, Field continued with his PhD fieldwork, but turned back one day from an appointment in Guguletu. On that day, an American student, Amy Biehl, was brutally murdered there. Field continued his academic work through the transition from apartheid into post-apartheid SA. He is now director of the Centre for Popular

Memory at UCT. He broke from the ANC in 2004, as have others, in disappointment at the transition of the ANC from a liberation movement to a political party of power permeated by chauvinism and corruption.

This book represents the work of two decades. The chapters encompass essays written at different times, some already published elsewhere and some written for this book. The book proceeds according to chronology and is divided into three parts: 1) the apartheid period, 2) the post-apartheid period and 3) “conclusions without closure”.

The first part focuses on drastic displacement of the forced removals in Cape Town, foregrounding life stories from the townships of Windermere and Guguletu, unfolding the experiences of both black and coloured communities. He shows how identity and community were ruptured in the radical psychological and social dislocation brought about through the social engineering enforced by the apartheid regime. The second part deals with sites of memory and memorialisation in Langa and District Six, a CPM project of recording audiovisual life histories of Cape Flats communities along the Klipfontein Road, as well as the multiple traumas of refugees from Rwanda subjected to xenophobic attacks in their place of refuge in South Africa in 2008. The third part interrogates the politics of memory, particularly the process in which critical voices have become muted in the narcissistic master narrative of the post-apartheid nation state. There is also a chapter adding to the very fine critical literature about the TRC, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, arguing that legal positivism won the epistemological battle, displacing victim testimonies to the intellectual margins.

The relation of oral history and historiography to the liberation movement and then the government is a key theme. Indeed, there are many important and even provocative themes explored here, some more persuasively than others. While I'm less convinced by his postmodernist polemic against logocentrism and his psychoanalytic sense of the self as fundamentally fragmented and contradictory, the overall thrust of this book is a coherent and grounded exploration of the processes of oral history, deftly moving from individual lives to local communities to the nation in transition to the academic discipline. This book is suffused with an existential authenticity so often lacking in so much academic writing.

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