

# 8

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## Krotoä remembered: a mother of unity, a mother of sorrows?

THE PERIOD SINCE the democratic elections in South Africa has seen the emergence of a number of new nationalisms. Kerry Ward and Nigel Worden, in their chapter in this book, discuss the rise of Coloured nationalism, and Steven Robins refers to Griqua nationalism. Afrikaner nationalism has undergone many changes, some of these in an attempt at a sympathetic response to the changing political situation, others a perpetuation of the claims to land, such as is seen in the calls for an Afrikaner *volkstaat*. In this chapter I discuss a relatively new trend in popular expressions of Afrikaner identity, namely the attempts of Afrikaners to try and find a connection with an African identity. In an attempt to create such an identity, however, there is the risk of remembering the country's history in a way that ignores the oppositions of the past.

On the night of 8 February 1669 in Cape Town, two children were removed from the care of their mother, the Khoikhoi woman Krotoä. She had been living in a cottage (furnished by the Dutch East India Company) under the name Eva, and was the widow of Pieter van Meerhoff, a Danish surgeon who had joined the DEIC garrison in 1659. After the children were removed from her care, the house was boarded up, and the children put in the custody of a respectable member of the (white) Dutch community. These children grew up as part of Cape Dutch society, and became the founding members of many Afrikaner families.

Ann Stoler, in her work on turn-of-the-century French

Indochina (1992), has shown that 'abandonment' was a term used to refer to métis children born outside marriage who were not provided for by their European fathers. The term was used regardless of whether the child remained in the care of the mother. These children were thus considered 'abandoned' for as long as they remained with the native mother, who would be able to give them only a 'native' upbringing. Ideally, from the point of view of those who were concerned with what Stoler calls 'racial frontiers', these children were to be removed and handed over into the care of state institutions, where they would be given an education commensurate with the 'blood' and name of the father.

This chapter traces the ways in which Krotoä, who is known to us only through her appearance in official DEIC records, has been remembered in South Africa. Her banishment to Robben Island (Deacon 1996, 19), where she died, had for long been presented as the fitting end to her life, and her role as the biological ancestor of many was long denied in the all-white versions of Afrikaner history. In 1995 an Afrikaans-speaking performer wrote a one-woman show in which Krotoä is referred to as '*onse ma*' ('our mother'). How is it that this woman, whose contribution to white South African identity (especially Afrikaner identity) has been disclaimed for nearly three centuries, has come to be remembered by Afrikaners as 'our mother'? Krotoä is one of a number of women whose life stories have recently been written as part of a project to make known hitherto ignored parts of South African history. Many creative writers and artists are, in South Africa as elsewhere, using the lives of women (especially women who are members of oppressed or colonized groups) as metaphors for alienation and a perceived lost wholeness.<sup>1</sup> In André Brink's most recent novel, *Imaginings of Sand*, a woman hears the stories of the foremothers of her family; and learning of their strengths and resourcefulness, herself is healed.

Many will want to resist the idea of woman as healing, and will want to question metaphors that promise wholeness if the

feminine principle is acknowledged and restored. But in a time of political transition, such as we are experiencing in South Africa, the desire for wholeness is sometimes impossible to resist. This chapter considers one such example of a quest for unity through memory: Krotoä, a woman renamed Eva, typecast for centuries as an example of her 'kind' and as a bad mother, and now hailed as an Afrikaner foremother. Her life story, one of destruction and breakdown, has come to function as an analogue of the state of the imagined South African nation. Her 'blood' is now claimed by those whose ancestors denied any relation with her ancestors.

South African history books used to start with the arrival of the Dutch East India Company's first commander to the Cape, Jan van Riebeeck, with his three ships; and hence Cape Town has been called – and remains – the 'mother city', the first city, where 'our' history began. Africanist versions of South African history, and histories written with the making of a wider South African nation in mind, will want to move the focus away from Cape Town, and in the press many are accusing the city of racism and intolerance to black South Africans. Even in narratives about the 'mother city' the focus is shifting. Instead of the spotlight falling on the Dutch man (whose portrait used to be represented on all South African banknotes), it falls on a Khoikhoi woman; his Europe meets her Africa, and she is the symbolic, if not the historical, champion.

The Cape, in this new version of the story, was once a good mother to those who lived in her, and at some point was forced to abandon her own indigenous children, who were taken over by a cruel white 'father'. And thus the 'mother city' was forced to become a bad mother to her own children. In current versions of Krotoä's life, she is being constructed as the mother of us all, the mother of the nation who was banished but can now be reconstituted. The political gain of this move is the acknowledgement of mixed blood and the Khoi contribution to South Africa. This is especially useful to Afrikaners, many of whom had long denied

their 'non-white' ancestry publicly. By reclaiming as their foremother the Khoi woman Krotoä, these South Africans can gain what seems like legitimate access to the new rainbow family.

Attempts at radical rewritings of South African history which situate themselves at the early Dutch Cape run the risk of perpetuating the myth of 1652 as founding moment. The dangers are clear: Krotoä's life serves as the image of a promised sense of fullness and completeness, a return to an origin, to fulfilment and reconciliation. While all new nations need to imagine origins, and unity, this particular version has other liabilities: again one places the beginning of South African history during the first decade of Dutch settlement. Before the Dutch arrived, it is implied, there was as yet no family worth writing about or remembering. It is the mother whose children were fathered by Europe who is our significant mother. And it is in this way that her life story (about fragmentation and breakdown) begins to function as an interpreting metaphor for white identity. Because now it is South African whites who often find themselves, uncomfortably, in a world in between.

The uses to which the idea of the mother have been put by South African nationalisms are well documented (see e.g. McClintock 1991, 1993; Kruger 1991; Gaitskell and Unterhalter 1989). Many writers have pointed out that both Afrikaner and African nationalism construct the mother as central; and in the literature one finds two neatly paralleled traditions. Krotoä, it seems, is being constructed as the mother of the nation which has yet to be constituted, of Afrikaners 'returning' to their roots. This 'return' operates in very different ways from the Africanist call *Mayibuye iAfrika* – let Africa return. Instead the return to Krotoä necessitates amnesia about how and why this mother of the Afrikaner nation came to be forgotten; through remembering her now, these forgetful children hope to gain a claim to an African identity.

The earliest twentieth-century references to Krotoä come from literary works such as Adriaan Francken's play *Susanna Reyniers*

(Francken 1908). Francken read Van Riebeeck's *Dagjoernaal* in the Dutch transcription, and prepared a lecture on the journal. In his play of 1908, Krotoä appears as Eva, but there is no reference to her marriage to Meerhoff, nor of her acceptance into elite Cape Dutch society (Coetzee 1996). The play was written by someone involved in early Afrikaans language movements, and the representation of Krotoä serves a clear racist and exclusivist purpose.

In a similar vein two articles on Krotoä appeared in the popular magazine *Huisgenoot* in 1942. At the time many Afrikaner intellectuals were involved in a project to define (and create) 'Afrikaans' culture, and the contributions on the 'Hottentots' were linked to a programme of constructing a 'pure' Afrikaner racial identity. The series of articles also serves, anachronistically, to justify separatist thinking by finding reasons for it at the early Cape. The articles on Krotoä are presented as proof of a certain kind of biographical trajectory. She is mentioned as a 'Hottentottin' (female Hottentot), and the articles focus on her 'fall' and banishment from Company circles; her behaviour is explained in terms of her inescapable 'hottentot-ness'. The author, Bosman, writes: 'As baptism offers no guarantee of Christianity, so civilization offers no proof of virtue. In Eva's case both Christianity and virtue were very superficial, simply a veneer. Repeatedly, she lapses into her original state of barbarism...' <sup>2</sup> His conclusion is that a life such as hers is proof of the fact that racial prejudice developed historically, and is a result of 'habits and characteristics of the Coloureds and not of the inborn prejudice of the whites'. <sup>3</sup>

In the second article on Krotoä, Bosman writes that he had, some time before, suggested that Herry, one of the other important Khoikhoi figures known to us from Van Riebeeck's journal, may be a suitable hero for a historical novel. Now, he writes, he wonders whether it might not be possible to see Herry as a patriot and folk hero, and 'Eva as a female Quisling'. <sup>4</sup> Bosman's reference is to Vidkan Quisling, the Norwegian politician and collaborator with the Nazis, who was executed three years after Bosman's

articles were published. The interpretation he gives here, which presents Eva-Krotoä as a woman who betrayed her people, is a fascinating one, and in complete contradiction to Bosman's political programme. For seeing Eva-Krotoä as a traitor means acknowledging the Khoi point of view, and the DEIC as a foreign enemy to be resisted, or with whom one can collaborate to the detriment of one's own people. The opposition between the roles of victim and betrayer in the interpretation of the lives of indigenous women who act as interpreters and sexual partners is one that is familiar from the literature on Dona Marina (Malintzin/Malinche) in Mexico and Pocahontas in New England. Recent work on Malintzin, by writers such as Cherrie Moraga and Nora Alarcon (see e.g. Moraga 1986) has attempted to evaluate her role not only as a national symbol (as Octavio Paz (1985) sees her), but as a precursor of women's position in contemporary society. Moraga reads Malintzin as a traitor, but sees her actions as predetermined by her gendered role in society. Interesting is the fact that the only version of Krotoä's life that casts her as traitor comes from a conservative, racist position. For writers such as Bosman, she served to make an argument about racial identity and inherent inferiority. To more recent writers, it is more important to acknowledge the complexity of her role as cross-over figure, and to try to place her life in the context of the fort as well as her kinship relations as a female member of Khoi society. <sup>5</sup>

The version of Krotoä's life and significance that I turn to is the one-woman show *Krotoä* by South African performer Antoinette Pienaar. Pienaar had been working on the piece for a number of years, and it is clearly influenced by the work of Karen Press, who has written a children's book and a poem cycle based on the story of Krotoä's life (Press 1990a, 1990b). Pienaar's work is regarded as among the most interesting being produced at the moment, and has a strong focus on women. *Krotoä* was first performed at the Klein Karoo Nasionale Kunstefees (Little Karoo National Arts Festival) in Oudsthoorn, and was awarded the festival's 'Herrie'

prize. When the show moved down to Cape Town, *Sarie*, an Afrikaans women's magazine, partially sponsored the production, and gave away free tickets in a competition for its readers.

Part of the reason for this association is of course Pienaar's popularity; but the strong 'Afrikaans' flavour of the production is interesting. Pienaar does not sing in Afrikaans only; but the audiences were mainly Afrikaans speaking. Mother-tongue English speakers tend to be the most resolutely monolingual group in the country, so productions that make use of another language rarely draw them as an audience. In Pienaar's work, the main narrator is Pieterella, daughter of Eva and the surgeon Van Meerhoff. Candy Malherbe (1990, 51) writes that Pieterella and her brother Salomon, the two younger children of Krotoä's marriage, were taken to Mauritius in 1677, and that Pieterella married the free-burgher Daniel Saayman. Pieterella returned to the Cape in 1709, and had eight children. The second daughter was named Eva. As in the other interpretations, artists want to take Krotoä beyond her death, since her death does not capture the significance of the story as they see it. Using Pieterella as narrator is an interesting way of dealing with this problem. However, Pieterella as interpreting consciousness has changed the tone of the narrative: Pieterella is the daughter of Khoi and Dane, of Krotoä and van Meerhoff. Having her as the narrator makes this a story about birth rather than death; of survival rather than destruction.

Krotoä offers Afrikaans-speaking South Africans a way into a South African identity, rearticulated in an African context. Krotoä becomes the mother of all, and her daughter the one who survives, and whose survival will signal that the forgiveness of all that has gone before is finally possible. Pieterella sings of being the daughter of Eva and van Meerhoff, of the sun and the moon. There was a time, we hear in one of the stories told by 'our mother' Krotoä, when the sun and the moon were one. This time, it seems, can be regained in some way by Pieterella. If she finds a way of telling her mother's story as one of healing and reconcilia-

tion, the time when the sun and the moon were one will return.

And what better moment than the time of the rainbow nation? Pieterella, the show assures us, is 'us', daughter of 'our mother'. The final song is a plea from Krotoä that 'we' plant an aloe on her grave, so that the roots will grow into her heart and the aloe be made sweet. Here is forgiveness from the grave for all who acknowledge their mother's pain, and will remember her. On the poster advertising the show, a naked woman dances behind an aloe and a sunflower. Her face is undifferentiated: the nose is shown in profile, the single eye full frontal. She has no mouth.

This version of Krotoä's life is an attempt to embrace a different history, especially for Afrikaners. 'Our mother', long denied by white Afrikaners, has to be remembered and acknowledged. The Heeses, a father-and-son-team of historians doing genealogical work, have done remarkable archival work showing the ancestry of Afrikaner families. When, in the early 1970s, they published their findings that present-day Afrikaners had a high percentage of Khoi and slave ancestry, their work was dismissed, angrily, by many Afrikaner intellectuals and political leaders. Now, in the mid-1990s, a largely Afrikaans-speaking audience sits and hears Krotoä described as 'our mother'. And in amateur genealogical circles, white people compete to discover that they are descended from Krotoä, the '*stammoeder*' (founding mother) of the Afrikaner. The admission of, or the claim to, hybrid identity and Khoikhoi blood can have a conservative impulse: it risks forgetting the conflict and destruction involved in the mix. The danger of such an interpretation is the sense of completeness it brings. Claiming Krotoä as the foremother who will make everything better because all will be forgiven risks distorting the significance of her life. Better it is to remember her as Yvette Abrahams does in her recent piece in *Kronos* as the mother of conflict, at the centre of whom some of us are; a mother of sorrows rather than of unity. Better to remember that her silence is not a sign of forgiveness.

# 9

STEVEN ROBINS

## Silence in my father's house: memory, nationalism, and narratives of the body

DURING 1996 AND 1997 South Africa was in the throes of a traumatic revisiting of the political terror and state violence of the apartheid era. Night after night television news broadcasts began with harrowing Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) testimonies of murder and torture by apartheid's death-squad killers. Former policemen confessed to 'necklacings' and blowing up tortured bodies of dead interrogation victims with limpet mines. In March 1997, five former policemen collectively admitted to their involvement in the murder of 65 people during their reign of terror in the mid-1980s (*Mail & Guardian*, 14 March 1997), and in the same month the exhumed remains of ANC activists were discovered at police 'death farms' in KwaZulu-Natal. Yet, to a numbed nation, the TRC hearings of March 1997 did not appear dramatically different from the hearings of previous months.

These testimonies capture the horror of the apartheid years. They also raise questions as to exactly how such accounts of murder and torture will be written and reconfigured into official histories of the new nation, and how they will be remembered and recollected by ordinary South Africans. Although official accounts of the apartheid past emerging during the mid-1990s seemed to comprise coherent nationalist narratives of heroism, sacrifice, and resistance, the television sound-bites and journalists' reports of the 'rivers of tears' of TRC witnesses recollecting these traumatic memories at times appeared fragmented and dispersed.

How will these personal, fragmented recollections and televisual images of traumatic experiences be represented, remembered, and memorialized in the years to come? Will the new nation state be the sole author of the official script of public memory, or will collective memory continue to lie elsewhere, in embodied memories, in the privacy of homes and within remembered spaces of violence? What about the millions of ordinary black South Africans who suffered the more mundane, everyday aspects of apartheid and who, unlike the activists, were not singled out for 'special treatment' by the state? How will these ordinary people relate to official accounts of apartheid that focus on the experiences of ANC activists and privilege specific sites of memory such as Robben Island? These questions take us to the heart of issues of memory, identity, and historical representation.

Saul Friedlander (1993, x) writes that for scholars such as the French philosopher Jean François Lyotard, Auschwitz has become 'the paradigm of historical catastrophes which cannot be represented directly by way of our usual "modern" discourse'. Similarly, for Harold Kaplan the Holocaust 'is where discourse stops as before the unspeakable'. It is an event in terms of which attempts to seek human motives, explanation, justifications, descend to idiocy (Kaplan 1994, x). Similarly, Claude Lanzmann, the director of the documentary film *Shoah*, suggests that attempts to interpret or explain the reasons for the Holocaust tend to descend into 'obscenity'. Reflecting upon these positions Saul Friedlander (1993, x) observes that 'we are confronted with an insoluble choice between the inadequacy of traditional historiographical representation and the need to establish as reliable a narration as possible'.

While recognizing the nature of these problems of representation, it seems that to challenge the persistence of Holocaust denial, as well as the Holocaust revisionism of neo-nationalist historians of the mid-1980s *Historikerstreit* (German historians' debate), requires the production of as reliable a narration of this

apocalyptic event as possible. However, the problem of historiographical representation is further compounded by the tendency of both official and popular accounts of collective suffering to serve (ethnic) nationalist agendas. Instances of this would include ideologies of Afrikaner nationalism, India's sectarian Hindu nationalism,<sup>1</sup> and Israeli Zionism, all of which seek to legitimize exclusivist and discriminatory ethnic nationalisms.

Jonathan Boyarin (1994, 24) makes the more general observation that ethnic-nationalist discourses tend to draw on metaphors of the body. These links between the body and the nation operate at both the level of the organic metaphors of nationalist ideology, and the fact that 'nationalist ideologies really do recruit bodies' (*ibid.*). Mary Douglas also recognized the salience of narratives of the body when she wrote that 'the human body is always treated as an image of society and ... there can be no natural way of considering the body that does not involve at the same time a social dimension' (Douglas 1970, 10). Following this anthropological line of inquiry, Allen Feldman analyses narratives of the body in ways that illuminate the staging and commodification of the body as an embodied transcript through political violence. Feldman (1991, 8-9) shows how bodies become violently staged political texts as part of a process of ideological production in Northern Ireland's violent conflict between 'Loyalists' and 'Republicans'. Drawing on similar theoretical threads, David Bunn (*forthcoming*) provides a fascinating study of burial and exhumation practices on the nineteenth-century Eastern Cape Frontier in which mutilated Xhosa and European bodies were staged as embodied transcripts and political texts in gruesome exchanges of violence. This chapter draws on these insightful writings to explore how narratives of the body are produced in the construction of national identity and the body politic.

The shattering of bodies through violent encounters with colonialism, Nazism, and apartheid is often recast as totalizing nationalist rhetoric that does symbolic violence to the personal and

embodied memories of these traumatic experiences. Through the reworking and rescripting of individual testimonies of violence, embodied personal memories of trauma are often erased and rewritten in the name of nationalism. The recasting of personal memory as nationalist narrative reconfigures and erases the fragmented character and silences of embodied experiences of violence.<sup>2</sup> This chapter examines these processes of erasure and disembodiment, processes which nonetheless tend to draw on metaphors of the body to narrate the nation and the body politic. It will trace the presence and absence of bodies in the production of ethnic/nationalist narratives within specific sites of public memory: the 'Miscast' exhibition that focused on KhoiSan material culture and history; and the TRC. The chapter also discusses in some depth instances in which the fragments and silences of embodied memories of trauma and violence are not spliced onto ethnic-nationalist narratives. These cases will be discussed in relation to two spaces of memory: firstly, the place of Holocaust memory in my family home in Port Elizabeth; and secondly, the 'Coloured' Reserves of Namaqualand, where during the 1980s there was a dramatic recuperation of fragments and the submerged and silent traces of Nama (Khoi) social memory.

In the opening section of the chapter I discuss my own encounters with Holocaust memory which led me to choose to live with fragments and silences rather than embracing totalizing narratives of collective suffering, national redemption, and destiny (i.e. Zionism). The fragments of memory and my father's silences around Holocaust memory may be deemed to constitute more 'authentic' and embodied traces of shattering encounters with Nazism than the nationalist narratives of Zionism. However, it seems that the problem of representing the Holocaust does not necessarily mean that there is no need for historiographical representation of the Holocaust or apartheid. Such historical narratives may indeed be necessary to recollect and make sense of these traumatic pasts, especially in the context of attempts at denial or

revision. This chapter explores the implications of this apparently insoluble solution through a reflection upon a politics and ethics of living with the fragments of memory. This may manifest as a tactic of resistance to totalizing narratives, as in the case of my opposition to splicing accounts of my family's fate in Auschwitz and Riga onto Zionist discourses of nationhood.

### Silence in my father's house: living with the fragments of memory

Holocaust memory has been shaped by museums and monuments in very different ways in the United States, Israel, the former Soviet Union, and Europe (see Young 1988; Huyssen 1995). These different appropriations of Holocaust memory point to the multiplicity of ways in which national identity shapes, and is produced by, processes of memorialization (Young 1988; Huyssen 1995). In responding to the (mis)appropriations of the Holocaust for various nation-building projects, Andreas Huyssen draws attention to the instability of both personal and collective memory. He concludes that all memory is to some degree 'abused' or compromised by the passage of time. 'The ways we remember', Huyssen writes,

[d]efine us in the present. As readers of Freud and Nietzsche, however, we know how slippery and unreliable personal memory can be, always affected by forgetting and denial, repression and trauma, and more often than not, serving the need to rationalize and maintain power. But a society's collective memory is no less contingent, no less unstable, its shape by no means permanent and always subject to subtle and not so subtle reconstruction. (1995, 9)

Both personal and collective memories are unstable, suffer the degradations of time, the pressures of the present and are often subject to self-serving revision and manipulation as well as the forgetting, silences, denials, and repression that traumas produce (Richards 1996; Huyssen 1995; Samuel and Thompson 1990). Writing about these deceptions of memory, South African artist Colin Richards (1996, 6) concludes that 'mostly I trust the voice of memory less than silence'. Given the variety of ways in which events such as the Holocaust have been appropriated to legitimize nationalist political projects, I am sympathetic to Richards' distrust of the voice of memory. My early childhood exposure to knowledge about the Shoah was the official Zionist version in which Holocaust memory is appropriated to legitimize Israeli nationhood. It was only in my thirties that I was able to begin to experience the Shoah at a personal level. This happened after years of submerging my Jewish identity and understanding the Shoah as an event that happened to other people, at another time on another planet. Like my father's silence about the Holocaust, it seems likely that millions of black parents are unable to express what they feel about the humiliations and pain of their everyday experiences of racism under apartheid. Perhaps the rage about systemic racism will only be expressed in future generations. Like my father, millions of black South Africans may be too concerned with survival, and perhaps only their sons and daughters will be in a position to revisit their parents' and their own traumas.

The immediacy and pervasiveness of white racism and state repression during the apartheid years also contributed to a silencing and deferment of any real engagement on my part with the Holocaust. The plight of black South Africans living under apartheid closed off any space for me to deal with Holocaust memory. Throughout my student years, apartheid figured as the space of terror and oppression. Moreover, my Jewishness was experienced as inextricably bound up within apartheid's categories and constructions of whiteness. Under such circumstances,

it was impossible to either engage with my Jewishness or confront Holocaust memory. After all, the 'authentic' victims were black South Africans, while Jews were beneficiaries of apartheid. With the collapse of apartheid in 1990, it finally became possible to begin to confront these submerged and repressed identities and memories.

It was only a few years before my father passed away in 1990 that I began to want to know more about how the Shoah had impacted upon his and my own life. In 1988 I had interviewed him on tape about his life story. Apart from two photographs, my father's thick German accent, and his account of his dramatic flight from Nazi Germany in 1936, there was virtually no trace of his family's fate – my grandparents' deaths in Auschwitz and Riga – in our Port Elizabeth home. There were only two photographs of the Robinski family: one is of my grandfather, David Robinski, standing outside his shoe shop in Erfort with his wife, Cecile, and his children Siegfried, Herbert, Arthur, Edith, and Hildegard.<sup>3</sup> Only my father, Herbert, and his younger brother Arthur managed to escape. The other photograph is a portrait of my paternal grandmother and her daughters.

Writing about memory, history, and the Holocaust, Saul Friedlander (1993, 48) elaborates on the process whereby memory eventually becomes 'mere history':

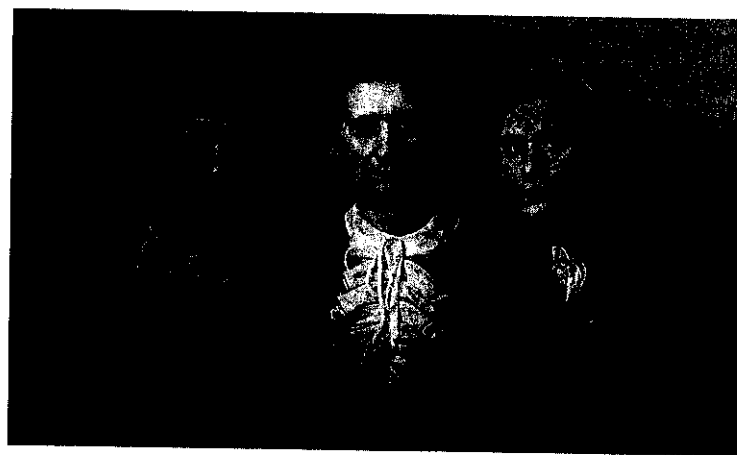
For a whole age group, still active on the public scene, this past remains part of personal memory. With the passage of two or three decades at most, the memory of the Shoah will be essentially ritualized for some and historicized for the great majority, like any other event saved from oblivion. The destruction of the Jews of Europe will become an empty formula and, in any case, 'mere history'.

My personal memory of the Shoah resides precisely in the silences and fragments of my father's past, rather than in the

selective, ordered, and simplified logic of the coherent narratives of collective suffering and national redemption – namely Zionism – that I was exposed to as a child attending Theodor Herzl Primary School in Port Elizabeth.



My grandfather (right) and his family



My grandmother and her daughters



## Fragments, fictions, and 'ethnic' truths

Drawing on Eric Hobsbawm and T. O. Ranger's notion of invented tradition, South African anthropologists Emille Boonzaier and John Sharp (1994) describe the 'rediscovery' and public performance of Nama (Khoi) identity in the 'Coloured' reserves of Namaqualand in the Northern Cape in the late 1980s and 1990s as a case of 'staged ethnicity'. Observing that these performances seemed to vanish following the 1988 Supreme Court case victory which reinstated communal tenure, Boonzaier and Sharp conclude that Namaness was enacted in self-consciously instrumental ways by Coloured Namaqualanders in order to strengthen their claims to Nama traditional lands. Once the court case was won, they argue, these performances lost an appropriate context, audience, and rationale, and expressions of Namaness once again disappeared from the more thoroughly missionized Namaqualand reserves such as Leliefontein.

During a visit to Leliefontein reserve in 1996, the earliest accounts of the past I was able to elicit from residents referred to Reverend Barnabas Shaw, the first missionary to arrive at South Africa's first Methodist mission established in 1816. It almost seemed as if there was no local history prior to Shaw's arrival. The pre-colonial Nama past seemed to have vanished from the public historical imagination. Boonzaier and Sharp explain these silences and the submergence of Namaness by observing that in the past missionized Nama responded to the racist and derogatory connotations that Europeans assigned to the category 'Hottentot' ('Khoi') by distancing themselves from their Nama language and cultural identity and by adopting Afrikaans, Christianity, and the identity of Baster or Coloured. In my own work on Namaqualand (Robins 1997) I suggested that the silences and submergence of Namaness amongst Leliefontein's residents were not as complete as Boonzaier and Sharp suggest.

I also critiqued Boonzaier and Sharp's concept of 'staged ethnicities' by suggesting that, rather than seeing these public performances as fictional and instrumentalist, one ought to view them as acts aimed at the recuperation of Nama social memory. I argued that it was precisely the devastating encounters with colonialism and apartheid, and the cultural hybridity, fragmentation, silences, and inconsistencies that these encounters produced, that made contemporary attempts to reclaim and re-present Nama identity appear to be merely fictive invention. It is the legacy of these colonial encounters that has rendered today's Coloured descendants of the Nama incapable of producing convincing and coherent narratives of cultural and historical continuity. Yet, fragments of Nama collective memory can indeed be traced in the 'off-stage' acts of collective memory, in the silent shadows of everyday life. It is in the material culture of traditional *matjieshuise* (mat huts), oral histories, place names, and the fragments of Nama language that we may find traces of these plundered and shattered subaltern identities. Contrary to Boonzaier and Sharp's analysis, I conclude that public displays of Nama identity are not purely instrumental staged ethnicities, 'made up' by thoroughly assimilated and missionized Coloureds in order to buttress claims to land. Instead these are collective efforts aimed at the retrieval of the fragments and silences of Nama social memory.

The 1990s have however witnessed a number of attempts to appropriate KhoiSan memory to serve the political project of KhoiSan and Coloured ethnic nationalism. KhoiSan and Coloured nationalists have challenged what they claim is the marginalization of the KhoiSan past and the privileging of black (African) historical experience of the recent apartheid past. Some of the more vocal of the KhoiSan organizations such as the Griqua National Conference of South Africa have demanded that the new ANC government recognize pre-colonial aboriginal land claims and political and cultural rights. They accuse the ANC of

ignoring the plight of the descendants of the KhoiSan and favouring their African constituency. An essentialist ethnic-nationalist politics of temporal priority seems to be emerging in which some KhoiSan ethnic nationalists are claiming autochthonous status, thereby transforming both Europeans and Africans into outsider settlers. These KhoiSan activists have also challenged official accounts of South Africa's past for marginalizing and silencing the KhoiSan history, memory, and identity.

The TRC has indeed privileged a modern temporal frame, with the past half century of apartheid as the starting point for a process of publicly accounting for human rights violations.<sup>4</sup> This temporal bias of the new nation state has been challenged by activists claiming to be the direct descendants of the KhoiSan. 'Miscast', a controversial exhibition that opened in Cape Town's National Gallery on 12 April 1996, provided the public space for a volatile KhoiSan politics that challenged official representations of South Africa's past.

Public responses to 'Miscast' reveal that many visitors did in fact view the exhibition as a type of Truth Commission. 'Guilty whites' experienced 'Miscast' as confessional space that forced them to confront European colonial violence and genocide in ways similar to the TRC's interrogation of apartheid's past. For nation building to take place, some visitors wrote in the 'Miscast' comments book, there needed to be a process of national catharsis through the revelation of truth. These statements revealed visitors' perceptions of the link between 'Miscast' and the TRC. Sue, a white woman in her twenties whom I interviewed at the exhibition had the following to say about 'Miscast':

It gives you the idea of the Holocaust, you know, just masses and masses [of bodies]. No use for them anymore, we've done with that now. Just a nameless, nameless burial... I think it's our story here in South Africa, along with things like the Truth Commission. It all seems to come together.

Once you know what happened you have a responsibility, you suddenly become part of what politicians did before you were aware...

This revisiting of the trauma of colonial violence has been a process that the new nation state has thus far been reluctant fully to take on board. By restricting itself to the last three decades of apartheid rule, the TRC has been silent about KhoiSan experiences of colonialism, and this has angered some KhoiSan activists. Rather than living with the fragments and silences of colonial violence and domination, KhoiSan activists have sought to construct totalizing ethnic-nationalist narratives that draw upon collective memories of suffering.

Despite the complex ancestry of these KhoiSan nationalists, many have claimed biological and cultural continuity to pre-colonial KhoiSan ancestors such as Saartje Baartman and Krotoä (Eva). The ways in which these KhoiSan female bodies were appropriated and reclaimed reveal the symbolic potency of links between the corporeal body and the body politic. The following section investigates the complex ways in which the 'Bushman' body featured in the KhoiSan identity politics that surrounded the 'Miscast' exhibition.

### The medicalized body, the museum, and the body politic

During a recent visit to the Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC I was struck by the ways in which the exhibition drew attention to how the Jewish body was measured, photographed, and categorized in order to develop Nazi racial theories of Aryan collective identity and supremacy. The exhibition displayed photographs, charts, and measuring instruments used by the Nazis to buttress the official Nazi view that human races were as

different as species. Hair- and eye-colour charts and nose-measuring instruments, used to determine whether individuals were racially 'Aryan' or 'alien', were also on display. The Holocaust Museum also showed how bodies were measured and classified for the Nazi population census. Walking through the exhibition it became clear to me that the metaphor of the nation as a 'body' was at the heart of the Nazi rationale for human classification and population census. For example, Nazi census technology was seen as an instrument through which 'the physician of the nation' (the Nazi Party) would be able to diagnose illness and prescribe remedies.<sup>5</sup> Similar charts and instruments for measuring and classifying KhoiSan bodies were displayed at 'Miscast' in order to challenge the romanticized and ahistorical portrayals of pristine and primordial 'Bushmen' displayed at the dioramas of the South African Museum. The display of charts, measuring instruments, and resin casts of KhoiSan bodies revealed the role of western science, particularly anthropology, museology, and anatomy, in the construction of the 'Bushman' and 'Hottentot' body (see Gilman 1985). The display of the resin casts of naked 'Bushman' bodies that were commissioned by the South African Museum in the 1920s also drew attention to the measurement, classification, and construction of KhoiSan bodies by means of technologies similar to those deployed in Nazi racial studies of Jews and Roma (Gypsies).<sup>6</sup>

Through a process of critical engagement by the public with the exhibition, 'Miscast' became a catalyst for the production of collective memories and the articulation of KhoiSan and Coloured ethnic nationalism. The exhibition's guest curator, the Cape Town artist Pippa Skotnes, had created a public space within which it was possible for a variety of KhoiSan groupings to put forward their claims to custodianship of KhoiSan bodies and suppressed and submerged memories, histories, and identities. The exhibition generated a multiplicity of competing readings and interpretations of KhoiSan historical memory and what it

means to be KhoiSan.

A number of KhoiSan intellectuals challenged the right of the curator, a white woman, to represent 'their' past. They also claimed that she was appropriating KhoiSan historical experience for her own intellectual and personal agendas. Upon entering the main exhibition hall one encountered a large photograph of a nineteenth-century European woman, Lucy Lloyd, the sister-in-law of German immigrant and philologist Dr Wilhelm Bleek. The name of Lucy Lloyd also appeared in the dedication of the *Miscast* book edited by Skotnes. From their Mowbray home, Lloyd and Bleek recorded thousands of pages of /Xam San folklore and learnt the San language from members of an extended family of /Xam San that had served a sentence at the Breakwater prison in Cape Town for stock theft (see J. Deacon 1996). Living with these /Xam San in their Mowbray home from the 1870s, Lloyd and Bleek developed complex and intimate relationships. Skotnes sought to redeem and rehabilitate the tenacious and dedicated ethnographer who worked ceaselessly under the shadow of the illustrious philologist Bleek. Skotnes' project of engendering memory and reclaiming Lloyd as a humane and sensitive ethnographer of KhoiSan culture and history was criticized by some KhoiSan activists as an improper appropriation.<sup>7</sup> Gauging their responses, it would seem that James E. Young's concluding comment, 'better abused memory than no memory at all', would have little relevance or bearing.<sup>8</sup>

Claims to propriety over KhoiSan bodies and the 'emotional reserves' of the San genocide were made by representatives of a variety of KhoiSan groups including the Griqua, the Brown Movement, and the militant Coloured Nationalist Kleurling Weerstandsbeweging (KWV). The biological essentialism of some of these groups elided the historical fact that many of the people referring to themselves as Brown, Coloured, and Griqua are in fact of slave-European-African-Khoi-San ancestry. However, rather than recognizing this mixed ancestry and cultural hybridi-

ty, many KhoiSan activists claimed a 'pure' KhoiSan identity based on notions of biological and cultural continuity. Others did not deny their mixed ancestry but asserted biologically based claims to KhoiSan identity to gain custodianship over the KhoiSan body and collective memory. For example, even though he had been classified white under apartheid, Mansel Upham, the Griqua National Conference's legal representative, insisted upon making public his claims of genealogical links to a founding Khoi ancestor, Krotoä (Eva). The following section discusses the ways in which the naked and clothed 'Bushman' body featured in discourses on KhoiSan identity emanating from debates surrounding 'Miscast'.

A representative of 'the Brown Movement' vehemently attacked the curator for inviting the semi-clad Kagga Kamma 'Bushman' delegation to the public forum at the exhibition opening, and thereby contributing to the objectification of the bodies of 'the Brown people'. For these KhoiSan critics the visual imagery of the 'half-naked clan' from Kagga Kamma resembled a living Bushman museum diorama and conformed to popular representations of 'Bushmen' in film and fiction:

We are sick and tired of naked Brown people being exposed to the curious glances of rich whites in search of dinner table conversation. Our shocked eyes were greeted by the spectacle of a half-naked clan sitting on the steps of the Gallery... The exhibition [is] yet another attempt to treat Brown people as objects... Where is the Khoisan view... Where are our representations of the people who came here to steal our land, make us slaves and deprive us of our culture and our history? When do we get to mount an exhibition?...

The Brown Movement was also extremely vocal in its criticism of Skotnes' display of resin casts of naked 'Bushman' bodies. These casts were originally made for the South African Museum in the

1920s from live 'Bushmen', purportedly for scientific study and because the 'Bushmen' were deemed to be becoming 'extinct'. By displaying the casts of naked 'Bushman' torsos, Skotnes sought to highlight the dichotomy between what is stored in museums out of public view and what is displayed. KhoiSan representatives, however, were angered by this display of nakedness and claimed custodianship over KhoiSan bodies, including those of Saartje Baartman, a nineteenth-century Khoi woman who was taken from the Cape to Europe where she was publicly displayed as a sexual freak, the 'Hottentot Venus', and where, until recently, her brains and genitals were on display in the Musée de l'Homme in Paris.

While the semi-naked Kagga Kamma Bushmen have become an international tourist attraction, as well as a televisual icon of public imaginings of authentic hunter-gatherers, a public statement from the !Hurikamma Cultural Movement expressed shock and outrage at the presence at the 'Miscast' opening of 'the semi-naked clan' of Kagga Kamma Bushmen. The statement indicted this display of nakedness and the fact that the Kagga Kamma people's livelihood 'depends on acting out the sick dramas played out by archaeologists, anthropologists and art historians'.

Another vociferous objector to this display of nakedness was Mario Mahongo, the spokesperson of the !Xu San of Schmidtsdrift in the Northern Cape. Mahongo, a Dutch Reformed Church minister, officer in the SANDF, and a veteran of the Angolan and Namibian wars, insisted that the Kagga Kamma delegation ought to have dressed in western clothing. Mahongo seemed to desire to cover their bodies, for reasons similar to those of missionaries in Africa who sought to transform the naked heathen body through the civilizing cover of clothing (Comaroff 1993). From this perspective, it seems plausible that Mario Mahongo, the Dutch Reformed Church minister and San leader from Schmidtsdrift, may have been more concerned with Christian signs of clothing and civility than with indigenous cultural injunctions. In other words, these calls to cover the naked bodies of the Kagga Kamma

Bushmen possibly embodied a Christian belief that 'clothedness was next to godliness' (*ibid.*, 3).<sup>9</sup>

The 'Bushman body' became the key site of contestation and commentary on memory and identity at the public forum. The link between the body and the (ethnic) nation was vividly illustrated in the dramatic ways in which the story of Saartje Baartman was recently reinserted into public consciousness, for example, through media coverage of Griqua demands for the French government to return her bodily remains for reburial in South Africa.<sup>10</sup> Mansel Upham, the Griqua legal representative, made the following demands at the 'Miscast' public forum:

[The Griqua demand] the immediate surrender by the French Government and the return of the remains of the late Miss Saartje Baartman to the Griqua for burial in her native land; the immediate release by the Anatomy Department of the University of Witwatersrand and reburial of the remains of the Griqua chief Cornelis Kok II; and the ending of all dehumanized portrayal of the Khoisan ancestors of the Griqua.

Cape Town historian Yvette Abrahams asserted a 'Brown' identity that gave a personal resonance to her claims on the body of the seventeenth-century Khoi woman Krotoä (Eva). Abrahams claimed that Eva was raped by a Dutch settler, a view that has been challenged by scholars who argue that her marriage to one of Jan van Riebeeck's doctors was of her own volition and who represent her as an ambitious 'career woman' with agency, rather than seeing her as simply a victim (Wells 1997). Carli Coetzee's fascinating account of the complex identity politics and negotiations around Krotoä's body in the new South Africa includes reference to white Afrikaner attempts to claim ancestry from this recently redeemed seventeenth-century woman. The 'Miscast' public forum illustrated how live and deceased KhoiSan bodies

were appropriated and recruited to produce such collective memories, ethnic-nationalist identities and ideologies, and essentialist narratives of biological and cultural continuity.

Like Zionist appropriations of Holocaust public memory, Coloured nationalists such as Mervyn Ross of the kwb appropriated the San genocide and suffering to produce narratives of national redemption and destiny. This Coloured nationalist rhetoric stressed the autochthonous status of present-day 'Coloureds' as the direct descendants of the aboriginal KhoiSan in ways not that different to Afrikaner nationalist appropriations of the suffering of Afrikaner women and children in British concentration camps during the South African War of 1899–1902. Given this legacy of the splicing of collective accounts of suffering onto dangerous ethnic nationalisms, how can we remember traumatic events such as the Holocaust, the British concentration camps, and apartheid, and yet resist the totalizing tendencies of nationalist rhetoric?

Black South Africans and Palestinians know at first hand how collective memories of suffering can be deployed to create more suffering for those whom Edward Said refers to as 'the victims of the victims'. This raises important questions as to how future generations of Coloured and black South Africans will make meaning of apartheid without resorting to new ethnic absolutisms. How will the public histories and collective memories of apartheid deal with this past without silencing those deemed not to have the necessary biological, historical, and cultural background to legitimately speak about 'black experience' under apartheid? For example, will new public histories marginalize experiences of Coloureds on the grounds that they did not suffer under apartheid as much as black South Africans?

## Miscasts, (mis)appropriations, and the making of national identity

The TRC testimony of the sister of Maki Skosana, a woman brutally 'necklaced' by an angry crowd in the 1980s for allegedly being an informer, reveals how the TRC hearings have complicated the production of seamless heroic resistance narratives.<sup>11</sup> It also shows how personal memory and pain can be reconfigured through multiple mediations. This was graphically demonstrated in an SABC news broadcast of Skosana's sister recounting to the Commission how, after her sister was burnt alive, she went to the mortuary where she saw that her grotesquely mutilated corpse had a broken bottle inserted into the vagina. This gruesome recollection of the horror of Skosana's terrible death was interrupted by the commissioner's call for a minute of silence to salute Maki's heroism and martyrdom. This silencing of the witness sought to transform the woman who had been necklaced as an *impimpi* (informer) into a hero of the struggle, a martyr whose body had been sacrificed in the name of the new nation. Through this reworking and reappropriation of the traumatic memory of the mutilation of Skosana's tortured body, a heroic narrative of the new South African nation was manufactured for consumption by millions of television viewers.

Despite the TRC hearings' role in complicating sanitized heroic resistance narratives, the televised testimony of Maki Skosana's sister illustrates how the TRC and the media are manufacturing a new nationalism from painful personal memories and shattered and mutilated bodies. This seems to be part of a broader process in which the incarcerated bodies of Robben Island political prisoners assumed almost mythical status in a heroic narrative of sacrifice and defiance. This focus on Robben Island could, however, ultimately elide the more banal and mundane everyday aspects of apartheid such as influx control, Group Areas Acts, and

the Separate Amenities Acts.<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile, the Skosana hearing suggests that even the dismembered bodies of innocent victims and bystanders are readily appropriated for this collective project of sacrifice and nation building.

## Conclusion

Recently, during my visit to the Holocaust Museum in Washington, I was able to find information about the transportation of my family to Auschwitz and Riga. This knowledge is now permanently etched in my memory. Visiting the building in which my father's brother Siegfried Robinski and his wife Edith lived in Berlin's Kreuzberg District, now a Turkish working-class neighbourhood, embodied and materialized my knowledge about my family's terrible fate. Standing in front of the building on a bitterly cold winter night produced a profound materiality to what had once been a vague and repressed knowledge about my family's past. In the past this knowledge had been disembodied, submerged, and repressed – mere history, part of a nationalist narrative about the making of the Israeli nation. Now I have reclaimed a Jewish identity that is tightly enmeshed within the memory of this apocalyptic event, yet outside religious or Zionist appropriations of this past.

Sifting through the fragments and silences of Berlin's sites of Holocaust memory, after more than thirty years of being emotionally distant and dissociated from this apocalyptic event, has rendered the Shoah no longer mere history or nationalist rhetoric. As I reflect upon living with these fragments of memory, my thoughts keep returning to questions as to how the thousands of TRC testimonies are likely to be recollected and represented once the TRC's hearings come to a close. It remains to be seen whether South Africa's contested past will be remembered in a

form that does not privilege particular historical experiences, collective memories, and nationalisms, and elide others. It is also unclear whether shattered bodies mutilated by colonialism and apartheid, as well as the gasping and choking voices of TRC witnesses such as Maki Skosana's sister, will be edited and erased in order to serve the needs of totalizing narratives of resistance, heroism, and nationalism. I remain undecided as to whether 'abused memory' is better than no memory at all.

### PART III

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## Museums, memorials, and public memory

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# 6

GARY MINKLEY and  
CIRAJ RASSOOL

## 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



TRC deals with the telling of individual memory that defies the categories most familiar to those who wish to collect these stories. They each raise a similar set of questions about how historical and personal memory have been approached in South Africa.

Van Onselen's history is meant to be read as a monumental counter-memory to the official record of segregation and apartheid, the biography of a man who 'never was' (1996, 3). The TRC reflects an official recording, on an extraordinary scale, of counter-memories to the silence imposed by apartheid. Both the book and the official body rely primarily on personal memory to counter official and documentary 'black holes'. Between the social history of the life of Kas Maine and the TRC's quest for political mastery of collective memory lies the claim by both to being vehicles for the histories and everyday stories of ordinary South Africans.

This chapter begins by exploring the notion of submerged memory in South Africa. It looks at the claim by recent social historians that they have been facilitators of its emergence through the generation of oral testimony and remembrance. Social historians have seen their work as characterized by the attempt to 'give voice' to the experience of previously marginal groups and to recover the agency of ordinary people. The documentation of these pasts, conceived as 'hidden history', sought to democratize the historical record. They were seen to be able to create an archive for the future and an alternative form of historical documentation.

We raise questions about, firstly, the chronologies, periodizations, and narratives of social history; secondly, the 'domination versus resistance' model it has employed; and thirdly, the practices and processes of the authoring and translation of memory through oral text into 'history'. Our discussion of the translation of personal memory into collective remembering is broadened by looking at the uses of oral history in the story of Kas Maine, and in the hearings of the TRC.

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 Hausse, 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 Hausse (1990), as well as much of the historical work he reviewed, was markedly silent about memory as either a theoretical or historical category.<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup> 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'.<sup>3</sup> 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).<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>

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 transformatory 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.<sup>6</sup> 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. Bozzoli with Nkotsoe (1991), Moodie with Ndatshe (1994), and Nasson (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. Bozzoli 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.<sup>7</sup> 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 Nasson

(1991), 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, 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 share-cropping 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 the 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 history 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' (Jewsiewicki 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.

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PATRICIA DAVISON

## Museums and the reshaping of memory

We must reckon with the artifice no  
less than the truth of our heritage.

Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country*

IN POPULAR MEMORY the South African Museum (SAM) in Cape Town, the oldest museum in the subcontinent, is associated with the natural history of 'Bushman, Whale and Dinosaur'.<sup>1</sup> Since the early decades of this century a series of plaster casts of the indigenous inhabitants of southern Africa has been a consistent visitor attraction. Indeed, surveys suggest they are the most memorable of all the museum's exhibits. Complete in every physical detail and revealing a mastery of technical skill, these casts are quintessential museum specimens, dehumanized objects of scientific inquiry, exhibited for the public gaze. If the casts seem at home in the contrived realism of a diorama, this is not surprising since both are constructs of museum practice, re-presentations that mediate the memory of people classified as Bushmen.

Millions of museum visitors have viewed the plaster figures of thirteen /Xam women and men who were living near Prieska in 1912 when they were cast to preserve an exact physical record of a 'nearly extinguished' race. Although by the time they were cast, this group of /Xam no longer wore traditional clothing made from animal skins and had long since been dispossessed of their hunting grounds, their history of resistance and subordination

was not presented in the museum. Instead they were reduced to physical types and exhibited unclothed, except for small aprons and loin-coverings, as examples of a primitive race. The compellingly lifelike casts gave tangible form to stereotypes of KhoiSan physical difference that had been well established during the preceding century in photographs and drawings. They echoed the public display of living 'Bush people' at the shows of London and Europe in the mid-nineteenth century, and recalled the sensation surrounding the earlier exhibition in London and Paris of Saartje Baartman, the 'Hottentot Venus'. For decades casts of the /Xam and other KhoiSan people were prominently displayed in glass cases inviting contemplation of anatomical features, such as stature, skin colour, and steatopygia. In the 1950s the thirteen /Xam figures were removed from the display that explicitly emphasized physical attributes and repositioned in an idealized diorama, depicting a nineteenth-century hunter-gatherer encampment in the Karoo. Intended to evoke memories of a past way of life, of bush craft and survival skills, the diorama shows the casts, surrounded by artefacts of everyday use, in a carefully constructed 'natural' environment. But, despite their new setting, the figures inevitably retained the connotations of stereotyped otherness that gave rise to their production in the first place (Davison 1993). In 1989 a display was mounted adjacent to the diorama to draw attention to the history of the people who were cast, and the ideas that gave rise to the casting project.

The visual rhetoric of the diorama medium evokes associations with the realm of nature – in other galleries fossils, fish, and birds are found similarly displayed. The inclusion of anthropology, but not cultural history, in a museum devoted mainly to natural history affirms this association. The problem is not that human beings are grouped with natural history but that only ethnographic 'others' are categorized in this way. Such spatially encoded classifications embody theoretical concepts that shape both knowledge and memory. The investigation of classificatory

constructs therefore becomes of critical importance in illuminating how museums institutionalize certain forms of knowledge, and perpetuate stereotypes in the name of scientific inquiry.

Pippa Skotnes, artist and curator of the recent exhibition 'Miscast: negotiating KhoiSan history and material culture',<sup>2</sup> set out to interrogate in visual form the historical relationships that gave rise to misconceptions surrounding the people that outsiders had collectively labelled 'Bushmen'. Listening to public responses to the diorama at the SAM had confirmed her view that the Bushmen were indeed 'miscast', fixed in a timeless depiction of an imagined past that occluded the public memory of their dispossession and decimation. Her project was to illuminate the power relations of this history through imagery, artefacts, and ethnographic narrative. The 'Miscast' installation stimulated unprecedented controversy and will remain a landmark in exhibition practice. Later I return to 'Miscast' and consider the conflicting reactions it evoked, but first I reflect briefly on museums as places of memory and outline the changing contours of local museum practice over the last decade.

### Museums as mirrors of power

Museums, like memory, mediate the past, present, and future. But unlike personal memory, which is animated by an individual's lived experience, museums give material form to authorized versions of the past, which in time become institutionalized as public memory. In this way, museums anchor official memory. Ironically, the process involves both remembering and forgetting, inclusion and exclusion. In making decisions about collecting policy, museum curators determine criteria of significance, define cultural hierarchies, and shape historical consciousness. The institutionalized neglect, until the late 1980s, of African art by national art galleries in South Africa is a case in point, as are the more

recent moves to redress this exclusion.

Every preserved artefact is a tangible trace, a crystallized memory, of its manufacture and use, but at the same time attests to conceptual and spatial displacements resulting from acts of acquisition, classification, and conservation. Once assembled, collections are complex and revealing artefacts of museum practice, as well as fragments of former social milieux. Objects held by museums constitute a material archive not only of preserved pasts but also the concerns that motivated museum practice over time. These concerns can seldom be separated from relations of power and cultural dominance. Museums have often been described as places of collective memory, but selective memory may be a more accurate description.

Although museum presentations are always subjectively shaped, they are widely associated with authenticity and objectivity. Consequently, museums have become privileged institutions that validate certain forms of cultural expression and affirm particular interpretations of the past. In many countries state-funded national museums have tended to pursue projects that further the national interest, even if this is not openly acknowledged. 'The ordering and reordering of objects and representations in national museums can serve to legitimate or "naturalize" any given configuration of political authority' (Steiner 1995, 4). Museums are thus used by nation states to represent themselves to themselves, as well as to others. But, as Steiner notes, defining 'themselves' and what constitutes national identity is not uncontested or unchanging – the concept of nationhood, like a sense of community, is a construct of the mind, an imagined reality. In practice the situation on the ground is more complex – there are always tensions between differing interest groups, overlapping constituencies, and opposing interpretations of events. For political reasons new versions of the past may become the official version and claim authenticity, but former structures and mechanisms remain unchanged.

In practice, despite changing power relations, collections designated as 'national' are assembled by museums and held in trust for future generations. The history of these holdings and their use in exhibitions provide insight into the shaping of national identity and public memory. Moreover, internal museum processes also have specific histories, often taken for granted because they seem self-evident. The conceptual frameworks that order collections and underpin exhibitions also mirror dominant forms of knowledge. Change may occur imperceptibly but at certain moments, as in contemporary South Africa, it becomes programmatic. Taking its cue from political transformation, the revision of heritage practices has become overt – the reshaping of public memory is an explicit project.

'In keeping with the spirit of the new South Africa, the South African Cultural History Museum at the top of Adderley Street is rethinking the history of the country it wants to reflect.' This quotation from a press report (*Weekend Argus*, 6–7 January 1996) underlines both the expediency of rethinking the past in the context of a new present, and the selectivity inherent in the process. The version of the past represented in this museum is being reworked to accord with an emerging new orthodoxy. Historical narratives, such as those relating to slavery at the Cape, that were previously excluded have become politically acceptable, even marketable as part of heritage tourism. The museum is housed in a building that, in much altered form, was the slave lodge of the Dutch East India Company at the Cape from the late seventeenth to early nineteenth centuries. Despite an ever-present spatial echo of slavery, this chapter of Cape history was not, until recently, interpreted at the museum for the visiting public – selective amnesia prevailed. Within the current political climate, however, memory has returned and the museum's slave connection is regarded as an important heritage resource and visitor attraction. A new tourism initiative is seeking to develop a local slave route that would create awareness of the legacy of slavery in



the Western Cape, and eventually link up with slave routes elsewhere in the world.<sup>3</sup>

This is but one example of a museum responding to South Africa's new national agenda. State-funded museums have been called upon by the Ministry of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology to redress past inequities as part of the national reconstruction and development programme. Funding is a powerful agent of change, and it has been made clear that financial support will be awarded to those heritage projects that contribute to transforming national consciousness. However, this policy of project-based funding has yet to be implemented. The National Heritage Council that will become the statutory body in control of funding is expected to be constituted during 1997. It is anticipated that appointments to the council will be made following a process of public nomination.

A number of recent exhibition projects have been directly concerned with reshaping memory. Among the most remarkable are a series of exhibitions undertaken at the Castle of Good Hope, the oldest surviving colonial building in South Africa. The Castle, resonant with complex histories of colonial power, slavery, and resistance, has become a venue and symbolic space for challenging the ideologies that supported apartheid, and for reclaiming histories that had been marginalized. The history and culture of the Muslim community was celebrated at the Castle in 1994 as part of the Sheikh Yusuf Tricentenary Commemoration. This was followed by a poignant exhibition of official documents and recorded testimony relating to the racial segregation of the city of Cape Town. Freedom to express views within the confines of the Castle that might formerly have been suppressed in that setting gave the exhibition heightened significance. Also operating within an evocative cultural space, the District Six Museum, founded in 1992, reclaims the social histories of people who were forcibly removed from the area under Group Areas legislation – it is also a memory bank of human resilience in the face of adversity.

My focus is on much older institutions that must confront the burden of their own history in shaping a new future. My central concern is with the SAM and other large state-funded museums. In different ways these institutions are all striving to embrace transformation and develop strategies for creating new constituencies.<sup>4</sup> However, the process is complex and uneven – the need for structural change may be accepted in principle but resisted in practice. In considering how museums are responding to political imperatives, I do so as an anthropologist whose personal memories of museum practice go back to the 1970s.

During most of the apartheid years the SAM and many other state-funded museums tended to assert that they occupied a neutral zone where knowledge was generated and communicated to the public. Museums that emphasized their research role were reluctant to recognize the relationship between knowledge, power, and privilege. Predominantly white museum professionals regarded their work as objective and apolitical. The 1975 entry in the international *Directory of Museums* suggested otherwise:

The museums of South Africa are the museums of white South Africa. The non-white majority is represented, not in the planning and the organization of museums, but in ethnographical collections and exhibits – the European section of the population is, for some reason, not considered suitable material for ethnography ... History is invariably presented from the point of view of the white man.  
(Hudson and Nicholls 1975, 385)

Until the 1980s little criticism of museums emerged from local sources. The Culture and Resistance Symposium held in 1982 in Gaborone, Botswana, although not directly concerned with museums, signalled an increased engagement in cultural practice by the democratic movement. From 1983 when the racially segregated tricameral Parliament divided museums into Own Affairs

and General Affairs on the basis of presumed 'group' interests, the argument that museums were neutral became untenable. The South African Cultural History Museum (SACHM) was classified as white Own Affairs, despite having large collections that did not fit into this category,<sup>5</sup> while the SAM and the South African National Gallery (SAMG) became General Affairs museums. Criticism was voiced by the Southern African Museums Association (SAMA) but many of its own members accepted the status quo, and did little to counter the prejudices and misconceptions that many museums perpetuated (Webb 1994).

This complacency was challenged increasingly within the profession.<sup>6</sup> Critical questions were raised regarding whose heritage was preserved in museums and commemorated in monuments, and who had the right to decide what should be preserved. An undeniably eurocentric bias was shown by the fact that less than 1 per cent of about 4 000 declared national monuments in South Africa related to pre-colonial African heritage (Deacon 1993). The development since 1990 of a number of new projects reflects a post-apartheid shift in priorities. Notable among these are the site museum at Tswaing, north of Pretoria, designed as an eco-museum that integrates cultural and natural history and serves 'the total South African society, especially hitherto marginalized communities' (Kusel 1994), the restoration of the stone-walled capital at Thulamela,<sup>7</sup> occupied between about AD 1400 and 1700, and the planning of the Robben Island Museum to commemorate the struggle for human rights in South Africa. Significantly, these projects are striving to set up negotiated decision-making processes that involve local communities in long-term site management. The co-operation between academic archaeologists and Venda chiefs in resolving sensitive issues relating to the excavation and reburial of skeletal remains at Thulamela has been hailed as a model of successful negotiation. Venda people have taken immense pride in the excavations and the restoration project. At the official opening of the site the

importance of Thulamela as a place of public memory was stressed – it affirms the complexity of African culture in southern Africa centuries before the arrival of white settlers and reclaims a significant chapter in Venda history. In this context ethnic identity has become a positive community resource.

Ironically, because apartheid policy used ethnicity to classify African people and deny them South African citizenship, the mobilization of ethnic consciousness by Africans themselves was, until recently, compromised. Cultural traits had been used too often to perpetuate racial stereotypes, and ethnicity had been used to justify separate 'homelands' for different 'tribes' or 'nations'. In post-apartheid South Africa this has changed and cultural diversity has been embraced within the symbolic construct of nation building. In practice, however, accommodating ethnic difference without resorting to essentialist notions of race and culture remains a challenge.

From the late 1980s, academics who had previously distanced themselves from museum debates became involved in the politics and poetics of museum practice under the banner of public history.<sup>8</sup> At the same time many museums started rethinking classificatory boundaries within collections and between institutions. In 1990 the formerly separate history and anthropology sections of the SAMA merged to form the humanities group. This symbolic realignment signalled a growing momentum to tell 'hidden histories' that had been suppressed or distorted under apartheid, a new respect for oral histories, and a call to democratize museum practice at all levels. A number of museums targeted new audiences among previously disadvantaged communities and employed black education officers in their outreach programmes. Acquisition policies came under review. Apartheid 'memorabilia', such as 'Whites Only' signs, became sought after by museums. Art galleries were quick to expand their collections to include material of African origin. However, authority to decide what to collect and exhibit did not extend to African people – existing

power relations remained unchanged.

New exhibition projects challenged conventional oppositions, such as art/artefact, with varying degrees of success. 'Art and Ambiguity' shown at the Johannesburg Art Gallery in 1991 emphasized the sculptural and aesthetic attributes of works in a collection that could equally well have been presented in ethnographic or historical context. The Brenthurst Collection of Southern African Art proclaimed itself as 'Art' by definition, location, and visual rhetoric. Although the ambiguities of the collection were largely eclipsed by the mode of presentation, the exhibition succeeded in focusing attention on memories waiting to be recovered. The arresting forms of headrests, staffs, snuff-boxes, and domestic objects, simultaneously aesthetic and functional, also embodied non-verbal histories that had yet to be fully explored. Coinciding with the return of many political exiles, the exhibition seemed to celebrate a heritage regained.

While temporary exhibitions adopted new conceptual approaches, these were less easy to implement in large museums with semi-permanent exhibitions that inhibited rapid change. In theory the division between cultural history and ethnography had been dissolved but in practice relatively little changed at the SAM. In 1993, as an interim measure, a series of 'dilemma labels' were installed in the anthropology gallery under the heading 'Out of Touch'. The intention was to highlight problems of interpretation and omission in the ethnographic displays, which had been mounted in the early 1970s. The introduction to 'Out of Touch' read as follows:

From looking at these exhibits you might think that all black South Africans lived in rural villages, wore traditional dress and used only hand-made utensils. The objects shown in this hall date from the late nineteenth century through to the mid-twentieth century. During this period, African people were profoundly affected by economic changes, following

the discovery of diamonds and gold. Men migrated from rural areas to work in the emerging mining and manufacturing industries. Despite laws preventing black people from living in cities, many settled illegally in areas surrounding major urban centres. This process, however, is not shown in the displays of traditional African life. Instead, African culture is portrayed as trapped in an unchanging past.

A series of contrasting images was superimposed on the existing showcases to create a visual counterpoint to the ahistorical depiction of traditional life. Images of San men in the South African Defence Force were placed over exhibits of hunter-gatherer material culture, the dress of African female executives was contrasted with traditional clothing, western religious ceremonial attire was juxtaposed with the African equivalent. The counter-images deliberately destabilized the narrative of the gallery. Predictably, many visitors found this confusing, while for others it successfully focused attention on critical issues surrounding the interpretation of cultural difference. If public memory is to be more than a dominant mythology, new ways of evoking multiple memories will have to be found.<sup>9</sup> Museums are well placed to take long-term perspectives on complex issues surrounding the shaping of cultural identities. Instead of assuming in advance that identities are fixed, museums can demonstrate how people shape their identities through cultural strategies (Hamilton 1994). Culture is a resource that people draw on in relation to ever-changing circumstances and shifting identities. A single individual may embody a range of identities, communicated in dress, language, or any other form of cultural expression. For example, the public attire of Chief Buthelezi, leader of the Inkatha Freedom Party, reflects a masterly mobilization of cultural symbols – ceremonial Zulu regalia on occasions of tribal significance, European suits for business meetings, and African printed shirts for stressing solidarity with the rest of the continent. By posing questions, such as 'What does it mean

to be Zulu', museums could explore complex issues. At a macro level the same could be done in relation to national identities. In effect national museums need not simply reflect a constructed national identity but could show the processes involved, and how national identity shifts over time. A similar approach could be applied to issues of cultural ownership. Who owns Robben Island? Although it is state property and has been declared a national monument, there are competing claims to the heritage of the island. The dominant claim at present is that of political prisoners who were gaoled there under apartheid legislation, but the recently revived Robben Island Historical Society voices other claims to the island's past, as does the Muslim community for whom the island is a site of pilgrimage. The right to interpret the history of the island for the visiting public is not uncontested. '*Esiqithini: The Robben Island Exhibition*', which opened in 1993 at the SAM, set out to raise discussion about the island's future, informed by a presentation of its remote and recent past.

Robben Island at the entrance to Table Bay has been described as the most symbolically charged site in South Africa – historically, a place of exile for political dissidents, and confinement for lepers and the insane; from the 1960s to 1991, a high-security prison and metaphor for the inhumanity of apartheid. Since the release of Nelson Mandela and other political leaders, the island has become a symbol of transcendence over oppression, an icon of hope.

Until 1990, the views of banned ANC leaders were relentlessly censored from the media. For decades it was illegal to publish or display photographs of Nelson Mandela in South Africa. The history of the struggle for human rights was excluded from state-funded museums. State propaganda and school textbooks presented distorted versions of South African history, and ignored the perspectives and interests of the black majority. In museums African history was usually reduced to static ethnographic descriptions of timeless traditions.

'*Esiqithini: The Robben Island Exhibition*' arose from an unlikely partnership between a long-established national museum and the newly established Mayibuye Centre, committed to recovering the history of the liberation movement. The two institutions had different perspectives on the past, different skills and resources, different constituencies, and different missions. The impact of the exhibition depended in part on these creative tensions. The timing was significant – in 1992 when the exhibition was initiated the ANC was not yet in power, and the ANC-aligned Mayibuye Centre saw itself as engaging critically with the establishment (Odendaal 1994). From the museum's perspective, this was an opportunity to provide a public forum for debate on the future of Robben Island, informed by its remote and more recent past. It was also an opportunity for the museum to attract new audiences, and to show its willingness to participate actively in an emerging discourse on museum practice in post-apartheid South Africa.

The exhibition evoked memories of prison life on the island mainly through the personal possessions of former political prisoners. Objects and documents were used as mnemonic devices, visual prompts to personal and shared recollection. Former political prisoners were part of the exhibition team, and their memories informed the script and shape of the exhibition. The hardship of prison life was juxtaposed with the commitment of comrades to continuing the struggle behind bars. Recollections also evoked personal memories of wives, mothers, and friends on the outside. Although female political activists were never imprisoned on Robben Island, the exhibition also recalled their roles in the liberation struggle. The official perspective of the Department of Correctional Services was not excluded. In short, no attempt was made to present a seamless version of the Robben Island story.

Although the post-1960 period was the main focus of the exhibition, an illustrated time-line traced the island's long history from its geological past to the present. At the time of the exhibition, no decision had been taken on the future of Robben Island

and viewers were invited to comment on the issue. Responses covered many other issues as well. Some viewers felt that the exhibition was overtly political and biased in favour of the ANC; many applauded the opportunity to learn more about Robben Island. Both positive and negative comments underlined the fact that locating 'Esiqithini' in the SAM was a significant affirmation of the importance of Robben Island in the social history of South Africa. It was also a symbolic shift to the mainland – the island was no longer 'a place apart'. Four years later, the island has been declared a national monument and, in due course, it will be proposed as a World Heritage Site.

Since the exhibition at the SAM closed, the Robben Island collection has been publicly displayed at the Mayibuye Centre and at an exhibition centre at the Waterfront. Can the artefacts of prison life retain their poignancy after multiple displacements, or will their capacity to move the viewer diminish? The Robben Island Exhibition, which was situated in a Caltex service station complex, showed many of the same objects and documents that were part of 'Esiqithini' at the SAM but they conveyed different meanings because of the commercial setting. Context is a crucial cue to meaning, and there is no doubt that the validating context of the SAM evoked respect for the objects – the setting and manner of display added value to the material. This was not the case when the collection was exhibited at the Waterfront. Although regarded by the Mayibuye Centre as a temporary measure, a stepping-stone to a purpose-built museum, it represented a commodification of heritage as visitor attraction.

As a site of memory, Robben Island presents a set of problems for those concerned with its development and management. The physical situation of the island and its history are invaluable heritage resources. Since the early 1990s the high-security section of the prison has become a place of homage, visited by dignitaries from all parts of the globe. But how will the island's past be packaged for large-scale tourist consumption without irrevocably

changing it? This is the implicit paradox of preservation – in the words of Lowenthal (1985, 410) – '... preservation itself reveals that permanence is an illusion. The more we save, the more aware we become that such remains are continually altered and reinterpreted ... What is preserved, like what is remembered, is neither a true or stable likeness of past reality.' In the early 1990s, when journalists were first allowed into the prison, the cells had been given a new coat of cream paint, a practical cover-up prior to press scrutiny; more recently picturesque murals appeared in some places, seeming to parallel a growing nostalgia among prison officials as their stay on the island drew to a close.<sup>10</sup> The eventual departure of warders and their families at the end of 1996 was marked by tearful reminiscences and sadness at leaving their island home. Signs of tourism development to follow were already present in the local shop: Robben Island T-shirts, souvenir teaspoons, and bottles of wine, successfully marketed as Robben Island Red.

In January 1997 Robben Island was designated a museum and regular tours to the island were started by the interim management body responsible for administering the island museum until a formal council had been appointed. The number of tourists wanting to visit the island soon exceeded the official limit of 265 people per day. Inevitably market forces and private-sector interests put pressure on the authorities to allow greater freedom of access to the island. This was strongly resisted by those in charge, underlining the critical issues of control and moral authority in planning the future development of the island. The unauthorized use of the name Robben Island in commercial products has also been strenuously opposed. A private venture to market Robben Island memorabilia under the label 'The Original Robben Island Trading Store' provoked an outcry from former prisoners and those involved in the preservation of the island. The swift moves to close this venture reflected the significance of the island in popular memory as a shrine to the liberation struggle (see *Cape*

*Times* editorial, 9 June 1997). The salient issue, however, remains one of control.

## Recasting memory

If museums are agents of official memory, individuals and groups continually intervene to contest and reshape orthodox views. Indeed, public memory emerges from an intersection of official and vernacular versions of the past (Bodnar 1992). Curatorship, which can be regarded as a process of institutional memory making, is in itself complex and seldom has predictable or stable outcomes. This was demonstrated by reactions to the exhibition 'Miscast: Negotiating Khoisan History and Material Culture' which opened at the SANG in April 1996.

The SANG has energetically embraced the challenges of transformation. At the recent Faultlines Conference the director declared: 'The process of redress started in 1990, and since then, every function of the national art museum has been reassessed and tested against the needs and requirements of a changing South Africa' (Martin 1996). The concept of 'Miscast' was in keeping with the overall mission of the gallery to redress past inequalities. The aim of Skotnes' project was to illuminate the colonial practices that had mediated perceptions of people classified as Bushmen and Hottentots, and cast them as objects of scientific study. Using aesthetic and textual tools the exhibition starkly exposed the unequal relationship between observer and observed. Harrowing images and artefacts of human suffering, humiliation, and objectification formed the visual burden of the installation, while transcribed texts from San oral literature, finely crafted objects, and rock art evoked the sense of a heritage lost. No redemption from shame was offered; no affirmation of survival. On the contrary, one gallery was designed so that viewers could not avoid walking on images of KhoiSan people,

signifying inescapable complicity with past oppression. But who was Skotnes implicating? What reactions did she anticipate from people of KhoiSan descent? And what of her own position as curator? If unequal power relationships characterized the colonial past, surely this continued to be so in the present. Far from applauding the exhibition, angry KhoiSan descendants contested the authority of the curator to represent their history, and accused the SANG of perpetuating the colonizing practices of the past. Their reactions were summed up in the comment 'To show these things here is just as bad as the people who did these things long ago. It is continuing the bad thing.' Ironically, this was diametrically opposed to the stated mission of the gallery.<sup>11</sup>

As Paul Lane (1996) has noted, KhoiSan responses to 'Miscast' suggest that the ironic intent behind the use of many images was misunderstood. Severed heads, fragmented body parts, and naked torsos were not read metaphorically but literally as another form of violence. People claiming KhoiSan descent asserted that the exhibition was aimed at white people; they themselves did not need to be reminded of the humiliations suffered in the past. Controversy surrounding 'Miscast' did not, however, extend to the South African Museum diorama. Skotnes' own response to the diorama had originally motivated the 'miscast' concept but her indignation was not shared by KhoiSan viewers. On the contrary, the diorama tended to be favourably regarded (Davison 1991, 187–93). Perhaps a reason for this contradiction lies in the fact that, although problematic in other respects, the diorama does not represent San hunter-gatherers as victims. Klopper (1996) stresses this point in a perceptive assessment of KhoiSan responses to 'Miscast'. She also notes that despite criticism of the installation, the occasion was used strategically by KhoiSan descendants to advance their current claims to land. Survival in the present is the most pressing concern for marginalized people, and it is a remarkable indication of resourcefulness that the exhibition could be used to serve current interests.

A public forum held on the day after the opening, and another before the closing of the exhibition, affirmed that power relations remain at the centre of critical debates on museum practice, but that museums themselves are public spaces that can be used for contesting and negotiating these relations. There is no single authentic voice – exhibitions, like other artefacts, are open to imagination and interpretation. A character from *In the Fog of the Season's End* (1972), by the late African writer Alex La Guma,<sup>12</sup> recalls waiting for a fellow political activist at the South African Museum. In the zoological gallery, he 'had been alone, a stranger in a lost dead world...' but in the anthropology section he had mused: 'These Bushmen had hunted with bows and tiny arrows behind glass; red-yellow dwarfs with peppercorn hair and beady eyes. Beukes had thought sentimentally that they were the first to fight' (cited in Voss 1990, 66).

The tangibility of objects is particularly salient in relation to memory. Museum collections, like monuments and sites, bridge the past and the present and provide cues to recollection. They embody memories of the past and evoke memory in the present. The /Xam casts made in 1912 are material reminders of ideas that were current at the time but, having been exhibited for over eighty years, they have accrued other meanings over time. Similarly, over a far longer period, Robben Island has accumulated many layers of memory. The significance attached to particular events in the past changes in relation to the politics of the present. But there remains a surplus of meaning waiting to be made and remade. Museums hold and shape memories but they cannot contain them.