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Towards the Rebuilding of Community: The Transformative Possibilities of Women's Testimonies in Post Apartheid South Africa

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts
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Acknowledgments

Thank you to my advisor Roger Simon for his guidance, for leading me to the right questions and for his constant support and encouragement over the past two and a half years. Thank you to Cecilia Morgan for reading and editing the thesis and giving me many helpful suggestions. I gratefully acknowledge the Canadian Development Agency (CIDA) and the Canadian Bureau for International Education (CBIE) for a generous grant I received through the CIDA Awards Programme for Canadians (2000) which allowed me to do five months of research in South Africa.

I wish to thank my parents for their love and support and for their unwavering faith in my abilities. Thank you to my sisters, Leah, Miriam and Tamara for their friendship, advice and encouragement, especially to Leah for taking the time to read a draft of my thesis and giving me great feedback.

I wish to express my thanks and appreciation for my extended family in Cape Town for their hospitality and generosity, especially David and Shirley, each of whom have a special place in my heart.

Thank you to my friend, colleague and mentor, Jacqueline Jaffe, without whom this whole project would not have come into being. Thank your for your wisdom, your faith in me and for getting me through all my crises in Cape Town. You are my partner in this.

I am grateful to Professor Ciraj Rassool for his time and energy, helping connect me with people in Cape Town and providing me with much information and reading material on South African public history.

A debt of appreciation goes out to Irene Kohn for asking me to present my research at the
Testimony and Historical Memory seminar series which gave me the opportunity to work through some important questions and issues in my thesis. It also kick-started me into thesis-writing-mode and I am grateful for that!

To my friends in Toronto: Dave, Alison, Shanna and Catherine, thanks for the cheerleading, pep talks and love which kept me afloat over the past two and a half years.

I want to especially thank Jodi and Hillaire for their loyal and nourishing friendship - thank you both for believing I could do this when I did not think it possible. Thank you Adam for always being there and giving me the gift of laughter.

I want to thank two people who have lived this with me: Scott, for his love, support, editing and endless encouragement and for putting up with all my antics; and my sister Tamara for being my 'land to light on'.

I am indebted most of all to the women of Ikamva Labantu, who have enriched my life and opened their hearts and homes to me. Thank you Cheryl for trusting me enough to share your memories with me, you are a brave and strong woman. Thank you to Avril for your positive energy, your spirit and eagerness to talk to me. Thank you Nobuntu for opening up to a young, white, foreign girl and teaching me much about ‘ubuntu’. Thank you Helen for your vision, your tireless energy, your generosity of spirit and for all the meals you fed me! Thank you Pumla for opening up to me in hard times. Thank you Tutu, for your love most of all, your incredible strength and for treating me like family; I truly am your Canadian daughter and I carry your love with me like a flag. I love you all.
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Abstract

This thesis explores the pedagogical and social importance of testimony as a practice of remembrance and its transformative possibilities, both individually and collectively through presenting a case study of one particular community of women in South Africa, in the process of remembering their lives during and after the apartheid regime. I examine how through these acts of speaking both privately and publicly, they and in turn, I, engage in the concept of ‘remembrance learning’, a learning from, and not just a learning about the past. This thesis argues that testimony, oral or written, can be more than just a mining for facts, but a resource for a critical pedagogy where learning and remembering are intertwined. The emphasis of this thesis is on the possibility for transformation in both the speaker and the listener of testimony and how this process can be used as a tool for social change.
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Chapter One

Introduction

The Site

Driving along the highway from Cape Town International Airport into the city is an appropriate yet almost overwhelming introduction into the economic, topographic and cultural contrasts within Cape Town and indeed, South Africa. On either side of the highway stretching as far as the eye can see are townships where the black\(^1\) and coloured population have been forced to live for the past 25 years. Although it’s been 7 years since the country’s first democratic elections in 1994, the majority of the population continue to live in squalor and destitution, most have one room shacks, roofs of corrugated metal or iron and no indoor toilets. Long ditches are filled with polluted water and garbage. Children play on the banks of the ditches along the highway. Hundreds of unemployed adults mill about the streets, some hawking goods or playing cards, others burning garbage. Government houses have been built, but most of them are poorly constructed and too small to house large families. Thousands more wait for their houses to be built.

As you enter the city, the scene and feel change. A thriving cosmopolitan centre with European architecture replaces the destitution. The city is dramatically flanked by the impressive flat topped Table Mountain. Driving through Cape Town, one begins to see the difference in the wealth of the landscape, the green space and infrastructure. Nestling above the city on the slopes of the mountain are large houses, paved streets, brightly coloured bougainvilleas climbing over huge walls and fences.

\(^{1}\) It is important to note that the terms ‘black’, ‘coloured’ and ‘white’ are not neutral, descriptive terms but have political connotations. I use these terms in my thesis as South Africans continue to identify and refer to each other in this way.
White people in expensive cars drive by, while black gardeners, domestic workers and construction crews walk hurriedly to catch the taxis - the black informal transport system - across to the outskirts of the city to their homes.

This visual image of Cape Town will most likely be familiar even to those who have not visited South Africa, so commonly has it been described by journalists and the media over 50 years of apartheid. Unfortunately, it is a stereotypical picture which still has currency in the year 2001; the racial segregation and huge inequality in the distribution of wealth and power across racial/class lines remains largely unchanged. What is changing however, is the way people are now confronting South Africa's 50 year history of apartheid. What South Africans are remembering both publicly and privately is something altogether new.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) has had a large impact on public memory although it has not been the only determining factor in creating a culture of remembrance or 'telling' in the new South Africa, rather this 'culture of telling' came out of a complex web of historical, political and social factors starting as far back as the late 1960's with the beginning of the 'people's history' movement. As a result of years of suppression and censure along with the recent media saturation of the proceedings of the TRC, this 'culture of telling' has freed everyone - white, black and coloured - to have something to say about the past. What is unclear, however, is the impact. What effect does the process have on the nation as a whole? How are communities coping?

My research takes up where the TRC left off and attempts to address some of its limitations by looking at alternative settings and practices of remembrance using testimony, but on a much smaller scale; where the relationships between speaker and listener are more closely knit. The questions which

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2See Chapter Two for more background.
Concern me in this thesis are: what is the relationship between remembering the past and the rebuilding of community, in particular in a post-conflict society? Is there a way to begin this process through the use of testimonies?

It is my aim in this thesis to explore the pedagogical and social importance of testimony as an alternative practice of remembrance and to consider its transformative possibilities, both individually and collectively. I will address these concerns by presenting a case study of one particular community of women in the process of remembering their lives during and after the apartheid regime. I will examine how in these acts of speaking both personally (to me) and publicly (to an audience of community members), they and (in turn I) engage in what Claudia Eppert has defined as ‘remembrance learning’: “a practice of questioning ourselves, our identities, our relationships to past and present others” (2000, 216-17). This notion of remembrance-learning denotes a learning from, and not just a learning about the past; that is to say, testimony, oral or written, can be more than just a mining for facts, but a resource for a critical pedagogy where learning and remembering are intertwined. The emphasis of this thesis is on the possibility for transformation in both the speaker and the listener of testimony and how this process can be used as a tool for social change.

I have organized the thesis into five Chapters. The first Chapter will introduce the current situation in South Africa - post-apartheid, post-TRC - and detail some of the questions and concerns that have informed and prompted my research into this area. I include my methodology at the end of this Chapter as well as a brief description of the women I interviewed.

In Chapter Two, I explore South African historiography and the role traditional and oral

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3When I use the term “post conflict” it refers to the previous apartheid regime of enforced segregation and state sanctioned violence. However, it is important to note that there is still an ‘economic apartheid’ that exists which contributes to clashes between different racial groups and is a cause of violent crime within major cities.
historians have played in shaping public memory in South Africa. I also locate my work within the larger context of women's activism and oral narratives in South Africa and elsewhere. In Chapter Three, I look at the process of remembrance-learning with an analysis of the women’s testimonies while at the same time examining my own role as researcher and listener - how I engage and respond to their stories. This reflective aspect is an important and necessary contribution to the study; as a researcher and listener, my own 'unsettling' and transformation is part of the findings of this study. In Chapter Four I explore the impact the process of testimony as a public performance might have on the community as a whole, and how it allows people to cross certain racial and/or cultural boundaries, which is especially critical in the South African context. In the final chapter, I discuss the broader implications of my findings in Chapters Three and Four and situate my work more broadly within the context of public remembrance in South Africa. To conclude, I suggest further areas of research for the future.

As I am working in the wake of the TRC, it is important that the reader is familiar with its conception and some of the main issues involved in its process, which I will briefly outline in the next section.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission

When the African National Congress was elected to power in 1994 with Nelson Mandela as leader, the new parliament passed the National Unity and Reconciliation Act. With this Act, in a bold and unprecedented move, the government along with Archbishop Desmond Tutu created the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to help facilitate a “truth recovery process”. It differed from any other truth commission in the world, in two significant ways: 1) amnesty was considered on an individual basis and could be granted in exchange for full disclosure of the truth, 2) hearings of testimonies were
The case of Dirk Coetzee, former head of Vlakplaas, the government’s secret death squad, represents the complexity and problems encountered when engaging in practices of remembrance; do we remember to preserve the past, do we remember in order to prevent forgetting or do we remember as a way of forgetting?

In her book, *Long Shadows: Truth, Lies and Memory*, journalist Erna Paris interviews Dirk Coetzee, in his rented home in a wealthy Afrikaner suburb of Johannesburg. Coetzee applied for amnesty after blowing the whistle on the highly secretive inner workings of Vlakplaas, making public the details of how they tortured, mutilated and burned their black victims who were targeted as guerillas. Paris asks him about his amnesty hearing and Coetzee says, “I told the truth because I believe we can only bury the past if we know what it is we’re burying.” (p.264)

An apt yet ironic metaphor for a man such as Coetzee who “buried” the bodies of hundreds of men he did not know. Now, as their bones are literally being exhumed and their ghastly fates being brought to light, he offers the nation his gruesome details as “truth” in exchange not only for a proper “burial” of the past, but for his own freedom and exoneration from punishment for past deeds.

As South African poet and scholar Ingrid De Kok points out, this idea of the ‘clean break’ then turns into the apparently ethical consideration of ‘forgive and forget’ and ‘life must go on’. “It expresses the terror that if we take one glimpse backwards, we may be dragged back into the apartheid
underworld.” However, this language is not limited to people in positions like Coetzee. It is also present in the TRC’s imperative to have the story - often called by commissioners ‘this chapter in our history - closed. (De Kok, 1998)

TRC Commissioner Yasmin Sooka states,

“One might be forgiven for asking the question, what have the beneficiaries of apartheid contributed to those who have lost? Privilege always has a price - oppression of others. All the advocates of ‘let’s get on with our lives, we need to forget the past and move on’ are those who can continue with their lives, they go to court, obtain permission to close off their streets and have boom controlled systems to keep black people out of their suburbs. They have something to go on with”

Notions of truth and memory get blurred and conflated as victims and perpetrators have different reasons and agendas for remembering the past and telling the “truth”. For many perpetrators telling the truth was a way of expelling their own demons, like Coetzee, to be set ‘free’ of the past in order to move on. It was not as much about reconciliation as it was about a kind of exorcism of ghosts - about personal redemption. Most victims and families of victims on the other hand wanted to hear the truth as a form of justice; a way of remembering, honouring and not forgetting those who were killed in the struggle. And for many, the burning question was, why?

For Dirk Coetzee the Truth Commission isn’t about why, it is simply about what happened. Truth Commissions engage in what Hannah Arendt called “brute truth”. It’s not about all the interpretations, all the why’s and how’s, it’s about getting the basic facts of what happened, all the while allowing people to debate the meaning of those facts. Harvard law professor, Martha Minow points out that, fundamentally, it is about preventing denial and secrecy. Acknowledgment is a dimension that follows from that, so that not only is there some official place where facts have been accumulated, there’s also then an official act that acknowledges the receipt of those facts. (1999, lecture)
It was impossible that the TRC would or could produce the full ‘truth’ of apartheid in all its detail, for all time. It had specific goals: to uncover the truth and hear the stories of regular South Africans who were victimized under apartheid. The TRC set out to achieve its goals with the amount of time and money allotted to it. It was not an easy task and was overwhelmed with the volume of requests of people wanting to tell their stories.

Unfinished Business

Now that the TRC is over, there is still much ‘unfinished business’ dealing with reparations, memorials and public access to the data. There is also an increasing chasm in attitudes that has developed since the TRC has closed its offices, mostly between whites and blacks. The onslaught of testimonies of trauma can often have the reverse effect than is intended; rather than promoting a spirit of reconciliation, recent studies have shown that since the beginning of the TRC 6 years ago, racial tensions have risen resulting in increased polarization between whites and blacks as each group struggles to “get on with their lives” in different ways.

A survey conducted by the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation last year (2000) revealed a large discrepancy between black and white South Africans in valuing the process of the TRC. While 77% of blacks felt the TRC was important in building a united South African nation, only 29% of whites agreed. White South Africans appear to be negative about the TRC and only 50% felt it was their responsibility as a citizen to contribute to the process of national reconciliation, while almost 80% of
black South Africans agreed it was their responsibility.

Ingrid De Kok, asks the question, “can structures such as the TRC contain the psychic and cultural processes involved when far-reaching social change is under way? Might they not unwittingly encourage cultural and social amnesia? Or in (Mahmood) Mamdini’s distinction might they not continue the process of privileging beneficiaries of the past social system by foregrounding the acts of a limited group of perpetrators only?” (De Kok, 1998, 59) This is an important question and one which continues to be debated and discussed throughout the country, by both all members of South African society. “It is in the multiplicity of partial versions and experiences, composed and recomposed within sight of each other, that truth ‘as a thing of this world’, in Foucault’s phrase, will emerge. In this mobile current individuals and communities will make and remake their meanings.” (De Kok, 1998, 61)

At a talk she gave at the John F. Kennedy School of Government in 1999, on her book Between Vengeance and Forgiveness, Martha Minow responded to a question from an audience member about the final report of the TRC on victim’s testimonies. Apparently, the thousands of stories the commission received were put into only four categories. The question put forth was how personal are these stories if they can be categorized like this? Minow responds;

“These formal documents are hardly the point. The formal documents give an edge to ongoing processes. Processes themselves include not only the formal processes, but also dinner time conversations, the communications where intimate details can be revealed, and more appropriately than in any formal place. So the point I would make about contributing to a national narrative in some material sense – there’s not going to be a document, there’s going to be the national narrative – is that there will be a project of building a national narrative with the memory these events encoded in them. And that will require countless conversations by countless people about the particularities. So I think that’s a better way to imagine the individual stories being acknowledged and heard” (Seminar, 1999)

What Minow and De Kok are gesturing towards is a less formal process of remembering that
occurs in communities between families and friends, one by which the actual accuracy and facts of a story are less important than the act of speaking and listening to each other. A re-membering of their lives on their own terms, as co-authors in their own history making. While this is a critical component in the healing process of a nation, it is necessary to point out that not all such informal or ‘dinner time’ conversations are conducive to “remembering well”. Research in other areas of remembrance work such as Holocaust Studies have shown that institutional forums and organized memory-spaces or events can help initiate a healing and transformative process, which is often difficult to achieve within a strictly informal setting.

Testimony as a Discursive Practice: Participating in the ‘Other’

For the most part, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission used testimony as a way of hearing the facts described by people who had experienced or committed violence during apartheid. The TRC’s use of testimonial accounts was heard in much the same way a court of law uses a witness to testify - “to make a serious declaration to substantiate a fact, to bear witness or give evidence” (Webster’s Dictionary, 1988). Even the set up that the TRC used in each town was like a small court with a panel of TRC commissioners seated beside each other like a jury, and Arch Bishop Desmond Tutu like a judge at the centre. Although the TRC insisted that the proceedings were not intended to resemble a court room and attempted to make the set up as un-intimidating for the speakers as possible, 

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*I refer here to Simon, Rosenberg and Eppert’s notion of a remembering “that humbles any design to master the past and requires a serious reflexivity rooted in a recognition that the historical character of one’s partial and mediated remembrance is contingent and thus can always be otherwise” (Between Hope and Despair, 2000).*
the purpose and function of the TRC process was very similar to a trial in its attempt to seek the truth and find out what happened.

In this thesis, I argue that testimony can be more than a declaration of facts, but rather a performance that has the power to transform those who speak it and those who hear it. Testimony is more than a narrativization of the past, the act of telling someone that something happened is in itself a performatve speech act.

"What the testimony does not offer is, however, a completed statement, a totalizable account of those events. In the testimony, language is in process and in trial, it does not possess itself as a conclusion, as the constatation of a verdict or the self-transparency of knowledge. Testimony is, in other words, a discursive practice, as opposed to a pure theory. To testify - to vow to tell, to promise and produce one's own speech as material evidence for truth - is to accomplish a speech act, rather than to simply formulate a statement." (Felman, 17, 1992)

Holocaust scholar James Young states that the importance of testimony lies in the telling, and not then, as a substitute or supplement to historical events. As a discursive practice, testimonies offer a way for the listener to relate to the speaker, thus allowing a way for both of them to enter into a space where a dialogue can take place. For example, Italian oral historian Luisa Passerini writes that in the era of equality and cosmopolitanism memories can help us to find ways, 'to participate in the other, to share his/her being other'. She writes,

"For us, (oral historians) the task is to participate in different memories, to share differences not in any way in an attempt to demonstrate their universality but rather to insist on the diversity and plurality of memory. Engaging in this task, inventing ways of facing up to this challenge, will be the contribution that oral historians along with those concerned with the processes of remembering can make, in order to detach human memory from all forms of totalitarianism, in politics as well as culture, and to help play its part in the forming of a democratic consciousness" (Passerini, p.18)

The emphasis on ‘diversity and plurality of memory” is one of the ways testimony in my project,
differs from that of the TRC. The transformative possibilities of testimony lie in the grey areas where there are not only facts to be found, but the details of a moment or a feeling that can disrupt, unsettle or even surprise a listener. More than simply a confession, less than a declaration and somewhere in between storytelling, oral history and narrativization, the testimonies in this case study are meant to open things up; to expand and question, rather than to seek facts or find conclusions.

Methodology

In 1998, I spent four months in South Africa working as a program developer for a non-profit, community-based organization in Cape Town called Ikamva Labantu, “The Future of Our Nation”. It is an incredibly dynamic organization that was founded by several women over 30 years ago and continues to be mostly woman-run today. In 1992 it became an umbrella organization for several organizations implementing a variety of projects in the townships around Cape Town. Ikamva Labantu now manages six programmes in over 1000 community-based projects and provides social services including daycare, youth education and sport, access to medical and legal services, skills training for the unemployed and disabled, rehabilitation and shelters for the homeless as well as seniors-for seniors programmes and AIDS education and awareness. In 1998 the organization was selected by the Mandela government as the lead partner in a pilot project to test and set up a new funding policy for social services in South Africa. In short, the organization is a major force in the reconstruction process.

While working with Ikamva Labantu, an American colleague and I were asked to record the oral histories of several of the founding members. Helen Lieberman, the Executive Director, wanted us to
record and document the stories of the women working with the organization as a way of testifying, or bearing witness to, the events they had resisted and survived. These women formed an alliance based on their social and political activism even though they came from different racial, and religious backgrounds, which I briefly detail at the end of this chapter. Helen was afraid they and their communities might forget the risks they had taken and how much they had accomplished in thirty years working together and also that their model of crossing racial boundaries might be forgotten in an atmosphere of rising racial tensions.

I was deeply moved by the stories of the women from Ikamva Labantu; their lives and struggles and the relationships the women had forged with each other across racial, religious and class lines. As I listened to them, I was confronted with the question, ‘are these stories important for other people outside this organization, beyond these individuals?’ With permission, we let the women read each other’s stories once they had been transcribed and new dialogues started to happen between them. I realized that this kind of informal practice of remembrance had more potential than just relating facts and dates of the past. The process was having an impact on how these women were relating to each other in the present.

This lead me to think about what would happen if the structure was set up for people to “remember well”? And what would that mean, what kind of structures would have to be in place for that to happen? Beyond just recounting events, is there the possibility of a transformative experience not only in the telling, but maybe more importantly in the listening? In my mind, I explored the possibilities of a community event, something akin to the TRC in having people tell their stories, in a less formal, but still structured way. It would have to be organized in a public place or cultural setting, and what would happen within that space would not be intended to uncover facts as much as it would attempt to create a space for dialogues and questioning and self-reflection. Such an event would provide
the participants with a place where they could feel safe, it would not be about victim facing perpetrator, but rather people facing each other. Friends, colleagues and family would be there.

For 2 years after my return from South Africa I kept in touch with the women from Ikamva Labantu and became increasingly engrossed in the larger question of the meaning these stories had for the building of the New South Africa, and, more specifically, the pedagogical significance of how these stories could transform a group of women within a particular post-conflict community. I began my master’s degree at OISE with the intention of learning more about the field of historical memory and testimony and last year, with the help of a grant from CIDA, I returned to Cape Town for 5 months.

Ikamva Labantu has expanded in the last 5 years and has many staff members now. I decided to focus on 6 women who had been involved with each other for over 20 years and who had been instrumental in building up what became the organization in 1992. These six women are all sector heads of different programs within Ikamva Labantu and have known each other through various community activist work over the past 30 years. These women were among hundreds of thousands of mainly black South African women who, from the mid 1970’s onwards placed human need above unjust laws and struggled for the community in areas such as greater access to housing for the poor and displaced. In Chapter Two I will discuss the importance of gender and women’s roles during apartheid. When I returned in 2000, I was able to continue the relationships with the women and they expressed their desire to work with me on the project of recording their testimonies.

The idea of speaking about the past was not a foreign idea to these women, but it was new for them to be asked to speak for themselves about their own lives. They had spent the past few years listening to the proceedings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission over the airwaves and on the television, but had never had the chance to express their own feelings of victimization, anger and /or
My two objectives in returning to Cape Town for 5 months of research were to: interview the women one-on-one to create a public archive, and then to put together an event at the Cultural History Museum where these women would speak their stories to a public that included affiliates of their organization, family members and friends. The interviews were approximately 1-1 1/2 hours in length and were recorded on a digital recorder. I had a series of 12 questions which I asked them:

1) Why did you become an activist?
2) Were you and your family ever relocated?
3) Can you tell me about Crossroads in the 1970's? Were you part of the resistance?
4) What was Cape Town like before District Six was demolished?
5) How did you become involved with Ikamva Labantu?
6) Could you give concrete examples of things you have done, actions you have taken to fight the system of apartheid?
7) What were the living conditions like in the Cape Flats in the 1970's and 80's?
8) Can you describe what kinds of relationships you had, if any, with white/black people?
9) What role did your husband and/or the men in your community play during apartheid?
10) How do you conceive of your work today, in post apartheid South Africa?
11) How do the people in your community perceive your work today?
12) After 6 years, in what ways have the conditions of the new democratic culture in South Africa evolved, or not?

These questions were intended to help the women begin to speak about the past and to ease them into their testimonies. They were free to talk about things beyond the scope of the questions. The testimonies were recorded on a Sony mini-disc (audio digital recorder) over the period of two months. In some cases I did two sets of interviews if the interviewee was unhappy with the first one, or if more information was required. The interviews were conducted at the women's convenience, at their location of choice.

The interviews were later transcribed onto the computer and printed. Each woman was free to read them. Each woman was also asked to write a statement/testimonial to present at the community
event I organized. These written testimonials were to be read at the event, in front of each other and the audience. Part of the visual portion of the event consisted of photos of the women taken by a local photographer which were then added to an excerpt of each women’s testimony and placed on display panels. There was also memorabilia from their apartheid struggle days exhibited with the posters.

These posters were interspersed with a series of twelve large laminated posters from the Mayibuye Centre (an archive of apartheid resistance) on South African women’s role in the national struggle, a series entitled “You’ve Struck a Rock”. The purpose of interspersing the two sets of posters was to highlight the local women’s contributions to the anti-apartheid struggle and community building and to place these in the context of the national women’s struggle, thus putting them alongside publicly recognized activists. This was done to encourage them and to value their own contribution as equally important to community life and national history.

I then returned again in March 2001, to do follow up interviews with the women and to find out how their lives had been affected by the event at the Cultural History Museum and through the one-on-one interviews I conducted with them. The follow up questions I posed were:

1) How has the interview process affected or made an impact on you over the past 3 years?
2) How did you feel while you were telling your story at the Cultural History Museum?
3) What happened in the weeks/months afterwards? Were your relationships with the other women affected in any way?
4) What feelings came up for you as you listened to the stories of your colleagues?
5) How has this process affected your life as a whole - in terms of both family and work?

This thesis draws on research from the 3 different sets of interviews with these 6 women, beginning in 1998 and ending in 2001.
Description of the Women of Ikamva Labantu

It is important that the reader have some information about each woman and her circumstances in order to understand and engage with the testimonies that will follow in the next 3 chapters. While the 6 women whom I interviewed were linked together because of their work, their personal and private lives differ greatly. I have attempted to highlight some of these differences in the brief descriptions I provide below.

The women of Ikamva Labantu wanted their real names attached to the stories they told me, however, they did not have the opportunity to read my analysis of their testimonies before the completion of this thesis and may disagree with my views. It is also important to note that any description or account of these women is only partial and in no way represents the complexity of their lives or their full personalities.

1) Helen Lieberman, Executive Director

Helen is a Jewish woman in her early sixties. She is a speech therapist by profession, but chose not to pursue her career; instead she spent the past 30 years as a social activist working in the townships. Helen is the founder of Ikamva Labantu, but is the only unpaid worker. She has a supportive husband, Michael, who bears the financial burden of their lifestyle so she can concentrate on her work. Helen is keenly aware of her privilege and the stark contrasts between the two worlds she has been straddling for the past 30 years. At the end of the day, Helen says, “I come back to this” gesturing to her plush, spacious apartment with a view of the ocean. She has been dubbed the “Mother Teresa of Africa” by the white newspapers and by her own Jewish community. She has three grown children and two grandchildren.
2) Pumla Tyalibongo, Sector head for the Educare Centres “Ithemba Labantwana”

Pumla is a woman in her early forties lives who lives in a house in the coloured township of Montana, although she is a Xhosa speaking African. She wanted her children to have what she never did, which is a room of their own in a ‘real’ house (not a shack) she could own herself, but she is still trying to pay it off. She is raising 4 children and is going through a divorce. Her husband is unemployed and will not support or tolerate her community work as he wants her home “waiting on him.” He is angry and jealous of her and feels emasculated by her commitment to her work and not to him. It has been a physically and emotionally abusive relationship which has left her depleted and unable to fully function at work. She is clearly struggling.

3) Nobuntu Nkanyuza: Sector head for the Shelter and Havens Program

Nobuntu, a Xhosa speaking African woman and a born-again Christian in her early sixties lives in a small house in the black township of Langa. She is twice-divorced, with two grown children. Nobuntu lives on her own but helps take care of her grandchildren. She has led a relatively privileged life for a black woman, and has been able to travel outside of South Africa for various educational and church-related activities to the United States and Switzerland. She has volunteered in her own communities for years, wanting to give something back. She has run her own daycare, opened shelters for the homeless and run a soup kitchen among many other things.

4) Cheryl Gordon: Sector head for Disabled Children and Adults.

Cheryl, a coloured woman in her late forties lives in a house in Plumstead, a well-to-do white area with her husband Graeme, and their two teenagers. Cheryl and her family were forcibly removed from their
home in the 1970's near the District Six area. She is looking after her elderly parents and her adult disabled brother, all of whom live with her. Cheryl got involved through her church, helping to find housing for the displaced and homeless. She is educated and has a happy, stable marriage.

5) Avril Hoepner: Sector head of the Development Programs for the Blind

Avril, a white Christian woman also in her late forties, lives in Kenilworth, an affluent white area. She and her husband, Lawrence have four children, one of whom is now married. Avril became politically involved with the ANC women’s league in the 1970's and through her husband, who was a teacher and very involved in the struggle. They have emotional and financial security now, although they went through some rough times in the 1980's.

6) Tutu Gcememe: Sector head for the Seniors Program

Tutu lives in a small house beside a squatter camp in Langa with her husband. Her three children are grown and one of them is in jail. She takes care of her mother-in-law, her late sister’s two teenage children, and her stepmother. She struggles financially and is active as a volunteer in her church and community. Tutu got involved teaching literacy in her community and then worked for the Red Cross for years before joining Ikamva Labantu.
Chapter Two

"History chokes on the little bones of meaning" (Anne Michaels, Skin Divers p.43)

Introduction

The context out of which my work emerges lies within the rich fields of education, oral history and social justice movements and thus some background on how these areas fed my project is necessary. This Chapter is divided into four different sections as follows: 1) I explore South African historiography and the role traditional and oral historians have played in shaping public memory in South Africa, 2) I locate my work within the larger context of women’s activism in Cape Town and explore the role gender played in the struggle against apartheid 3) I discuss the use of testimony in two South African works of literature which informed my own research and approach as a white foreign researcher and 4) I provide excerpts of testimonies I recorded from Helen and Cheryl.

South African historiography

More than twenty years ago, oral history projects started up in South Africa and elsewhere, both within institutional settings and in grassroots projects, attempting to record the lives and testimonies of oppressed people. In the 1980's and early 1990's, along with the extensive work that was (and continues to be) done with Holocaust survivors’ testimonies, there emerged a genre of ‘testimonios’ from Latin America; the recording of subaltern women’s stories in their own voices, for example, that
of Rigoberta Menchu from Guatemala, or the stories of The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, from Argentina. These widely published works increased the interest and importance of rural and uneducated women's stories and their need to be recorded; as ethnographies, as accounts of terrible injustices wrought by corrupt governments, and as oral histories to be passed on to future generations.

These stories, along with the trend in popular culture of the 'confessional narrative' within talk shows and mass market books over the past ten to fifteen years has helped shape the field of public memory, the use of testimony and the way in which people's stories are taken up for various uses, politically or socially.

In the 1960's and 70's a new field of history emerged, in South Africa and elsewhere in the academy out of a context in which documents and records left by the literate, almost exclusively dominant racial and ethnic groups (as well as being male, middle-upper class) were privileged to the exclusion of those sources that helped scholars understand the lives and struggles of subaltern peoples. Oral historians began to collect and substantiate such sources and struggled considerably to have their work accepted as being legitimate as other forms of historical knowledge.

The production of history - oral or photographic - is an exercise in power. Not only do those in positions of power have the greatest opportunity to control this form of knowledge production, they also shape the history to further entrench their dominant positions. The telling of history cannot be isolated from the context of power from which it emerges. While no history can be free of bias, omission or interpretation, it can however be told in ways that either perpetuate hierarchies of inequality or challenge them.

In her book *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (1995) Anne McClintock writes that the representation of history, including oral history is itself a contested historical
event. In South Africa’s written history, many popular myths were codified in order to justify Afrikaner’s claims that they were as African as the Zulu or Xhosa people and had merely settled areas where no indigenous people had lived. Over the past decade or so, an increasing number of people have pointed to oral history as a way of challenging the bias of written histories. In South Africa and elsewhere, hope emerged that oral history would offer the delirious promise of what Walter Benjamin dubbed “brushing history against the grain” (p. 310). It promised to restore the vivid, ordinary lives of those people who built railroads, raised children, and served the colonials. Dubbed as the “new history”, a “history from below” or the “people’s history”, oral history opened up domestic power relations, family histories and informal social groupings into public history.

“Oral history is not simply a new technique for recovering the past in its purity. Rather, it invites a new theory of the representation of history. Not only is history produced as much by miners, prostitutes, mothers and farmworkers as by the heroes of history-writing, but the recording of history is both the outcome of struggle and the locus of struggle itself” (McClintock 1995, 310)

In South Africa the emergence of an oral or “new history” came in response to the fast growing extraparliamentary activism of the independent trade unions and community organizations that were mobilized through the 1970’s and 1980’s over major issues such as rent, transport, housing and education. McClintock defines the new history as having taken at least three directions. The first having been empirically-based, politically radical academic histories which have explored such topics as the rise and fall of the African peasantry, the making of the black proletariat, the different histories of Zulu, Xhosa, Pedi, and so on. These histories were written by white academics for a specialized academic readership. Second, histories such as those produced by the Labour History Groups, which consist of illustrated booklets in English, Zulu and Xhosa. Booklets such as Learn and Teach were written for a
popular mass readership by intellectuals or community activists committed to putting their training and expertise at the service of the communities. Finally, there are histories produced by nonacademics, workers and students for worker publications and community broadsheets, such as Fosatu Worker News and Izwilase Township, as well as popular comic-book representations of history, which attempt to put the writing and reading of history into the hands of the communities themselves. (McClintock, 309)

In their chapter in the book Negotiating the Past: the making of memory in South Africa (1998) Minkley and Rassool offer a critical reading of that school of historiography known as ‘history from below’ and suggest that the complexities of memory have been glossed over. They argue that 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 1950's. “Individual memory, sourced through ‘resistance voices’, recollected ‘the memory of a people’ and implied an unstated collective memory of resistance.”(92)

According to Minkley and Rassool, in the 1980's social history within South Africa was divided into two compatible resistance narratives. One was academic, based on culturalist notions of class and consciousness. The other was popular, located within the cultural politics of nationalism. Both narratives drew on the notion of community as a metaphor for everyday experience, as the place for locating divergent strands of political consciousness. (Rassool,93)

In the 1990's, however, oral history as the ‘democratic practice’ of social and popular history in South Africa came under increasing strain and it is important to acknowledge the critique of oral history here. The mythology of ‘history as a national struggle’ and the partisan ‘ventriloquisms’ of people’s history began to be questioned. (Rousseau,1994 82-119). No longer did oral history by virtue of its radical entry into South African public history mean the shift in power, it often came to mean
replacing one set of master narratives with another, rather than opening up the complexities of the past with multiple narratives.

Minkley and Rassool, discuss the essentializing of the past through the simple dichotomy between apartheid and resistance. In their work they note the previous unwillingness of social historians to engage in issues of power embedded in the conversational narratives, and the tendency of these historians to impose themselves and their ‘radical’ methods on ‘ordinary people’. They write, “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.” (94). In the past few years a number of recent studies have begun to explore and re-examine experience and unravel constructions of resistance at the core of South Africa historiography.°

The point is that there is no indication that oral historians are any less prone to privileging a few master narratives than traditional historians or any more able to evoke multiple versions of the past. As Patricia Davison writes, “If public memory is to be more than a dominant mythology, new ways of evoking multiple memories will have to be found. For political reasons, new versions of the past may become the official version and claim authenticity, but former structures and mechanisms remain unchanged”(1999,146-153).°

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° Some examples are, Bozzioli with Nkotsoe (1991), Moodie with Ndatshe (1994), and Nasson (1991). Bozzioli with Nkotshe, for example point to the more complex and less coherent forms of identity and agency collected through peasant testimonies among various women of Phokeng. (Minkley,Rassool 1998, 95).

°For more on the topic of how power relations remain at the centre of critical debates on museum practice see Patricia Davison’s chapter “Museums and the reshaping of memory” in Nutall and Coetzee’s Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa (1999).
What about processes? Minkley and Rassool note that the most surprising aspect of the recent work is the continued limited engagement with form, structure and social processes of memory. Isabel Hofmeyr argues that while much work has been drawn from oral historical information, this scholarship continues to mine testimony for its facts without paying much attention to the forms of interpretation and intellectual traditions that inform these ‘facts’. (Hofmeyr 1994, 181). Hofmeyr's concern is that oral history can collapse into historical realist narratives and becomes a source, not a complex of historical narratives whose form is not fixed. Simply preserving and collecting human memories is a “mode of historical taxidermy” reproducing events in the past as fixed and static. Empiricism denotes the idea of history as a pure and recoverable set of events, a notion that can only be upheld by depoliticizing the dynamics of power that underlie the activities of history-making. (McClintock, p. 311)

While traditional historians, oral historians and recently ethnohistorians (historians of Native/Indigenous peoples) have engaged in much debate and discussion since Hofmeyr’s piece was published, acknowledging the complexities of their work, still not enough attention has been devoted to the forms of interpretations and social processes that inform the recorded memories.

Approaches to the Representation of Testimony and the Struggle for Power

Despite the various critiques and concerns associated with the field of oral history, there are important contributions that have been made and continue to be made through the representation of oral histories and testimonies in South Africa.

In this section I discuss two widely acclaimed South African books which deal with testimony
in very different ways but are both critical in their negotiation of power relations between whites and ‘blacks’ in the area of recorded/written oral histories produced for the public. Both of these works have informed my own research, and my approach to my own role as a foreign white researcher collecting and recording oral testimonies of South African women.

The reins of historical power in South African history have largely remained in the hands of academics, mostly white and mostly working in white-run institutions such as museums and publishing houses. Representations of the ‘other’ through literature and transcribed oral histories have had an impact on the South African psyche, but in the past have entered into the mass market only because of their depoliticized nature. Stories of women’s lives for example were not considered political since they dealt with the domestic and family realm. One example is the famous book Poppie Nongena (1980) by the popular Afrikaans writer Elsa Joubert. This book was a part of the ‘history from below’ movement but was disregarded due to its gendered origins and the way it was marketed and received. In 1978 Joubert published Die Swerfiare van Poppie Nongena based on the oral history of a black woman who was given the pseudonym of “Poppie Nongena”. Joubert had been looking for a new topic for her next book when a black woman came to her doorstep the day after the Soweto Uprising in 1976. The two agreed that Joubert would transcribe and edit Nongena’s story and, should the book sell, Nongena and Joubert would divide the profits. They met three times a week to record the stories. Nothing like it had been published before in South Africa, and it became an overnight sensation.

Published in English in 1980, The Long Journey of Poppie Nongena challenged literary conventions as well as political authority. A black woman’s story entered the white male dominated establishment of publishing, and two women collaborated across race and class lines, while calling into
question Western notions of the individual author (McClintock, 308). A book that deals with deeply theoretical, political and cultural issues was paradoxically hailed as an “apolitical” book, a work of “literature” by an Afrikaans woman about Afrikaans speaking ‘blacks’. Because it was regarded as a domestic story, written in the language of the dominant group and the sole listed author was a white Afrikaans woman, the book was safely embraced by the Afrikaaner society (McClintock, 309).

While it is a collaborative work, written and edited and re-written collectively, there is no evidence on the front cover, on the copyright page, nor in the prefactory note that Nongena is an agent in her own history. Joubert writes:

“This novel is based on the actual life story of a black woman living in South Africa today. Only her name, Poppie Rachel Nongena, born Matati, is invented. The facts were related to me not only by Poppie herself, but by members of her immediate family.” (Preface)

Nongena’s role in the book is reduced to the passive “relating” of facts, rather than one of co-authorship. While Joubert leaves herself out of the narrative to make it an authentic rendering of the story, her name is the only one on the cover, and as McClintock points out, it is marketed as a “novel”. The book is written in the first person and the “I” represents Nongena, yet Joubert’s role in editing, structuring and ordering the narrative is left unmentioned. What might have happened if Nongena was officially listed as co-author? How much does the author authorize the text?

A white person who attempts to represent the oral history of a marginalized individual or group requires more than just transcribing and editing and trying to “mirror reality”. McClintock states: “The collection and preservation of human memory is less a technique for increased historical accuracy, than it is a new, contested technology for historical power”(p.310)

Nongena was “fictional” due to the political climate. She had every reason to keep her identity hidden and this prevented her from being able to do interviews and promote her story as something
which belonged to her. However, Joubert had the responsibility of presenting the story not as a novel written by her, but as a co-authored work that was collaborative in every way up until the end. If she had written an introduction explaining her relationship to apartheid and how this woman had ended up coming to see her, then the book may not have been received like an apolitical “novel”.

Despite the “novel” status, Joubert enabled Poppie Nongena’s story to be brought into the public realm and white South Africans suddenly had access into the life of a poor, black woman from the townships. However, in the erasure of Nongena’s creative authority and the resulting whitewashing of its politics, Nongena becomes a ‘witness’ of otherness and her agency as a history-maker is denied.

Twenty years after the publication of The Long Journey of Poppie Nongena Antjie Krog, a critically acclaimed South African poet and journalist came out with the book Country of my Skull: Guilt, Sorrow and the Limits of Forgiveness in the New South Africa. Krog won the most prestigious South African literary award for her book which documents her experience covering the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The transcripts of victims testimonies are placed at the heart of the book, and she tells her story of coming to terms with her own complicity in the legacy of apartheid, alongside and simultaneous to them.

Krog’s book, Country of my Skull is radically different in style, genre and content than Joubert’s book but Krog is able to do something Joubert was not able to do. Krog openly discuss issues of power in her book and tries to cope with her own complicity in the system of apartheid as a member of the Afrikaner culture, the creators of apartheid. The book exposes its own crafted nature and does not purport to be an oral history, autobiography, or reportage. It mixes genres and writing styles - it is part fiction, part fact, and she does not hide behind the guise of the official (H)istory. Yet, the book is engrossing in
the way Krog constantly positions herself in relation to both the victims and perpetrators of apartheid.

Krog dedicates the book to “Every victim with an Afrikaner surname on her lips” and the book is both a chronicle of the Commission and a working through of her role as a member of a culture of oppressors. As the title suggests, this is a telling of one woman’s journey through the history of her country. She can only speak from her position as a white Afrikaans woman, and how the victim’s stories have shifted her own sense of self and her relationships to others.

I look to this book as a good example of how stories of the “other” can be represented by those in positions of power and privilege in transformative ways. Krog breaks the colonizing hold on the other by taking responsibility for her own role, and by not trying to tell their story for them. More than that, the book also documents the kind of ‘remembrance learning’ I have gestured towards; as Krog listens to testimony after testimony her own position and frames of understanding shift and break apart in the act of listening. She questions her own identity, her relationship and responsibility to ‘past and present others’.

However, Krog does edit, select and structure the testimonies she includes in the book, and for this she is criticized for appropriating the victim’s stories for her own gain. She is also criticized by South African critics for fictionalizing the book. At one point in the book she alludes to an affair between herself and a black colleague, which actually did not happen. However, the intensity of the relationships between those who were involved in the TRC were extremely intense and the kind of emotional bonding that occurred could have easily become sexual. Although it may not have actually happened, she believed it would add to the truth of the experience. She writes about the idea of truth, “I have never bedded that word in a poem. I prefer the word ‘lie’. The moment the lie raises its head, I smell blood. Because it is there … where the truth is closest.”(50)
Krog draws out and complicates the notion of truth, by including poetry, diary entries, thoughts, observations as well as testimonies and facts; in this process she comes closer to exposing the partiality of any truth. Acknowledging the constructed nature of 'the past' and leaves the door to the future open "while holding the keys to the past, so that one does not lose sight of that history even as one seeks to move beyond the attitudes associated with that history" (Willinsky, 207).

I would argue that without the testimonies of black victims of apartheid in the book, South African history is segregated once again. Whites should not speak for blacks and vice versa but the move towards a more inclusive history that seeks to represent the power relations between them is desired and necessary for the creation of a new public memory.

I recognize the difficulty of collaboration between white women and indigenous women and that it is important to move beyond simply recounting the histories of another group, as Joubert's book does, to a place where the position of power shifts in relation to that group. The project then can become not just an educational one, but a transformative one for both myself and the women whose stories I record. Oral histories and testimonies must be about more than consuming the stories of others: we must find a way to remap our own taken-for-granted positions in the world.

Addressing Gender: Why Women? Women's Role in Cape Town's Resistance Movement

In South Africa when male political prisoners languished on Robben Island or other prisons around the country, their wives, daughters and sisters took on the struggle. Conflict blurs and sometimes destroys the boundaries between household and communal space, so that gender roles become reversed (Krog, 2000). Women were not forced out of their traditional roles as child rearers, but instead
took on both jobs of breadwinner and child rearer. They fought for basic rights for their children to have access to education and health care and for themselves for the right to work without pass books.7

In 1978 following the destruction of squatter camps Unibel, Modderdam and Werkgenot, Crossroads was the only major surviving African squatter camp in Cape Town. The determination of its residents and the actions of the Crossroads support group throughout most of 1978 resulted in the community winning a “reprieve” from a state caught in its own contradictions. At the forefront of the struggle were the women of Crossroads.

Unlike the Men’s Committee of Crossroads which tended to have membership along fairly strict geographical lines, the Women’s Committee of Crossroads drew its members from all sections of the community. During this early period the women tended to concentrate on educational issues, developing links with outside liberal organizations, some of which, with their assistance, ran projects in the community. As time went on those women either unemployed or employed in the informal sector and therefore more in touch with day to day problems, slowly developed into a much more powerful force within Crossroads than either of the Men’s Committees. When the community once again found itself faced with the threat of removal in 1978, it was not surprising that it was the women of Crossroads who took the lead in the resistance.

In 1980 the new townships of Khayelitsha and New Crossroads were constructed and efforts were begun to move people from Crossroads into them. Violence increased in the early 1980’s and in 1986 P.W Botha declared a state of emergency and the whole city of Cape Town was declared a “coloured...

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7Apartheid as control was most forcibly felt by African women in the form of influx control and the pass laws. These pass books were initially created to control the flow of migrant male workers into the city. Stepped up influx control and the threat of passes shook African women into a keener awareness of their oppression, as ‘blacks’ and as women, and launched a decade of militant and sustained protest amongst them. (Walker, 1982 124)
preference area" with no blacks allowed. In the height of violence, Crossroads was burnt down and all the residents were displaced.

In the survival struggles of the 1960's against a state which intervened at every level of African women's lives and against men who seemingly colluded in this process, some women began to develop a consciousness of their differential oppression. African women were at the forefront of the struggle, fighting for basic rights for their children - food, health care and education. Most women engaged in an all out war against the system clandestinely, not all participated through political organizations like the PAC or the ANC.

For the women participating in protests around the country, the starting points were not necessarily the big national questions of the day but rather the desire to keep these issues from interfering in their everyday lives. As many of these protests (such as the anti-pass law protests in the 1950's) demonstrate, politics continually intrudes on the 'private' sphere. South African sociologist Debby Bonin provides examples of this citing the legislation that required women to carry passes, noting how this made them available for body-searches by police. Contravening this legislation could result in women being unexpectedly detained thus leaving children alone and vulnerable. Also legislation making beer-brewing illegal deprived women of incomes. Bonin also notes the random police detentions of children and shooting in the street threatened the safety of the home and family. (2000, 302)

Traditionally women have been at the centre of the family and the home as the primary caregivers and nurturers and it has been no different in South Africa. It is through women's stories that much can be learned. For example, learning how women coped with domestic power relations and managed familial responsibilities is crucial in understanding how apartheid, with its forced segregation and
oppression, affected the daily lives of people, and shaped them. This is why a book like *Poppie Nongena* was an important contribution as it revealed the conditions and nature of oppression, specifically that of African women. McClintock writes,

“Oral narratives such as Nongena’s are thus of great importance in expressing, in however oblique or mediated a form, some insight into the myriad hidden experiences of women. At the same time, such narratives offer deep-reaching challenges to a number of Western theories about the formation of selfhood, narrative authority and social identity.” (313)

**Differences in Narrative Structure: Western notions challenged**

Women in South Africa have been marginalized once again in the reconstruction period as male heroes such as Nelson Mandela create a hierarchy of importance in the public memory. Women’s voices and stories represent an important segment of the whole community’s past. It is with these concerns that in 1998 in Cape Town, my colleague Jacqueline Jaffe, a professor of humanities at New York University, and I, approached the project initiated by the Executive Director, Helen Lieberman to interview the women from Ikamva Labantu.

Jacqueline and I, saw our roles as outsiders who could approach the task of recording oral histories of these women with some sense of objectivity. We tried to order and “make sense” of the narratives by chronologizing them and adding in the omniscient third person. Yet when I asked my black colleagues questions that I thought were straightforward such as, “how do you see your own role in the organization in the New South Africa?” I received responses in the form of anecdotes and stories that started in the middle and ended somewhere in the beginning. I was encountering a new form of narrative that sought to express a perception of the world on different terms than I did. The black South African
women were telling me what mattered to them, which was not necessarily addressed in my questions. How they saw their own role in the organization, for example was not as important as were the roles that were available to them, along with the structures and social systems that determined their place in the organization.

The narrative structure of the women's oral testimonies were anything but chronological or conventional. The answers were not often straight forward. Jacqueline and I soon found our Western understanding of narrative structure challenged profoundly. Notions of identity and self were also challenged. For example, when I would use the pronoun “you” the women would often answer with “we”. Implicit in our questions was the Western notion of the individual, the “hero” persona where one person acts on his/her own outside of the community. Perhaps this can be understood as a strategy for community survival for women as they experienced the daily difficulties in negotiating their lives. (McClintock 1995,314)

Staying together and working collectively was the only way African women could mobilize change and improve their lives. For example, when black children were being killed in road accidents because their mothers were working as domestics in the city and their fathers were not around for any number of reasons (work, jail, participation in guerilla warfare) it was the women who had to get together and volunteer to look after each other’s children. The working mothers would pay what little they could to the women caring for the children and soon creches (daycares) were started and became a source of income and a source of help to all the women. Strengthening community was a strategy for survival and thus identity shifts from being defined as individual, to a ‘self’ in relation to others. In many ways these women were driven into political and social action in order to maintain basic human rights through what Temma Kaplan defines as a ‘female consciousness’:
"...certain women, emphasizing roles they accept as wives and mothers, also demand the freedom to act as they think their obligations entail. Women in many societies and historical periods learn from youth that they will be responsible as mothers for providing food, clothing, housing and health care for their families. When toxic pollution or expulsion from their homes threatens their communities, certain women will take action according to female consciousness, confronting authorities to preserve life. Far from being a biological trait, female consciousness develops from cultural experiences of helping families and communities survive" (Kaplan, 1997,7).

The Accidental Activists

In Ireland the term “accidental activism” is used to describe women who previously did not see themselves as in any way political, but became advocates and agents for social change (Krog, 2000). In 1998, in our one-on-one interviews, the first question I asked the women was “how did you become an activist?” The answers were more than interesting stories, for they indicated how both black and white women negotiated their gender roles in an oppressive system such as apartheid. They made choices to take action against a government that denied basic human rights to the majority of the population like access to clean water, housing and health care. In listening to the answers to this question, women’s lives are brought into focus in their specificity of the historical circumstances “that are not simply “there”, not simply “given” but the result of choices made by those committed to mass systemic violence and its attendant justification” (Simon et al, 1998) While Simon et al are referring to the Holocaust, the implementation of apartheid by South Africa’s Nationalist government created a society based on the principles of white supremacy and black subordination; these beliefs then determined the lives of people according to their race and dictated what kind of opportunities they could pursue and ultimately what kind of lives they could lead. What was available to them was strictly a result of a system based on inequality and an imposed moral code on what was right and what was wrong.
Women who acted out against this system in the large part were ordinary women, housewives, mothers, many uneducated with children and husbands to care for, just as women in other parts of the world, like the Mothers of Plaza del Mayo in Argentina, or the market women of the French Revolution were. What their stories of coming to activism can tell us about their particular reality in a certain time and place is one important contribution to history. Another important contribution is the impact such a telling can have on the women ("the speakers") as they authorize their own stories and claim their places in South African history. In the next two sections I have included excerpts from Cheryl’s and Helen’s testimonies taken from interviews in 1998, as examples of how telling their stories altered their own perception of their role as social/political activists.

Cheryl’s Story

Cheryl, as I described at the end of Chapter One, is a coloured woman in her late forties who heads the sector for disabled children and adults. Cheryl had come to the interview (July 2000) very distraught. As soon as she sat down, she began to weep. She said she slept terribly the previous night and she just could not face the past, there were too many places she did not want to go. She said she became angry at Helen (the executive director and the one who spear-headed this project) for allowing this to happen, for wanting to document their lives. She said, "I work here, dammit, but you can’t have my soul too. This is personal, and I won’t talk about it.” She said she had too much anger still, too much pain to bring up to the surface. She did not want to have to live with that and open everything all over again. I told her she did not have to do this at all, it was completely voluntary, but that maybe she needed to talk about it. It was clear she was struggling between wanting to unburden her heart and yet terrified she
might not be able to cope with the emotional aftermath of letting her memories out.

Cheryl said she trusted us (Jacqueline and me) implicitly, it was just that she did not want to go into personal stories, although it was hard to divorce personal stories from work-related stories. The work these women do is inextricably bound to their personal lives and in fact that is at the heart of the narratives - the very personal things that drove all of them into action. Cheryl told us snippets as we were talking about what she didn’t want to talk about. She started telling us what she couldn’t say, what was too much to bear. Perhaps there was reluctance about having it recorded, having other people hear her shame. Cheryl has many stories that seem to speak of her own angst and guilt at being in between both worlds; at wanting to be white, yet hating whites. At passing for white and getting certain white privileges, while her own siblings couldn’t and then hating herself for doing that.

This is an excerpt of Cheryl’s testimony, taken from an interview in 1998. This incident occurred in the 1970's.

"I was classified as coloured but my boyfriend, (now my husband) was white, so we lived with the fear that someone, a neighbour, a friend, a family member, would tell the police and we would be arrested for violating the Immoralities Act. I remember one day when I knew I had to do something... I don’t know what came over me, but I had to act... do something. I was dressed up in my best silk dress and high heels, stockings, and a hat and make-up. I had been for a job interview, and I was sitting in a cafe, reading the paper about this member of parliament... a representative of the ruling Nationalist Party who was supposed to be more liberal about some aspects of apartheid. So, I rang up his secretary, and I used my best Afrikaans, my best accent, to ask for an appointment. I told her the matter was confidential and private and urgent. I got my appointment and in the middle of the afternoon. I went into the parliament building, which was a violation of the Separate Areas Act, and met the member. He was having tea, but the secretary, no doubt impressed by my best Afrikaans, told me I could go on into the members lounge. "Join me for tea and tell me what I can do for you?" he said, and so I, a woman classified as coloured, found myself having tea in the members lounge with a man whose party had voted for the Race Classification Act. And at the end, I was able to tell him that he had not been able to tell either by looking or by listening to me that I was coloured; "So, what sense does that make?" I said."
This is an incredible story of Cheryl’s courage and sense of justice and yet after deeper discussion in subsequent interviews with her, I found there to be a sense self loathing in Cheryl. This self loathing and sense of shame are not only as a result of a reign of hate sanctioned by the state that was imposed on her psyche at a young age, but more importantly for all that she felt she did not do to prevent others from suffering the same way. Her reluctance to speak, she told me when I went back on a subsequent visit, was because “I did not do enough”. This brings up the question, in that particular space and time, what is enough? As long as the injustice and murder and oppression continue, whatever actions one person takes will never seem like “enough” because people continue to suffer and die. This signals the extent to which apartheid stunted her growth emotionally. She did not feel like a valuable human being on two counts, 1) because she was dehumanized by a racial classification system and 2) because she did not do enough to oppose such a system. Cheryl’s feelings around speaking or “telling” her story are a result of the very system that brought this upon her in the first place.

Three years later and six months after the last set of interviews and the public event, I talked to Cheryl again. She told me that the impact of telling her stories was subtle on a daily basis, but have played a big part of her healing process. She knew that it was important to talk about the past even though she hadn’t wanted to. She felt a weight had been lifted off her and her confidence had risen. Cheryl said she realized how strong she was. A certain sense of acceptance of herself had occurred. “Life goes on,” she said to me, “but things are better now”.

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Helen’s Story

In an article last year (2000) entitled “Mothers of a New Nation” Antjie Krog explored the impact of apartheid on women. She writes “How does one reconstruct a society after conflict? How does one cut a community loose from the destruction of the past? Is it possible to rebuild a post war society when those who should weave together the social and moral fabric are themselves maimed? (Krog, Mail & Guardian, August 4-10, 2000). Helen Lieberman, the 60 year old Jewish executive director of Ikamva Labantu is one woman who definitely believes it is possible to rebuild South African society and she has been trying to do that with every ounce of energy she possesses.

Part of Helen’s intention when she approached Jacqueline and me about recording the testimonies of the women at Ikamva Labantu was to contribute to a healing process that began when apartheid ended, but which still has a long way to go, individually and collectively. The women were initially shocked that anyone would want to hear the stories of what they considered to be very ‘ordinary’ lives. They all said, “we just did what we had to do”. However, once they started speaking and remembering, some of them said, “I had forgotten about that incident” or “I cannot believe I had the guts to do that” or “I was crazy back then.” These comments are significant because they reveal the schism in how these women perceive themselves. They are regular mothers and wives and yet they are social activists as well. They did not see the two roles as harmonious or even possible roles for themselves to inhabit. Yet they helped feed, clothe and find shelter for thousands of people over the years and improved the quality of life. In terms of women’s lives they saw ‘real’ stories of activism as stories from national leaders like Winnie Mandela, Albertina Sisulu, Annie Silinga among others. The more they spoke, the more they realized what they had to say. In an interview in July 2000, Helen talked about what brought her into her activism
although once again she says,

"I don't think I became an activist. It’s only now that I look back, that it could be termed as activism. To me there was no... it wasn’t political, and activism is political. So, to me it was just looking at human need, looking at survival. It was the injustice and the anger and the affront to humanity..."

(Taken from an interview in 1998)

"After University -I did very well at University, because I loved it. It was like eating cake, I couldn't stop learning - I became a speech therapist. I worked at a city hospital and I worked a lot with the black section--the hospital was divided, black and white and you couldn’t take the equipment from one section to the other--otherwise you would contaminate the whites. The white children weren’t even allowed to touch what the ‘blacks’ had touched!! Dirty, you see? What I was seeing, what I was learning was just in the hospital, but when I saw the pain and the horror on the faces of my black patients, I began to question. A lot of confusion started, and I began to work very hard with my patients. But, nobody came on time, nobody followed through on instructions, so I worked harder but my patients were worse than anyone else’s. One day, a young woman came in with this baby (I found out later that this baby was the result of a rape) it had a cleft palate and many other things wrong and I worked with this baby to try and get it to swallow. The fear on the face of the mother was just extraordinary!! Anyway, I went home-it was Yom Kippur so I couldn’t come back as I often did to check on my patients -- and what I saw sometimes..let me tell you! I was in this racialist, white anti-black world -- I rushed in on Monday morning. The baby had been discharged. So, halfway through the day I couldn’t bear it any longer--it wasn’t the baby, I was thinking about the mother, a girl younger than me, and the pain on the face. I found this black nurse, she looked just like Tutu, and I asked her if she knew where the baby had gone to. "How dare you ask me that?"she said, "I can't take you into the township" "I'll get into trouble, I'll be on the police list. Why are you putting me in danger like this?" Please, please help me, I said. "Well I'm not driving into the township with you."she said "The way you're acting, you may be a police informer". Right, so, finally she agrees to come with me not into the township but to the police check point and we get into the car and up until this time I have been saying--they never come on time, they never do what they're told, and da,da,yeh,yeh... Now, I hear about how long it takes her to get to work she starts to tell me how she has to leave home at 4.00am to be in work at 6. She has to go via Mowbray and this place and that place and take 3 bus routes and there are white buses and black buses and what it costs. I can't believe that after she has explained to me about the buses and the type of transport system and the practicalities of it and the logistics and the obstacles, that I have been judgmental about people coming late, that I have seen people fatigued and exhausted and thought they are lazy, stupid, animalistic etc. And not following instructions? It never occurred to me that they were Xhosa speaking, that as they didn't understand or they couldn't follow the
words, how could they? Anyway we got to the township, she got out and went through the bushes. There were no police—they must have been changing the police then and then I met her inside, she walked ahead of me, I drove and she walked in front. We came to a shack, a little shack, in a compound of a few shacks, and I opened the door and there must have been over 100 people living in this little area. Anyway, when the mother saw me, she nearly died. She got so scared. The baby was nearly dead, it was rolled up in a rug on the floor. I put the baby in the car and drove back to the hospital. I got into trouble on that level too. "How dare I, who was I to demand this care?" and "Where was the mother?" She was too scared to come back with me, was where."

Helen was moved into her activism by human need—a visceral reaction to the suffering in front of her. She saw the young woman as a mother, and as a mother herself she made a connection. The significance of this testimony is not so much in its description of the hospital’s policy of segregation or the living conditions in the townships, nor in the baby or mother’s condition, rather it lies in what it tells us of the indifference and cruelty of the system of apartheid, that a doctor—(by definition someone who protects and saves human life) in the hospital would question the need to save the life of another human being based on its race. The question Helen says she was faced with “how dare I, who was I to demand this care?” stops the listener/reader, forcing one to ask “how could this have happened?”

Simon states that to evoke through testimony the memory of an injustice that has initiated a traumatic legacy of death and misery is to be caught in a potential disruption to one’s understanding of the human possibility inherent in configuration of our present social order; a disruption that may frighten us insofar, as participants in that social order, it “bears witness to our historical disfiguration” (Felman 1992, 73-4) The power of a testimony such as this one has the potential to disrupt our understanding or concept of a natural social order and therein lies the potential for learning not just about, but from the historical realities of the past and how it might change our actions/understanding of the present.

In the next chapter I will further discuss the notion of remembrance-learning through examples of the women’s testimonies and my own response in attending to the testimonies.
Chapter Three

"If the Greeks invented tragedy, the Romans invented the epistle, and the Renaissance the sonnet, our generation invented a new literature, that of testimony" (Elie Wiesel, 1977,9)

Introduction

In his chapter “The Touch of the Past: The Pedagogical Significance of a Transactional Sphere of Public Memory”, from the recent book Revolutionary Pedagogies: Cultural Politics, Education and the Discourse of Theory (2001), Roger Simon asks the question, “What might it mean to live our lives as if the lives of others truly mattered?” This question is one that runs through the heart of my thesis and which has challenged me throughout my project in South Africa. Simon writes, “One aspect of such a prospect would be our ability to take the stories of others seriously” (3) What might this mean?

Simon’s work here is informed by Walter Benjamin’s ideas on “counsel” as “less an answer to a question than a proposal concerning the continuation of a story which is just unfolding” For Benjamin, writes Simon, one would first have to be able to tell this unfolding story. “On such terms for the lives of others to truly matter - beyond what they demand in the way of an immediate practical solidarity - they must be encountered as counsel, stories that actually might shift our own unfolding stories, particularly in ways that might be unanticipated and not easily accepted.” (Simon,4)

I utilize this notion of a sphere of public memory as a transactional space for mobilizing practices of remembrance-learning in which one’s stories, and I would add necessarily one’s life, might be shifted by the stories of others. In this chapter, I examine the process of remembrance-learning within an analysis of the women’s testimonies while at the same time examining my role as researcher and listener; how I engage and respond to their stories.
Doubly Positioned

Invested in South Africa through my own personal history and subsequently through my relationship with the women of Ikamva Labantu, I am positioned very specifically as a listener. When I first met them, the women asked me why I was in South Africa and why their stories mattered to me. I told them about my family history - that my father was born and raised in Cape Town and most of my relatives still lived there - and that I wanted to participate in the rebuilding of community.

They liked the fact that I was from Canada because that provided a safe distance; they felt I was removed from the ingrained segregational attitudes they had all grown accustomed to in South Africa. Furthermore, the fact that I was not reluctant to travel into the townships to meet some of them, crossing certain and continued ‘taboo’ boundaries for white people, also helped create trust. This granted me a certain level of respect from the black women. Because my family was South African, all of the women said it made me “one of them” which in turn allowed them to trust me because the country was “in my blood”.

Therefore I was doubly positioned as a listener: an insider by blood and an outsider by birth. This position was not completely unproblematic for them, nor without frustration for me. For instance they often wanted to speak to me “off the record” not to be documented by a researcher because I was not really an outsider and therefore they did not see me as a professional, rather like a friend or even a daughter. There were also many times when I knew they chose to omit certain incidents or to whitewash

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8It is important to note that I was socialized with my own set of cultural and racial biases in Canada, which I carry with me as a researcher and I do not mean to suggest I listened to their stories with complete objectivity. It is my intention in this thesis to point out how through listening to others I am confronted with my positioning, my own sense of “here” which then affects how and what I hear and what questions arise from my listening.
the organizational politics when I asked certain questions.

Despite these dynamics what they did tell me was varied and rich and allowed all of us to explore the meanings in the testimonies and reflect on our responses to them.

**Attending to Testimony**

As I stated in Chapter 2, there is a tendency among more traditional oral historians to see oral testimony as a clear representation of past experience⁹. Spoken comments are often taken at face value and not probed into for other possible meanings, be it through looking more closely at the nuances of language or being more sensitive to hearing gaps in the narrative, or even listening for the details that seem insignificant and taking them seriously. “Sometimes a tidbit of mundane information, quickly attached to the expression of something more profound or thoughtful, distracts us into following that cue instead.” (Mouton 1999,49) Testimony unravels meanings rather than tying them up neatly and containing them. Shoshanna Felman argues that testimony is a discursive practice and not a totalizable account of historical events. She talks about testifying as ‘accomplishing a speech act’ and I would argue then, that as a discursive practice and as a “speech act” testimony has the power to transform both the speaker and the listener in its performance.

The next three excerpts of testimonies provide examples of this ‘performance’ and my analysis of the transformation that occurred in both the women and myself. These excerpts are taken from the one-on-one interviews I conducted with the women. The first excerpt is from Helen Lieberman, the

⁹See Rassool and Minkley’s discussion of Van Onselen’s work on Kas Maine in Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa (ed.Nuttall, 1998)
Executive Director of Ikamva Labantu, in July 2000, and as I listened to Helen what struck me was not so much what she said in this story as much as how she told it and how she seemed to feel about it.

Helen’s testimony:

"I was very involved in Crossroads in the seventies. Oh, I need a week to tell you about the life and all that went on, the hardship and the lack of transport and the police intervention and the strange people that would arrive, that were there as government spies which were picked up very soon. I remember outside Crossroads, on the border of Crossroads, near KTC the building of a school, I built a daycare centre and it wasn’t really much of a building, but we did it ourselves you know, we dug the foundation - myself and the mamas, a couple of the fathers. We would do it ourselves physically. A young man arrived on the scene, he was just amazing and he started helping us build and he had double the energy and double the ability and when the whole thing was finished we all had a party and I didn’t know that this young guy had probably been recruited and he had gone to one or two meetings which could have been of a political nature, so he was already spotted by those people who were out to find anyone with a political involvement but the night after we had the party I got this terrible phone call and screams - he had been tied in his shack and petrol poured all over him and had been burned to death. And that was a sign and when I went back and forth screaming and shouting at the police station they pulled me in one day, they sort of put me before the commander, and I said, ‘when are you going to investigate, who did this, why was this done?!’ ----- and he said, ‘listen lady, you’re a criminal to me and we’ve got a file on you this thick and if you don’t keep quiet, the same will happen to you’. That was one of my first indications of the Third Force. And that was about just the beginning of the 80’s. That was the beginning of the Crossroad and the burnings and it was there with the tanks coming after us and one of the people that was with me in that time was Maggie Burqua - tanks descending and Maggie saying ‘Now what are we going to do about this, Helen?’ The tanks and the guns pointing at us... ‘Shut up Maggie! Just don’t say a word!’ And Maggie is saying ‘I can’t keep quiet, I can’t keep quiet!’ These were machine guns!!"

Helen started laughing as she told me the end of this story. She repeated it over again, "Now what are we going to do about this, Helen?" Then she threw her hands up in the air and imitated Maggie’s voice, mock fear on her face before she let her hands fall and collapsed into laughter again. I listened
to this story and did not know how to react, I began to laugh with her because her laughter was so infectious but quickly felt uncomfortable laughing at the subject matter. I wondered if her laughter was a shield for feeling too much, if maybe she was just on the verge of crying but then as I watched her, I realized that there was joy in her body as she told this. She seemed lost in memory for a moment as she shook her head and her shoulders heaved with mirth again. "You should have seen us!!" she exclaimed, laughing again and wiping tears from her eyes.

Helen has mentioned time and again how closely she worked with the ‘mamas’ during this time and how they would crowd into her kitchen at 5am making food for the day to distribute to children, or the hours she spent with youth in the townships, building structures like schools or community centres. I think back to conversations we have had when she has told me that she feels so lucky to have lead the life she has and how enriched her life has been because of her work with people in the townships. Could this be a time she misses? She says softly at one point , "...now I have lost touch with hundreds of people that I used to be working with on a daily basis".

It is not so strange that she would feel a nostalgia for that period of time, with the intensity, camaraderie and emotional bonding that occurred during those struggle years. It is also easier to talk now; to remember these events with the knowledge that victory was won and apartheid was dismantled. Yet as a researcher, I felt there was more than simple nostalgia in the way Helen told her story. I believed there was some value in how she felt about the story, in her expression and emotion in the telling; that it signaled something meaningful.

It is significant to note what stories Helen chooses to tell and what kinds of stories she leaves out as these stories lend insight into how she feels about herself and her role in the present and the future of
South African society. For example, Helen is the only one who does not tell me any stories about her family or personal life; instead she restricts her stories to descriptions and anecdotes from her working life.

Helen has many stories to tell and many reasons for telling them. In the telling and remembering, she is able to create meaning and a sense of coherence or order in her life, and in so doing is able to reaffirm her identity as a valuable member of the resistance movement. As a white woman who was once at the centre of the resistance movement in the townships, who risked her life over and over again to work with the black community, Helen is now, 30 years later, on the periphery of not only those black communities but also her own organization. Helen has dedicated her life to social welfare and many of the people she worked with and helped out are now shunning her and betraying her.

In post-apartheid South Africa, most black people see Helen as just another white woman, a beneficiary of apartheid who leads a privileged life. In South Africa an economic apartheid still exists but outside South Africa, Helen can access international funding more easily than black people. These two factors tend to be at once a source of resentment and a source of help.

At the same time, Helen's work during the apartheid era distanced her from sources of traditional support and community, i.e. her own Jewish community. Helen does not belong in the Jewish community\(^{10}\), she has never embraced the lifestyle or the material culture many white - Jewish or otherwise - South Africans adhere to. Instead, she claims that Ikamva Labantu is her community and is where she belongs. However at the end of the day Helen does not easily fit in anywhere and she knows

\(^{10}\)Although there is a history of South African Jewish activism in unions and the labour movement and a few prominent members of the African National Congress (ANC), the majority of Jews in South Africa were not involved in anti-apartheid work. Helen told me that when she started going into the townships to help, she lost many friends in her community who did not support what she was doing.
that. There are many more stories like this one, all evidence of Helen's active role in the resistance and her role as helper and provider. Telling stories like these gesture toward her need to reaffirm her identity and place in South Africa. During this interview, Helen speaks for a while and then suddenly stops. The future is uncertain and she becomes reflective. She says,

"...I, at the end of the day, not that it really matters, I would love to know their feelings about someone like me. Sometimes they must resent (me). There must be something. I had a phone call just last night from one of the mamas who I've always felt is not happy with me, and she phoned me because she is in desperation about something - two people have died of AIDS and left young babies with her to care for. I think they all had reserve about meeting me. They all confronted me you know. I had my moment with all of them. They tested. They wanted to know what I was doing there, I mean Tutu was wonderful. She wanted to know what I expected out of all this, and I thought she was mad! I said, 'what do you mean expect?' and she said 'don't expect a thing, we owe you nothing.' And then she saved my life, a little later.""11

Telling this story allowed her reflect on where she is now, wondering what her black colleagues truly feel about her. She has deep respect for the women she worked with but because of the power difference and the psychological affects of apartheid it has not always been easy for them to tell her how they feel about her. Pumla told me at one point, "It took me ten years before I was able to ask Helen for what I wanted because I was always afraid she could take away what she gave me". Helen is slowly extricating herself from the organization but it is a painful process for her and for her co-workers.

Talking about the past has allowed her to feel good about what she has accomplished, but to also begin to see her role as more complex and fraught with problems now as she tries to reconfigure her new place.

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11In the mid 1980's, Tutu received information that Helen was on a hit list, among other white and black activists, to be killed by the Third Force, i.e. the secret police. Tutu then told Helen about this, and risked her own life by hiding Helen for several days in her house.
Avril’s Testimony

As a white woman, Avril, like Helen has to renegotiate her role in the new South Africa but she is in a different position than Helen and has her own project to work on. She received funding for seven of the blind women from the program she runs (Western Cape Blind Association) to be trained as massage therapists. She has a specific place within the organization and is a paid employee, unlike Helen who has always been a volunteer.

Avril’s activism is directly linked to her husband’s involvement as a teacher in a coloured school.

She was an ordinary housewife and mother to four children when her husband was detained, leading her into a world outside her home where she confronted the reality of apartheid.

This excerpt, like Helen’s, is a fairly straight forward rendering of one particular day, but it reveals something more than the incident itself would suggest and points to the dangerous tightrope of negotiating gender roles and identity under apartheid.

Avril:

"...when Lawrence was released, a group of activists were in those days UDF members (United Democratic Front) we all moved - they started a group called FAFAD (friends of the families of detainees) where parents could come and children could come and share and light candles and - we met at the Church up opposite Caledon square Buitenkant - that Church. There was a very nice minister there who was an interdenominational guy so he wasn’t specific about which denomination you should join and he opened up the Church and we fasted and we were all in this Church for - I think it was a long time. I took my kids, we slept over there and we fasted, I mean I didn’t fast, I was breast feeding and I had to worry about the children. I fasted for a couple of days, but Lawrence fasted for along time and he got very very thin and I was actually quite concerned about his health. What was significant about that and where I started really - the thing that touched me as a woman was a group of Langa women came through and today I see them so often, sticking out in the crowds. I know exactly who they are. A lot of them have died, unfortunately. They came to fast at the Church as well. They came in support.. Once the news got out, there were services every night and the church was packed with people. The children would come up and light candles for their fathers and it was a very sensitive, emotional time."
"...But that day I wanted to work with the black communities and the women. That was a very powerful moment for me. And you know when finally, we broke our fast I went home and I stayed the night at home and I made little purses - ANC colours - for the women and bow ties for the men so that everyone could leave there with something once we broke our fast. And you know while I was doing it, sewing and sewing, because I knew I had to get it all done, there was a knock on the door and it was the security police, standing there. "Where is Lawrence?" He asked and I said "I don't know, he goes reading you know" You see now I'm getting clever, you learn to be very skillful with these guys! And he stood very lazily against the door and I thought, 'Oh my goodness if he walked in to the lounge now...' in those days if you had anything to do with the ANC - the colours or anything that was it, you've had it... you were in trouble. And I had all this material laid out all over the table, I was busy sewing in the lounge and I had the music on!! I just knew that if he had walked in there I would have been taken away with my bow ties and purses.

So, I managed to say to him, "You know, sometimes Lawrence goes off to read a book and he can walk and walk and walk and that's where he's gone. I don't know when he's going to get home, or what time, but that's where he is" and I managed to get rid of him.

Then I had to carry this bag with the purses, I had to sit on the train and I knew that if anybody had to stop me now I am going to be in a fix. That night, I wish you could have seen the faces when I pulled out the purses - it was just marvelous! And the guys all had their bow ties on and we got photographs of it somewhere...."

The image of a housewife hunched over her sewing machine in the kitchen on a week night, while her children are sleeping peacefully in their beds, is one which I consider a relatively normal domestic scene. However the seemingly kind and innocent gesture of making decorative gifts of bow ties and purses for her 'friends' also marks her as an enemy of the state who is engaging in clandestine political activity. Which one is the truth? Both these meanings are equally real and 'true'. Avril is at once innocent and guilty, aware and unaware of what she is doing, and both an ordinary housewife and a political activist.

That Avril's actions are at once incongruent with my own understanding of the world forces a disruption of my own time, my taken for granted position in the world is shattered as this "disjunctive continuity" (Simon, 1998,17) brings my attention to how a similar object or action in my time is differently interpreted in an other's time "This is a practice which, in attempting to hear the details of
testimony, returns me to the “details” of my life, implicating my experience in the attending to the experience of the other” (Simon et al, 1998, 23).

Such memories and such a telling as Avril’s reveal oral history’s potential to ‘unmask something beyond the immediate, ordinary conventional explanation of events something more raw and vital, unruly and disruptive of the usual narrative” (Mouton, 1999 42)

During her testimony, Avril was very excited telling me about how she became involved in the struggle and what kinds of meetings took place. She talked about how it felt when she would spent less and less time at home doing traditional women’s work, and how this changed the gender dynamics between her and her husband. As she spoke, it was like a flood gate had opened and she had so much to say, so much she wanted to tell. I saw her a few days after our interview and she told me how she went home and had a long discussion with her husband about those days and speaking about the past was helping them heal.

It became clear that talking about the past was important for Avril’s self confidence and for her to see how the actions she took in the past allowed her to control her own life and make her own decisions. When I was in Cape Town in March 2001, I asked Avril if the interview process over the past few years had any effect on her, she answered: “I do think it helped [us] to move [on], and to say ‘yes this happened’ and now we can’t do anything to change that, but we can change our futures, and I think that’s very important.”
Learning through Crisis

These two short excerpts from Helen and Avril's testimonies illustrate how these women negotiated their lives and identities then and now. Providing more than just information or facts, these stories enable an unfolding story to emerge. But the process by which these stories were told to me, a foreign researcher, also creates another story, the story of my position as researcher, both with them and the other women of Ikamva Labantu.

Part of this other story is that attending to these testimonies can elicit emotional reactions and responses that are surprising and possibly distressing for the listener. As I heard testimony after testimony I found myself feeling more and more disconnected from the women, rather than connected to them. The closer I got into their lives and their pasts, the farther away I felt. According to Simon (et al, 2000)

"The historical remembrance we are most interested in takes its form as communicative acts that re-cite and re-site what one is learning - not only about what happened to others at/in a different space/time but also (and key in regard to the social memory of mass violence) what one is learning of and within the disturbances and disruptions inherent in comprehending these events." (Simon, Rosenberg, Epperî, 2000, 3)

My attempts to better understand my disconnectedness brought me back to Antjie Krog's book Country of My Skull. After she has attended the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings everyday for four months as a journalist for the SABC, Krog experiences a crisis within. After hearing about a bomb explosion during one session she collapses into laughter and decides to take two weeks leave. She writes:

"I walk into my home one evening. My family are excitedly watching cricket on television. They seem like a happy close-knit group. I stand in the dark kitchen for a long time. Everything has become disconnected and unfamiliar. I realize that I don't know where the light switch is. I can talk about nothing but the Truth Commission. Yet I don't talk about it at all."(63)
This kind of crisis, directly associated with listening to difficult testimony is what Shoshana Felman describes in her students' response to her class on testimony. She states that it is a turning away from the world; feeling deprived of their bonding to and with the world. Her students become obsessed and talk to everyone around them - friends, roommates, family - about the class. Yet they feel apart from everyone, even from their classmates who are going through the same thing. Krog describes a similar experience after months of listening to testimonies at the Truth Commission. She feels uprooted, disoriented and at a loss. The stories, the pain, the words and images stay with her and haunt her. She even develops a trauma-related skin rash. I too, after two months of listening to the testimonies of these 6 women found myself feeling disconnected from the women as well as from my everyday life.

What Felman claims she experienced with her class, and thus with her testimony as a witness to the transformations her students underwent, is the validity of a "generic pedagogical event" and thus a generic lesson.

"I have learned from that class that teaching in itself, teaching as such, takes place precisely only through a crisis: if teaching does not hit upon some crisis, if it does not encounter either the vulnerability or the explosiveness of an (explicit or implicit) critical and unpredictable dimension, it has perhaps not truly taught..." (Felman 1992, 55).

Felman speaks of the performative as well as cognitive aspect of teaching insofar as it strives to produce and enable change. These women were my teachers, and I, the more I listened the more questions I had about my own place, my own perceptions and understanding of what it meant to be a South African, a woman, an activist.

Keeping a journal during my 5 months of research in South Africa helped me record my reactions, questions and responses to the testimonies I heard.
What happens as I listen? At the end of the week I feel totally shattered. I am brutalized by the stories. Yet, it’s not the events in the stories themselves. They don’t always shock me on a conscious level, mostly I think because I have read much about what went on. Perhaps it’s the cumulative effect of hearing so many testimonies continuously for weeks on end. I can’t get over the years of suffering and struggle these people endured, and perhaps I feel the enormous gap between my world, my idea of normal life and their daily lives for the past 30 years. What would their lives be like if South Africa had not been torn apart by apartheid? What kinds of marriages and family lives would they have?

Would Helen be more like Michael and their Jewish friends? Would she ‘fit in’? Would Avril be the perfect housewife? Would she have accepted things as they were? Would Pumla be happy and fulfilled in her marriage? Would she be a devoted wife to her husband? Would Cheryl have the same sense of justice? Would any of them?

Are these testimonies supposed to bring me closer to the women? I do feel closer to them as human beings because we shared personal memories and emotion, but are they supposed to make me feel numb and confused as well? I don’t know how to respond. Perhaps this is the beginning of my responsibility? Questioning things?

Then after several more weeks of listening, I write in my research journal again (July 10, 2000):

How am I listening? My mind wanders, I imagine what they are saying. I hear them and realize I can’t imagine. I realize I have logistical questions running through my mind, like “what does Helen mean when she says we built a school? I try to picture her digging with a huge shovel. “where did she get the materials, who gave them to her, how did she get into and out of the townships with this stuff? what kinds of lies did she tell her husband, her children?” When Avril says she sewed banners for the ANC and went to meetings all over the place while her husband was active too, I think, “Who took care of her kids? What did she tell her friends?” When Pumla says her mother was widowed and left with 11 children to care for and she decided to volunteer her time and set up a day care of kids, I think, “What did they eat? How is it possible to do the things they did?

I picture people going to the store to buy bread, but then that image breaks down when I realize the store is not the store I know. It is a little shack with a few things, it leaks and water seeps in and it’s totally informal. One day it may be there the next day it could be torn down, or blown over or flooded. The person selling the food may have been shot, or there may be no bread that day.

What do I make of these questions? Why are they important?
These questions perhaps signal the value behind oral narratives and testimony. The role of such self-questioning is articulated by Simon who writes, “it is crucial to stress that such questions are emotional interrogatives on the part of the listener, marks that the testimony heard is breaking the well-ordered frame which regulates our everyday sense of how human relationships take place (2001, 17).

In a subsequent interview with Helen, I asked her further questions of how she did certain things such as building a school, and she told me very matter-of-factly, “I just did it”. She told me she bought most of the materials, her husband provided others and she just figured out what they needed. The answers did not provide me with any sort of relief or further understanding. Instead, I was more frustrated. I wanted to know more, to get to some ‘truth’ of her experience. A complete story perhaps. This made me see that wanting a whole story was impossible. It was still insufficient for my understanding. In fact my need to understand was the point. I wanted something complete because otherwise there was nothing to contain her story. It seeped into the present and left things unfixed, unordered in my world.

Simon states that to engage in a responsible listening, one must pose to ourselves questions about our questions, interrogating why the information and explanations we seek are important and necessary to us (2001,19). As I mentioned above, I wanted to learn more about how Helen built schools and what it meant for her to sneak past the police and to even get papers to become a minister so she could officially be in the townships. I wanted to learn more about activism in South Africa, but as Simon points out, simply acquiring more information will never suffice “if one is to respond to the force of a testimonial address, a force which, if acknowledged, puts ourselves into question” (22) Bringing together
what Simon calls the "doubled moments" of attentiveness to testimony, one informational, the other reflexive, there is a practice of binding together remembering and learning. He writes,

"If such a practice is brought to a sphere of public memory, learning in such a space could be more than knowledge acquisition and remembering more than the retrieval, recollection or recall of something past but now forgotten." (24)

Nobuntu’s Story

Not all important memories are those highlighted in a narrative: some of the deepest truths may be hidden in a soft aside, a detail quickly passed over. (Mouton 199958) I refer here to research done by Michell Mouton and Helena Pohlandt-Mc Cormick who conducted a comparative study on oral histories of Nazi survivors and apartheid victims (History Workshop Journal, Autumn 1999). They write that despite the narrator’s active part in telling and remembering their life histories, what they found then seemed to go beyond the narrative’s conventional story, beyond what the narrator thought she was telling them, and beyond the questions set by our research agendas” (43). In other words, while I had asked Nobuntu to tell me about how she got involved in the struggle, what she thought she was telling me and what I thought was the value of the story turned out to be completely different.

I think the kinds of questions that are raised after listening and reflecting on her story are powerful pedagogical questions that gesture towards a learning from the past that is a critical recognition or discovery that unsettles the very terms on which our understanding of ourselves and our world is based. (Simon, 2001,17).
Nobuntu:

“Well, I think there are two things really that made me an activist and work for the community. One was that I could see how people were suffering in the community. It was coming clear to me that the suffering I was experiencing was the suffering that my mother experienced. That made me very very angry because my mother kept on saying, 'I worked hard, I worked hard' and then until I saw how the other people were working hard and I thought 'no, I musn't just sit down and look at this' but at the same time I was married for the second time to a very wonderful man. He was just doing everything I wanted him to do for me, and I was not even working. I was a housewife who was getting everything that I wanted, so I thought I wanted to share what I was getting, with my community because most of the people were not having that. That is what caused me to think, okay one of the things I am going to do is something for the community and I am giving back what I am getting. Because in a way I was like a privileged African, I was privileged, so I thought, let me share it.

At the same time, the communities were going down, you must understand that it was also now, 1985, you could see things were really going down because people were losing jobs. It was the sanctions, there was no food in the houses. You know being a woman who has got everything, I kept on sharing with people when they told me their stories. This was another thing, I was taking a risk because my husband was not like me, he was totally individual. He never really expanded his sort of looking, and I had to steal food here to give somebody do this to do this. He felt that we were so comfortable that we musn't worry. He could hardly tell our neighbours, he was driving cars - I would say when we were passing somebody 'that is our neighbour, how could you do this?' and he would say 'I didn't see him' and I always thought, 'you saw the man but because you didn't want to give anybody a lift' and this was bothering me because I was saying to myself, 'I know where I come from and I know where these people are at' so that is what made me to think, okay I am going to be an activist."

When I heard this story I could not help but ask myself, “why didn’t he just offer his neighbours a lift?” What is he afraid of? Is he just stingy? Could Nobuntu, a woman with a huge heart, love a man who is inherently selfish? Nobuntu says it was a time of sanctions and food was scarce for people in her community. Why would he not want her to help others? This feels like a foolish question, but one which I insist on asking myself. She does not say he is not a nice man, she just says to him “you didn’t want to give anybody a lift”.

Why am I asking such a question? Is this really about her husband’s character? This question gestures towards my own perception of what it is to be “African” and forces me to re-evaluate my
assumptions and why I would ask such a question. Nobuntu’s husband’s attitude is one which I have come to associate and even expect from someone in the West, where the majority of people are removed from an environment of real poverty and there exists a level of indifference when confronted with it. In the West, we live within a capitalist society where the individual is placed above the collective. Generally, in this system people tend to look out for themselves and work for their own individual gain. My perception of Africa differs in that I have understood it as place where community and the collective good is placed above the individual. I see Africa as defining the self in relation to other, as opposed to the West’s notion of the self developed in isolation. While some may see this as a sweeping and/or homogenizing description, it is my own understanding gleaned through the media and popular culture from a series of images and historical texts of Africa.

My knowledge of oppression in South Africa is also taken from the media and historical texts, rather than through a first hand account. I, like many people in the West, who were at a great distance from the situation, saw South Africa in terms of those who were either for apartheid or against it when actually apartheid did not always produce resistance and resistance was not always occasioned by apartheid. As Rassool and Minkley argue, in essentializing the past, a dichotomy is created between apartheid and resistance and this can belie the many truths of reality and daily choices people had to make in negotiating their lives under apartheid (2000,94).

While this story does not refer to the notion of resistance directly, it hints at the idea of African solidarity and the idea that all Africans automatically joined together to help each other or fight the system. Simon writes “It is the possibility of a critical, transformative learning that offers the listeners the chance to redeem their obscene questions.” A critical learning begins when we view such questions as symptomatic of the difficult knowledge (Britzman, 1998) contained in the testimony of in this case
Nobuntu, a knowledge placed on its (non-African) listener and which requires a degree of self-reflexivity in order to be responsive and responsible to that claim (Simon, 2001, 19).

My own assumptions and perceptions of African culture are shattered by this story, no matter how minor a part it may play in what she was trying to tell me. The nature of this ‘shattering’ begins within Nobuntu’s response to her ex-husband’s behaviour, the way she felt shame because of his ‘selfishness’. Including his actions in the story served as a way of expressing Nobuntu’s anger and frustration at what was happening around her to people like her husband. She could not just sit and watch apartheid slowly tear apart her community. My pre conceived notions of what it meant to be ‘African’ were not discarded as much as opened up and expanded over the course of the next few weeks as I listened to Tutu’s and Pumla’s testimonies, with these questions in my mind. I began to see a pattern and understand similar behaviour as that of Nobuntu’s ex-husband, not only in the African men, but in both men and women in the townships. What the women were telling me allowed me to link these anecdotes to larger systems of oppression. Rather than seeing someone like Nobuntu’s ex-husband as an anomaly, these stories and anecdotes lead me to think about the societal issues that could be influencing and fostering this kind of behaviour.

In one of Tutu’s stories she talked about the lack of resources in the townships, not only material but social as well - people you could count on or look to for support. A person’s or family’s financial gain or status in the community would often produce fierce resentment, envy and suspicion in the other members. She told me that the level of poverty among people in the townships was combined with a general atmosphere of mistrust that permeated through almost every relationship as people were forced (by torture or through fear of starvation/torture/death) to spy on and betray each other. Tutu explained to me what happened to her when she started trying to teach literacy on a volunteer basis (no one would
give them funding) to the people in her community.

"...There was a problem because people wouldn't believe you are doing that voluntarily. They would think we are getting monies from somewhere. For example, I started a sewing group because I found that not everybody was concerned about reading and writing, but they just want something to earn. We didn't have anything from nowhere that we could start these programs. We'd be motivating each other that if somebody got a machine they bring it in, or those who are able to contribute to buy materials, or we can get remnants somewhere and bring it to the group and sew.

....So because of the mistrust also you find that a person says 'no, Tutu is lying. She is getting something somewhere. Why would we work for her?' And they would take the things maybe we have worked up to sell, and find that they sold it and took the money. Or maybe those who are bringing machines people will say, 'why are you using your own machines? We are supposed to be getting machines because she is earning money for what she is doing'."

Tutu, along with Nobuntu and Pumla told me similar stories, some as they tried to help people in their communities and were met with mistrust, or others where members of their own families would turn on them. There are many forces at work in the brief stories of Nobuntu's and Tutu's. Their stories open up the door to discussions about systems of oppression and the development of a material culture, issues of trust and the abuse of power within disadvantaged communities. This is significant of how testimony can be a learning from and not just a learning about. Attending to this testimony opens up larger questions about ideology, myth, and the psychological implications of colonialism as well as notions of how Africa gets taken up in the West and looked at through an anachronistic lens. Testimonies such as these can bring some of these issues to light and allow people in the West, like me, to begin to see the complex relationships between political and social systems and the impact on human behaviour. While much of the infrastructure of apartheid has been dismantled, it will take many more years for the psychological damage to heal, and for patterns of behaviour to change. The need for

12For further reading on these issues see work by Franz Fanon such as Wretched of the Earth and Edward Said's work on Orientalism.
reparations and redistribution of wealth are critical not only for issues of physical health but for the psychological and social development of communities within the townships.

Oral history is an essentially creative, often subjective dialogue within a particular historical context. Moments such as the one I experienced as described above, and moments of disruption that Mouton and McCormick call ‘boundary crossings’ are, they state, but one in a range of ways in which the interview reveals itself as a process of the conscious and unconscious (re) construction of a story in the remembering of a historical event. “Interviews are shaped by the interaction of social and political conditions, the relationship between historian and narrator, and the individual experience of remembering” (44)

Actively attending to what Simon has called the “transactive claims of such testimonies” includes more than simple comprehension or the registering of a few shocking facts of evidence of a historical injustice. Simon contends that

“such listening requires an attentiveness to the questions one feels such accounts solicit, that is, an attentiveness to one’s compulsion to pose difficult, and at times, unanswerable questions, which nonetheless impulsively press for responses that seemingly (from within one’s own entanglement of history and epistemology) promise help in deciphering what is to be heard in a testimonial account. What is sought in such questions typically is not attached to something within the text but rather to something missing from the text.” (2001, 17)

Conclusion

Taking the stories of others seriously is a difficult task and one which requires a commitment to recording my questions, to questioning those questions and constantly being aware of how disruptive moments in the testimonies or in the speaker’s feelings about the memories might be shifting my own
story. These examples provide the beginning of what it means to open up the past in way that can reconfigure the present, not only for myself, the listener in this case, but for the speaker as well.

In the next chapter, I will discuss the event I organized at the Cultural History Museum where the women spoke publicly, by taking three examples or moments of 'boundary crossings' that occur between the women and the audience.
Chapter Four

"Is testimony, therefore, a simple medium of historical transmission, or is it, in obscure ways, the unsuspected medium of a healing?" (Shoshanna Felman, 1992, 20)

Introduction

In the previous two chapters, I explored testimony as a practice of remembrance that has transformative possibilities for the speaker as well as for the listener. Through telling their testimonies to me, in a private space, the women had the opportunity to speak about their lives and to reflect on that process, and I, as a researcher had a chance to explore my own responses in attending to their stories. This chapter explores what impact this process might have on a community as a whole by looking at how testimony, as a performative act, might allow people to cross certain racial or cultural boundaries.

In thinking about how South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission initiated a process whereby ordinary people were given the chance to talk about the past publicly, I began to wonder what the women of Ikamva Labantu would want to say in a public forum, if given the opportunity. Up to this point, the women had been speaking to me alone, or to myself and my colleague Jacqueline. Their responses to the interview process had been positive and while painful memories arose at times, they felt that it was an important process for them as individuals and repeatedly expressed that it was important for the rebuilding of community as well. Thus, the idea for an informal community event where they would speak publicly, was born. The event was held at the Cultural History Museum, (formerly called the Slave Lodge) on August 21, 2000.
Throughout the interview process, I had asked the women to bring me photographs, mementoes, banners, placards, clothes - any objects that linked them to the past and to the lives they had lead. These objects would serve as memory-aids to help the women remember events in the past and also were to be displayed at the museum. Avril brought an ANC Women’s League banner, photographs of herself and other activists, clothes she used to wear with ANC colours, buttons with slogans on them and family pictures from the 1980's. Cheryl came to me one day with a large bundle of papers in an envelope and said, “here, you can look through these”. I took them home and began to leaf through copies of her ID and her mother and father’s photos. What captured my attention was a letter Cheryl had written to the Land Claims Commissioner a couple of years ago. It was a poignant letter about how her family had been forcibly removed from their home in Claremont due to the Group Areas Act, where the city was divided up into “Whites Only” areas and “Coloured Only” areas. She told me that writing the letter had been cathartic for her and regardless of whether anything came of it, the act of writing it allowed her to let go of some of her anger and begin the healing process. I asked Cheryl if she would be willing to read it at the event and she agreed.

After reading the letter and speaking to Cheryl about it, I came up with the idea that I would ask all the women to write something - a statement or testimonial that they would feel comfortable reading to a public audience made up of friends, colleagues and family members. Because it was a public event and a rare opportunity for them to speak out, I figured they would want to have something prepared before hand. Writing down their stories or feelings would be different kind of testimony, one that I hoped would perhaps allow them to explore feelings, stories or events that were not discussed during the one on one interview process.
Cultural History Museum in Cape Town, on August 21, 2000

The room was large with a long mahogany desk at the front. Framed above it was a painting of Table Mountain dating around 1700, from the early days of colonial rule. A podium stood to the far left and along the two side walls were portraits of the colonial masters. It was a cold, old-world room, with thick curtains blocking the windows which overlooked the courtyard. This building used to be the old Slave Lodge - in which the fate of slaves brought over from Malaysia and China, Mozambique and Angola was decided. The remains of bones are still being dug up in its courtyards, below its pretty cobblestones and brickwork. Now the bones are archeological relics for students at the university to examine and sift through.

At first it seemed like a terrible room to hold such an event, but the more the women and I thought about it, we realized it was precisely a room such as this one, a room that represented the old South Africa, that needed to hear the voices of these women. It was the perfect space to unleash the ghosts of the past and create new histories, adding to the continually unfolding story of South African public memory.

I had borrowed twelve posters from the Mayibuye Centre ("let it return") which is a pioneer project with the University of the Western Cape that focuses on all aspects of apartheid resistance, social life and culture in South Africa. The centre puts together exhibitions on different aspects of apartheid resistance. I used their series entitled, "You've Struck a Rock" documenting the national women's struggle. These posters were laminated photographs of the apartheid era's rallies and actions, with large,
colourful captions and slogans. The posters were in chronological order, starting in the 1940's and moving right up to the first democratic election in South Africa in 1994.

I had made about 8 posters of my own, on a smaller scale. The idea was that these posters would fit in between each one of the larger series, and together they would tell a different story, or perhaps add another level to the ‘dominant’ story of women’s role in anti-apartheid work. The result of the two sets of posters was a juxtaposition of national and local; rural with urban, political activist with social activist.

A local photographer, Gina, came in one day at a staff meeting and took pictures of each woman. There were two more posters, one with articles, drawings and other family photographs that Avril had given me. These posters were important for creating a commemoration/celebration of these women’s lives, since they were not only about the community work they did, but about the things they sacrificed, the people they loved. This event was about community life and how women’s resistance stemmed directly from family life and the domestic realm.

As I was organizing the presentation I began to feel uneasy with my role as coordinator. I wanted to be a technician, or a stage hand, the one who sets up the props and paints the scene. I wanted the women to be the creators; the actors who tell the stories that need to be told and bring the play to life. I had rented the room at the museum and started working on a visual and textual display of their lives - texts which they had given me permission to use and photographs they had agreed would be publically displayed.

As I made the posters, I felt as though I was just reproducing the same power dynamics that deny marginalized groups autonomy and the right to control their own representation. I did not want them to
feel I was taking control of their representation, so I approached the women and asked them if they could put a visual and/or textual display together of their own lives.

The truth was they had more important things to do. The reality of daily work and having households to manage, children to look after and responsibilities to deal with did not allow the women the time or energy to put this together. In terms of collaboration, it became clear to me that being collaborators was also about division of labour and taking into account the priorities of the people involved. As a fully-funded researcher, I had devoted all my time to this project, whereas the women were just trying to live their lives.

I took a step back and realized that although they saw the relevance and significance of such an event and were excited about it, it was not the number one priority in their lives. They were willing to show up, speak and give up an afternoon to this, but as Cheryl told me, “life goes on”. There are things to attend to. My job was not to tell their stories for them, but to provide a space, a time, and the wherewithal for the women to talk about their lives and what mattered to them.

The Event: Telling Stories Publicly

“We tell stories not to die of life” (Antjie Krog, Country of My Skull)

People began filing into the room about half an hour before the event. There was a feeling of anticipation from everyone. No one, including myself, knew what to expect from the event. It was the first of its kind for everyone involved.

Cheryl entered the room and came up to me and said she was nervous and not sure she wanted to do it. Avril came in bouncing and smiling with her youngest son and her husband in tow. Nobuntu
entered, then Pumla with her friends, and Tutu and Helen came last, looking anxious. Friends and family filled the room and I counted 30 people in total.

The event started with me introducing the first speaker, Rolf Wolfsinkl, a professor at University of Cape Town (UCT) of Holocaust studies and the Third Reich. He read a short speech about oral history and the importance of first-person narratives in the field of history. Next came my colleague, Jacqueline Jaffe. She read a short lecture on slave narratives, particularly women’s narratives, explaining why she thought these narratives were important both to the canon and to the day’s event, alluding to the museum’s origins as a slave lodge. I read last, a paper I wrote about this research project. In the paper I spoke about my own investment in South Africa and the past three months of work with the women.

After my paper, it was time for the six women to come to the front of the room so that each could read her written testimony. As they got up from their seats and walked to the front of the room, Pumla started them in a song, a Xhosa prayer. At this point they began to walk together, hand in hand. They put together a united front - three Xhosa speaking African women, one white Jewish woman, one coloured woman and one white Christian woman. Together they sang, strong voices, hands locked together and walked to the front of the room.

Boundary Crossings

I have selected three moments I call “boundary crossings”, which I define as a transformative moment when a person overcomes a barrier that was constructed due to the socio-political context of
the apartheid system. These moments are not exclusive to crossing racial barriers but can be emotional, social and political as well. The transformation occurs when the person, either speaker or listener, moves towards taking responsibility for their actions, (or inaction) and is able to make a shift in thinking about their own position in relation to others. This process of transformation comes from being ‘unsettled’ in listening to someone else’s story or from the telling of one’s own story.

Engaging in practices of remembrance such as these are not as much about the recording of new public memory as they are about providing the space, literally and figuratively, for people in a post-conflict community to come together and take things into account. Such a place would allow people, whether they are victims or bystanders, to engage in a dialogue, even if that dialogue occurs within oneself after one has listened to the testimony of another. An event such as this illustrates how people’s lives and stories might truly matter to others.

To reiterate Simon’s claim that

“On such terms for the lives of others to truly matter - beyond what they demand in the way of an immediate practical solidarity - they must be encountered as counsel, stories that actually might shift our own unfolding stories, particularly in ways that might be unanticipated and not easily accepted.” (Simon,4)

The first example I provide is an interaction between Helen and Lila which illustrates Emmanuel Levinas’ notion that the real structure of learning proceeds not from the self, but from one’s encounters with the alterity of a unique other (1969, 73).
“I did not do enough”: Lila and Helen’s story

Lila is a white Jewish woman in her early sixties who has lived almost all her life in Cape Town. She is divorced and lives on her own. She has recently received her license to be a tour guide in the Cape area and is in the process of setting up her own business.

I invited Lila, a friend of mine, to the Cultural History Museum because she was interested in the work I was doing. She wanted to come to the event and see what it was all about. Lila had always maintained that it was too hard for her to do anything to fight apartheid. She told me many times how she and her ex-husband had taken big risks by hiring as many black and coloured people to work in his factory as they did, and they promoted them even though it was not common to have coloured or black office workers. Lila maintained that she could not speak out against apartheid in a public way because as a mother of three, a wife, and a daughter, she could not risk going to jail or leaving her children motherless. Especially being a Jew, she told me, it was even more difficult and dangerous to stand out or go against the state when the Holocaust was not so long ago and Jews were not welcome in South Africa. “That was just the way it was” she said. “Apartheid was a terrible system and I never thought it was right, but there was nothing I could do”. Helen and Lila are roughly the same age and grew up in similar environments. They are both mothers of three children, both had a middle class lifestyle and were part of the Jewish community. Helen was the last woman to speak at the event.

Helen had prepared a written testimonial like I asked all the women to prepare for this day but when she got up to speak, she decided not to read what she had written. Instead, she told a story

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13Lila is a pseudonym

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about when she was a speech therapist working at a hospital in Cape Town. Helen had become increasingly aware of the situation in the townships. After doing a follow up on a child with a cleft palate she came face to face with the stark differences between black and white health care and, horrified, became determined to fight the injustices of apartheid. One day a man with an elderly mother who was recovering from a stroke needed Helen’s help. Helen agreed to work with his mother and for 3 months worked with the woman until eventually she could speak again.

When the elderly mother recovered, the man admitted to not being able to pay Helen the full amount. She knew he was an official in a government office which supplied passes to blacks for work. By this time Helen had been already making her own way into the townships and was taking action to help the people, by raising money to build schools and community centres.

Helen told the man it was okay if he could not give her money, instead she asked him for a pass for her maid and he said, “sure, no problem”. Several weeks later, Helen went back and threatened him by saying, “what you did was illegal and I can go to the police and tell them what you did, so if you want to keep your job, give me 100 more passes and the template for the passes.”

Her blackmail scheme worked and Helen soon was clandestinely operating her own printing press in the garage of her house. She printed thousands of passes for ‘blacks’ to come and go in and out of the city.¹⁴

Lila heard this story and although she had known of Helen for years, she had never met her personally and was shocked by this story. Lila came up to me afterwards and said, “I don’t know how

¹⁴Helen could tell this story since no one from her family was there. Otherwise, it would have been in direct clash with the self, the woman and mother she presented to her husband and children. But it was perfect for the audience of her work related friends and colleagues and once again it is a story that reaffirms her place in South African society and her role as activist. She needed to tell this story because she wanted her colleagues to remember who she was, and continues to be.
she was able to do that. I don’t know why she took those risks and I did not. She was fearless. But I know now and I can say now that I didn’t do enough. I was scared. I didn’t want to.” Lila told me she was now willing to confront that in herself and do what she could to make up for what she did not do during apartheid.

Lila’s previously tightly held belief that she ‘could not do anything’ was thrown into question. If Helen saw the same injustice and did something, why couldn’t Lila? The power of Helen’s story forces Lila into asking herself, How could this be so? How could this have happened? How could I have let this happen?

Because Lila identity is connected to Helen’s through her Jewishness and motherhood, Lila listened to Helen’s testimony with a certain set of assumptions already in place, ready to hear Helen’s testimony on terms she understood. It is precisely because Lila (consciously or unconsciously) expects to hear something familiar from Helen that she is shocked by what she does hear. Helen’s testimony makes a claim on Lila. Simon talks about the transactive claim testimony places on the listener. He writes, “Testimony is always directed toward another, attempting to place the one who receives it under the obligation of response to an embodied singular experience not recognizable as one’s own.” (Simon, 2001, 9)

Lila starts listening as someone who identifies with Helen but quickly finds herself at a loss, unable to find that common ground between them, even though they are so closely linked as white South Africans, as Jews, as mothers and as wives. Helen’s experience is not recognizable as Lila’s own, and therefore she is confronted with something radically new to her.
I draw on Claudia Eppert’s understanding of Emmanuel Levinas here and how she uses Levinas’s theory of ethics to inform her notion of remembrance-learning. Levinas shows the real structure of learning to proceed not from the self but from one’s encounters with the alterity of a unique other. The other thus becomes the teacher who teaches a responsive/responsible relation with him or her. (Eppert 2000, 222) Because we are continually subjected to this alterity that exceeds the resources of consciousness, “learning thus is always incumbent upon an encounter of surprise.” Levinas deploys the phrase “traumatism of astonishment” to describe more specifically, the learning of responsibility in the encounter with another. Lila encounters surprise when listening to Helen’s story and the learning is astonishing because it is the experience of something radically foreign. (Levinas, 1969, 73).

It might seem strange that Lila could be so shocked when she is a citizen of South Africa and was not distanced from this history in time or space. However, her astonishment speaks to the historical reality that regular white people, like Lila, were deliberately shielded from knowing about such actions that people like Helen conducted, by the state, its media and even by people like Helen who could not afford to disclose this kind of information. Lila’s shock or astonishment grows out of what Helen did, but is more about what she, herself, did not do.

It is not easy for Lila to accept her role as a bystander, it has taken her over 50 years to be able to take responsibility and account for what she did not do, for what she might have done, and now, what she can do. It is also significant to note that Helen spoke last and Lila had been listening to 5 other testimonies before she heard Helen’s story. It is possible there was a cumulative effect or impact on Lila as she listened to white, coloured and black women speak about their experiences under apartheid. There was no defining ‘theme’ in the testimonies they told (for example, black victimhood, or attacks on white privilege). Rather the event was a forum for an array of South African women’s experiences as activists,
as mothers and wives, daughters and workers. As she listened, Lila could think about her own place among them, or where she stood in relation to them.

The next boundary crossing concerns Avril’s awareness of her place in relation to Tutu.

“Call me your sister”: Tutu and Avril

Tutu, a woman of few words, often comes across as aloof and hardworking. Once a person gets to know her however, she is a wonderfully sensitive and caring person. It takes Tutu time to trust someone. This day at the museum Tutu told a story no one had heard before. It was about her childhood and how she was given up by her birth mother and left to a distant relative to be raised in the Transkei (a rural area in Eastern Cape). When she got older Tutu wanted to continue her education, but her ‘granny’ could not afford it so she went to look for her birth mother in the city of Cape Town. However, her last name was different from her mother’s, and as a black person she could not stay in the city without a pass, so Tutu was constantly harassed by the police. The police did not believe Tutu had a mother in Cape Town and thought she was just trying to scheme her way in to the city. They would pick her up and throw her into jail time after time. Tutu would wait for days in government offices trying to get a pass, so she could get to see her mother and go to school. Finally, after months and months of this Tutu decided to lie. She told the officials she had no family and eventually managed to change her last name.

Tutu explained this is why she likes to be called by her nickname, “Tutu”. It is what her ‘granny’ used to call her and not an official name given to her. She also said it was living through the experiences like the one she described from her childhood that made her want to spend her life helping other people
who had been discarded or neglected.

Avril listened to Tutu’s story and said she had no idea this was the “kind of baggage” Tutu was carrying around. Below is a quote from Avril when I interviewed her upon my return in March of this year 2001:

“Tutu... really, when I listened to what she had to say, I thought ‘how much haven’t you carried all these years?’ That the next day I went to her and said, I thought about it, and I said, ‘Tutu, I know you haven’t got a sister, but please I want to be your sister, so when ever you need a sister, you call me your sister.’ And of course that broke through to her completely and now when I see her, I get this smile and in the past she just used to say ‘hello’ very sort of like.... (aloof) and now I understand why she has such a low self image. I mean, she is a brilliant, wonderful woman and it’s all that deep baggage she had.... and for me that was absolutely extraordinary.”

What happened to Avril as she listened to Tutu? They have worked together for a number of years and although they have been united in their fight against apartheid, they have belonged to different cultural and racial groups: Avril to a white Christian community, and Tutu to a black Xhosa/Christian community. They worked together but lived separately and faced vastly different personal struggles. Tutu does not often talk about her past, and rarely speaks of her personal problems to anyone. Hearing her open up and expose a vulnerability touched Avril. Avril began to see their relationship differently and this new awareness pushed Avril to make a move towards Tutu.

Since that day, Avril and Tutu continued to work in the same environment but a barrier has been broken down between them. Today Avril knows it is she who must work to bridge the gap between herself and Tutu. She no longer attributes the ‘coldness’ from Tutu as a character flaw or as a personal
grudge towards Avril, instead, sees Tutu as a woman who has suffered immeasurably, and in very specific ways because of apartheid. Despite her activist work, Avril realizes she still has considerable privilege as a white woman. In asking to be ‘her sister’ Avril is telling Tutu that she has some understanding of what a heavy load she has been carrying, and accepts responsibility as her friend and fellow South African to carry this ‘baggage’ as well. In other words, Avril has made a move to share Tutu’s load and offers to play a part in Tutu’s healing process.

While Avril knows she cannot ‘belong’ in Tutu’s world, she can however begin to understand more about how she exists “in relation to her”. Simon writes that the practice of a transactive public memory evokes a persistent sense - not of belonging - but of being in relation to, of being claimed in relation to the experience of others. It is “a connection that may be other to one’s identificatory investments.(7)

Avril has often spoken of her spiritual connection to black women and how she feels ‘at home’ with them. At one time in her life, what seemed almost unbearably hard to do is now somewhat easier. Avril regularly crosses over from her white suburban world over into the black townships and feels comfortable in her roles in these disparate worlds. The ease with which Avril interacts with the black community can gloss over the reality of the psychological, emotional and economic devastation on non-white South Africans, like Tutu, and how it affects their daily choices, attitudes and behaviours. This testimony made Avril aware of the danger of letting that distance seem close, and allowed her to see there was work to be done on her side. Being Tutu’s ‘sister’ must be about existing in relation to her, negotiating those differences together – not letting the distance get too great, but not losing sight of it either.
“It made things easier for me”: Nobuntu and the Boyds

Before the day at the museum, Nobuntu told me she had written her testimonial and, although she wanted to read it, she said she did not think she would be able to because it was too difficult. She said,

“my anger is still there when I think about this incident. I wish I had time to tell these people how I felt. I also want to say with my present job I am very happy and my white colleagues are so open to criticism and I can share with them stories like this one. If one day I can meet my ex-madam and master I will be very happy because I have now grown enough confidence to tell them what I think of them.”

It was a story about Nobuntu’s experience as a domestic worker and her treatment by the family she worked for. I told Nobuntu she did not have to read the testimonial and whatever she felt comfortable saying was fine. After three of her colleagues had spoken, Nobuntu knew she had to tell this story to everyone in the room. She gathered her courage and left her papers on the table and spoke from her heart.

Nobuntu told her story about working for a white family as a domestic worker many years ago when, as the oldest child in her own family, her mother needed the extra income to look after her younger siblings. Nobuntu cleaned the house and looked after the couple’s two children. The dishes her employers let her use to eat on were cracked and old and kept separate from everything else. She had to eat her meals outside on the patio or standing up in the kitchen on cold and rainy days. The white couple treated her like a stranger, never asking how she felt, even though they entrusted their children to her care. She was having trouble financially as she was supporting her mother’s family as well as her own
young children. Nobuntu decided one day to ask to borrow money from her employers. She said,

“*My master called me into the kitchen, he said to me, ‘listen, I don’t want to give blacks money because they are not honest and I don’t trust them. If we give you this fifty Rand you will have to pay it all back by month’s end’. I was so shocked by the way he spoke to me and I was angry as well because I did not know any dishonest black. But I was also thinking that I needed the money and how was I going to pay the fifty Rand and go home with ten rand only at the end of the month.”*

Nobuntu went home that day and cried for hours, full of anger and humiliation. Nobuntu’s mother did not think her daughter’s frustration was valid. She told Nobuntu ‘you must just work hard’. Instead, Nobuntu decided she could not work for those people one more day at the cost of her own dignity, so she quit her job. She did not work for 6 months after that experience because she was so angry.

After telling her story to her community and colleagues, Nobuntu felt differently. I went back to Cape Town in March 2001 to do follow-up interviews and I asked Nobuntu how that day at the museum had affected her. She told me for a long time she had been looking up this white couple’s names in the phone book, wanting to call them and confront them. This is what she told me:

“I think when you did the interviews with us we were individuals and when you called us all, I think we had a chance to hear about what baggage the people were carrying and it also was very nice because at the Cultural Museum it was not only Ikamva Labantu, there were people listening... where do we come from and why are we like this. And to speak about the Boyds, it made things easy for me. I really was looking for them in the phone book. I really wanted to go and visit but since that day I thought, ‘okay, it’s done and I have proved that I can do things you know, without being oppressed’. So I think to me it made a lot of sense also to expose what our other colleagues were suffering, because seeing a white women, how did you know they had any baggage, like Avril or Cheryl? You didn’t know.

It healed me, and I had an understanding that I musn’t take it as if only the ‘blacks’ were oppressed in this country... we all have to work on something because we all come from different
In this case, Nobuntu was able to overcome an emotional barrier that was set in place through this incident with the Boyds. She carried anger around with her towards white people, but was directed specifically at this couple. She thought that if she could just tell them how horrible they were, and let them know what she has made of herself now, then she could perhaps move on with her life and feel vindicated. Yet, it was her public testimony in front of both white and black South Africans that allowed her to let go of her anger and see herself in a new light in the context of other tellings in the event.

She felt validated in front of the audience; people listened to her, her story was acknowledged, but more than that, she had the confidence and strength to face the Boyds. She realized that this meant that she did not have to face them anymore because she had overcome what they had done to her.

What allowed the experience of telling this story to be a transformative one? Nobuntu says "at the Cultural Museum it was not only Ikamva Labantu, there were people listening, where do we come from and why are we like this" Dori Laub talks about the need for an “addressable” other when engaging in testimony. Testimony cannot exist without someone to hear it. Laub writes, “

“The listener, therefore, has to be at the same time a witness to the trauma witness and a witness to himself. It is only in this way, through his simultaneous awareness of the continuous flow of those inner hazards both in the trauma witness and in himself, that he can become the enabler of the testimony - the one who triggers its initiation, as well as the guardian of its process and of its momentum” (58).

The audience was key for Nobuntu’s boundary crossing moment and having people who she knew
and others she did not know as well be there to listen to what she had to say ‘triggered’ the testimony and enabled it to come forth from her.

Nobuntu took responsibility for her own healing. She was able to see how she, as a black woman, was affected by apartheid, but that everyone - black, white and coloured - was affected albeit in different ways. It was not helping her to hold onto her suffering or place her suffering above another’s. Even if black women did suffer more than any other group, holding onto that anger was destroying her own happiness. Through public testimony, Nobuntu begun the process of accepting that the road to reconciliation starts within herself. Having said this, she needed others to hear, acknowledge and accept what had happened to her, as a black woman as well as she needed to hear from others.

The Limits of Transformation: Pumla’s Story

For other black women, like Pumla, who have a harder time acknowledging what happened to her people, the event and process of testifying was altogether something different than for Nobuntu or Tutu for example. Pumla spent her schooling in the Eastern Cape, in the rural and nominally independent region then known as the Transkei. Protected from much of the violence and segregation in Cape Town, Pumla came back after her graduation to help out her mother and siblings. Younger than the other women at Ikamva Labantu by several years, Pumla came into community work through her mother’s activism as her mother needed help running the creche. Her demeanor and approach is more like the younger generation of blacks who did not feel the sting of apartheid as acutely as the older
generation. She brings a greater sense of entitlement, a stronger voice and an aggressive stance when it comes to her work in community development.

Pumla made herself the least available to me during the project and was less forthcoming than the others. I felt some resentment from her and she kept me at a distance. I believe this was largely due to my ‘whiteness’ and the fact that I could offer her nothing of material or financial value with this project. After our one-on-one interview in July 2000, Pumla proceeded to tell me all her financial woes and how much money she needed to put her children through school. She asked me if I could help her myself, or link her up with a sponsor in Canada who could provide her with some support. When I told her unfortunately I could not do that, she retreated. During this project, however, Pumla was going through a very difficult divorce and had a lot of stress trying to deal with the loan payments on her house and supporting her four children on her own, all of which no doubt contributed to her lack of enthusiasm to participate in this study.

During our private interview, Pumla spoke to me about developing her confidence speaking to white people. I asked her how she felt about Helen back in the eighties, when a white woman helping people in the townships was a rare and strange sight. This is what she said:

"I was so concerned asking myself 'why is this woman helping us? It's not only my preschool, there are more than 20 preschools that she is helping? Where is she getting all these toys?' Nevertheless the explanation at the meeting was that she is able to get things from the Jewish community13 and then those are the things she is sharing with us. We were even scared to ask her more and more questions 'why are these people only interested to give to you? Not straight to us? We were scared because we were under the impression that if we ask even Helen more questions, Helen might leave us, thinking we are now 'clever'. We told ourselves, most especially

13Helen was involved with The Union of Jewish Women who would collect toys and clothes from the community and donate it to the needy. They were not affiliated with any political organization.
me, that 'okay, let me lie low until I get to know this lady more and more.' It took me more than ten years to be free enough and ask her everything. More than ten years! Although now we were very close friends working together, because as the chairperson of the organization (Ithemba Labantwana) she had to phone me every morning to try and give me the program for the day; to tell me who must we go and see, what time, where. This is what was happening and by Helen doing that, phoning me every morning... the relationship... she was now very close to me. And honestly, I was scared to ask her even for, when they (Ikamva Labantu) started to give me salary it was as little as... I don't know what to say.... for more than five years the salary was the same. I was not even in the position to ask for an increase because I was scared if you ask for more, you are going to lose even what you are getting. I mean, the situation was like that. On the other hand, I kept on attending workshops and big meetings on ECD (Early Childhood Development) and local meetings within our areas. I could now hear when people talk 'you mustn't be scared of the white man, you must talk, you must ask them, you must tell them if you don't like something.' I started, but very shy and very slowly to do those things, but today, I am telling you, I cannot take any nonsense from them. If they tell me this, I will always answer back. And I was not doing that before. The way I can challenge them now.... I mean today, really I can go anywhere. I am in the position of wanting to go out... I'm really now ready to go anywhere if one asked me come and address - even if it's thousands of people. I am not shy now to stand up and address those meetings. The way I have developed since 1988 when I joined this field, I can stand up now and say anything. I am not scared at all anymore... I am not scared.”

Because Pumla had told me this, I knew she would be comfortable speaking at the event. The first time I heard her speak, I noted her skills as an orator and this made me all the more interested to hear her speak from a more personal place than she usually does. I include this excerpt from her interview because I believe Pumla's sentiments here can help explain her behaviour at the Cultural History Museum.

The day at the Cultural History Museum arrived and Pumla looked nonplused. She used this event to tell a story that made people laugh. The idea that testimony is a performance would mean that it has the power to entertain, as much as it does to transform or educate. Certain testimonies can be transformative as they entertain and educate, while others are delivered with different intentions. For
example, it was quite telling that the people who did most of the laughing at Pumla’s story were among her own group of friends (black women).

Pumla spoke of the time she worked in Truworths, a large retail department store in Cape Town. Pumla was hired as a sales person and worked there for number of years under a supervisor. Her story was about how good a worker she was; how many hours she worked and the excellent evaluations she received, but she never got promoted. Her supervisor, a white woman, would tell Pumla every few months how wonderful she was and that she was an exemplary employee and promise to promote her. Pumla told the story like a master story teller, setting up the scene and imitating the supervisor, emphasizing her superficiality and patronizing manner. Although this was a story that was all too familiar to her black friends, it was to them that she seemed to be speaking. It was an insider story, meant for black women who could laugh at the white woman for all that she represented to them - perhaps pathetic and fearful. It was a story that did not dwell on her being a victim as much as it accented where she is, and who she is now. This story seemed to be an extension of Pumla’s interview with me, a testament to her feelings of not being “scared” anymore; of being her own boss and in control of her life which includes choosing what, if any, stories she wants to tell on her own terms.

On the surface, the point of her testimony, like Nobuntu’s was that no matter how good she was, Pumla would never be promoted, get more money or be treated with respect because she was black but what she was really saying went deeper, as I mentioned above. How is this story different from Nobuntu’s? Again, as I discussed in Chapter Three, the way in which Helen told her story when she and her friend Maggie were held at gunpoint, the feeling, delivery and even the attitude in which the story was told said more than the story itself. Pumla was not looking for reconciliation or even to let go of her anger. Her manner was relaxed and defiant. This was not a serious event by her estimation.
Pumla was the only one out of the six women who did not write the testimonial beforehand (which I asked the women to write two months previously). Instead, Pumla decided on the spot what she was going to say. I believe that the lack of effort she put into thinking about this and cooperating with me (although she could have opted out of the study at any time) was her way of maintaining a sense of power.

It is not my intention to belittle her story or to imply there is nothing of value in hearing the content of the story. It is necessary that Pumla tell such stories, as they are a part of her history and need to be heard, acknowledged and incorporated into South African public memory. What I mean to suggest is that Pumla came to the event with nothing invested, nothing to lose or gain. While she does maintain a sense of solidarity with the other women and in fact was the one (as she often is at meetings) to lead them in song to the front of the room, the fact that she did not invest herself in it is perhaps indicative of her continued level of mistrust of white people, and maybe an unwillingness to give anything of herself to a white person like me, if they are not willing to give her something “real” in return.

Pumla’s response, or lack thereof, to me and this project provided some valuable insight into the problems and limitations of such an event. Not everyone came with the same agenda; some like Cheryl and Avril came with high expectations and had invested much time and emotion into the project. Others like Tutu and Helen were committed to the idea of rebuilding their community and strengthening their relationships with each other. Nobuntu, being a born-again Christian, embraced the notion of forgiveness and reconciliation as preached by Archbishop Desmond Tutu and therefore used this opportunity to let go of some anger. But Pumla, a woman struggling with a bitter and unsupportive husband and the prospect of raising four children on her own while working full time just to put food on the table and
keep her house, possibly has more reason than anyone to see this exercise in memory-work and community building as perhaps futile and useless to her.

The importance of an organized public space for memory work is clearly articulated here in the transformative moments I described in this Chapter, but also the limitations of testimony within such an environment of inequality and continued economic disparity. While this event had the possibility of altering perceptions and challenging some people in new ways, for others like Pumla the past is perhaps better off being replaced by the future.

Creating Space for Social Transformation

The difference of what was said to me privately and what was said publicly tells me that such spaces are critical for social transformation. As I mentioned in Chapter One, informal settings such as dinner-time discussions or even much of the one-on-one interview process often cannot provide the necessary dynamics for social transformation. I want to stress the importance of creating institutional spaces with cultural legitimacy for such ‘tellings’ to take place. These stagings allow crucial forms of memory work to happen where people can continue to negotiate and renegotiate the meanings of their stories and histories with each other in a way that can shift their relationships and foster social change.

As it turned out, almost all the women discarded what I asked them to write and told stories they wanted to tell. Like the ever-optimistic and spirited woman that she is, Helen had written a speech as if the event were a pep rally, designed to celebrate Ikamva Labantu. She thought that is what I wanted and what people would want to hear. But after listening to her colleagues she knew that what she had written was not what she really wanted to say. The event went from being something created and controlled by
me to something the women laid claim to; an event they shaped and authorized themselves. These were stories I had not heard, and they expressed themselves in ways they had not done with me. This lead me to see the constructed nature of the interview process; that my questioning was limited and therefore limiting for them and what they were able to say. I learned more about the women’s lives and about my own position - how I can enable as well as disable certain stories from being told because of my age, race, class, education, nationality, religion, etc.

But beyond my own limited questioning is the real and profound impact of the TRC over the past few years which has given people not only the right, but the ability to speak about the past (without fear), as well as the audience’s capacity and willingness to hear what needs to be said. This event at the Cultural History Museum allowed me to see the value of organized cultural practices of remembrance, and how the character, setting and relationships of the people involved created the space; an institutional vehicle for transformation to occur.

Conclusion

Being supported by each other, the women were inspired by listening to what each one had to say, and this allowed something transformative to happen. The women transformed and re-authorized the space, letting each story unfold into the next one. The value of such a space is in its possibilities: anything can happen, good or bad. It is the dynamics in the room that ultimately determine what gets told. The relationship and level of comfort between the speakers and the audience is critical, but also between each speaker. These dynamics that emerge freely or spontaneously, dictate what can be said and what cannot be said, and allows access for certain stories to be told, and to be heard. With hands clasped
together, singing a Xhosa song as they approached the stage, the tone was set for the women to operate as a unit, fully supportive of each other and united in their mission for that day.

While some might view this as an overly romantic description or event itself, such emotion between South Africans illustrates the kind of socialization that occurred during the struggle years and gestures towards possible - and hopeful - forms of being together. The need for certain social practices and institutions such as the one described in this chapter, becomes evident and critical when thinking about how South Africans are to sustain their relationships with one another in ways that promote a growing together, rather than a growing apart as the old fabric of struggle wears away in the weaving of a New South African society.
Chapter Five

Findings

"It will not do to forget a past that is not past" (John Willinsky, Learning to Divide the World)

"because of you
this country no longer lies
between us but within

it breathes becalmed
after being wounded
in its wondrous throat

in the cradle of my skull
it sings, it ignites
my tongue, my inner ear, the cavity of heart
shudders toward the outline
     new in soft intimate clicks and gutturals

of my soul the retina learns to expand
daily because by a thousand stories
I was scorched

a new skin.

I am changed forever. I want to say:
    forgive me
    forgive me
    forgive me

You whom I have wronged, please
take me

with you.

(Antjie Krog, Country of My Skull, 1998)
In this thesis I have attempted to show the pedagogical and social importance of testimony as a practice of remembrance with transformative possibilities, both individually and collectively. To conclude, I will discuss the broader implications of my findings and situate my work within the current context of public remembrance and the debates surrounding it in South Africa. Finally, I will suggest further areas of research for the future.

Memory and Healing

Memory is always as much about the present as it is about the past, in that it relates to the redefining roles and reconstituting place, space and even survival. What and how people remember is linked to the social and political atmosphere of the time and serves a purpose in shaping how people might envision the future. Envisioning a future requires hope, and hope comes from healing. What constitutes healing, however, remains an open question in South African discourse. There is no consistent notion of what it means to heal and such a concept is fraught with ambiguities. South African scholar Sarah Nuttall problematizes any simple notion of healing when she writes, "is any version of healing a kind of closure, somehow problematically holistic and harmonistic?" Nuttall states that the integration of the past into the present may be one stage in the process of healing, or in the making of memory, and notes that healing can be an opening up, not a closing down, "... to heal, and to remember, is also to find the freedom to ask more questions, to let the unspeakable, both then and now, filter in, to disturb, to open out consciousness." (Nuttall, 1998,85)

'Opening out consciousness' is to expand the parameters of one's mind and to begin to shift
the existing paradigms. To disturb is to astonish, unsettle and to let filter in what is new. Black and white South Africans have long lived with deeply entrenched attitudes and beliefs towards each other, making it a challenging and even daunting task to begin to bridge the divide and find ways for them to coexist harmoniously, with respect and without violence. In South Africa, political leaders and scholars alike have devoted much time and energy to practices of remembrance. Since the end of apartheid, the nation’s quest to remember started with the TRC and moved to community-specific commemorations and exhibits and finally to grass roots projects where people have been creating their own ways of remembering and re-composing their histories.

Sarah Nuttall writes that the public rehearsal of memory, either through testifying at the TRC or writing one’s autobiography, is a “palpable, messy activity which has as much to do with a struggle with grief, to fill in the silence, or to offer something symbolically to the dead, as it does with the choreographing of a political and social script”(1998, 75-6)

Although most South Africans would agree that it is important to deal with the past, there are widely differing opinions on how that should be done. Some, like the family of Steven Biko16 strongly opposed the process of the TRC and instead chose to take the commission itself to the Constitutional Court. Others like Cynthia Ngewu, the mother of Christopher Piet, one of the Guguletu Seven17 said, “This thing called reconciliation... If I am understanding it correctly... if it means this perpetrator, this man who has killed Christopher Piet, if it means he becomes human again, this man, so that I, so that all

16Steve Biko was the leader of the Black Consciousness movement and the South African’s Students’ Organization in the late 1960’s and 1970’s, Biko died on September 12, 1977, while in police custody in Pretoria.

17 Guguletu Seven were seven young men, suspected of being members of Umkhontu we Sizwe (MK), who in 1976 were killed in the Cape Town township of Guguletu by apartheid security operatives linked to Vlakplaas.
of us, get our humanity back... then I agree, then I support it all” (Krog, 1998). Then there is P.W. Botha, former president of South Africa from 1984 - 1989, who refused to participate in the TRC, saying, “I will not appear before the Truth Commission. I don’t perform in circuses” and “I won’t allow myself to be threatened. The Truth Commission is tearing Afrikaners apart” (Krog, 1998).

These are three major South African examples which speak to the complex notion of what it means to remember, of the importance of memory and memory’s relationship to reconciliation and healing. These examples, among many others, demonstrate the TRC’s limited scope in its power to heal and transform the nation. Rebuilding a post conflict society is a slow, difficult process. While the TRC has been a first step in the movement towards social change and has been a valuable structure for many South Africans, it has left others at best indifferent, and at worst, violently opposed to reconciliation. It is not surprising, therefore, that alternative forms and processes of remembrance are being produced throughout the country, either in continuation of, or in contestation to, the structure and process of the TRC.

Public Histor(ies) and the Creation of the New Post Apartheid Nation

South African historian Ciraj Rassool writes that the domain of heritage and public history requires serious examination, “for it is here that attempts are being made to fashion the categories and images of the post-apartheid nation. It is also this domain of historical production that important contests are unfolding over the South African past.” (Rassool, 2000, 1)
Dominant discursive forms such as the ‘miracle’ of the new South Africa and the demise of apartheid through the ‘wisdom’ of heroic leaders and especially the ‘special magic’ of Nelson Mandela are being contested through other forms of commemoration and cultural projects. The present official view that South Africa is a society of ‘many cultures’ with a history of great lives of the ‘resistance and reconciliation’ has been emerging and taking shape in almost every sphere of construction and public culture in South Africa, from television histories and cultural projects of newspapers to the TRC and claims for land, from museums (new and old) and legacy projects to new monuments and cultural tourism. (Rassool, 2000,1)

While much of these constructions have happened ‘from above’ as part of the engineering of a new nation, and while many presentations have “accorded with new identifiable discursive frameworks for the new nation, many projects have, to varying degrees sought to challenge or chip away at the dominant constructions” (Ibid) These include the District Six Museum, Cell Stories at Robben Island Museum, and many other exhibitions, designs, poster campaigns, choreography and theatre, visual art, etc.

There is concern that projects such as the Robben Island Museum and its concentration on the national symbolic role of the island may distract the public from remembering individual activists, both on and off the island. The employment of ex-prisoners as tour guides around the island may help to ground visitors’ experiences on the island in the personal suffering and heroism of individual prisoners. South African Historian Harriet Deacon claims that the island’s story has to be related “very concretely to South Africa’ history, to ensure that visitors are encouraged to think deeply enough about their own parts in the dissonant symphony of apartheid and their role in the country’s future” (1998, 179). It is a project such as this that promotes many voices and multiple memories that can respond to Mahmood
Mamdini’s claim that the TRC’s privileging of one group of white perpetrators enables bystanders and beneficiaries of apartheid to resist taking responsibility for their action or inaction. Making room for multiple stories/histories to be told is a critical component in creating a public memory where those who were not ‘centre stage’ can be implicated, and see themselves nonetheless as actors and agents (even passive ones) in the history of their country. Deacon writes “there is always a danger that the celebration of victory might exclude the individual memories of those who fell by the wayside during the anti-apartheid struggle as well as those who were always on the other side” (1998, 179).

Ingrid De Kok writes that smaller, various artistic initiatives emerging out of different places in the country from unexpected links between institutions, individuals, and communities involve a responsibility for public education or re-education” (1998, 63). The notion of ‘re-education’ might mean developing and learning new ways for people to listen to each other. Due to deeply entrenched attitudes based on the racial constructs created during apartheid, South Africans bring preconceived notions and assumptions to their interactions with each other. If white South Africans are to own up to their role as bystanders and if black and coloured South Africans are to move on and build their lives based on a system of equality and democracy, perhaps examining how people listen to each other can play a critical role as South Africans begin to build new relationships.

Questions of Remembrance and Pedagogy

There is much emphasis on the process of remembrance in South Africa, as the focus is on what people have to say/remember, how they are saying it and why they are saying it. But what about responses? What about listening? How are South Africans to begin to listen to one another? Much of the current discussion and contestation is over new national memory and the re-creation of South
African identity, but what about the pedagogical implications? Such questions are missing from the debates surrounding memory work and remembrance. My work has sought to address these questions and contribute to the debate with this case study.

In their "Witness as Study: The Difficult Inheritance of Testimony" paper (Simon et al, 1998) write that while considerable attention has been given to the various 'uses of the past' and conceptions of time (and space) implicit in practices of remembrance, little concern has been given to the notions of teaching and learning inherent in the presumptions and organization of different forms of remembrance. "Indeed, the centrality of questions of pedagogy to notions of remembrance is often missed, eviscerating discussions of how and why public memory matters" (2) They point out that history and memorialization are the two dominant modes through which questions of the purpose and practice of remembrance are most frequently addressed. In the paper the authors further elucidate their argument by differentiating between a learning about and a learning from, concepts I explored in Chapter One. Learning about, a "a telling again" is first and foremost a reminder and a warning of what threatens to be forgotten or has already been forgotten, whereas a learning from ‘the past’ is a critical recognition or discovery that unsettles the very terms on which our understanding of ourselves and our world is based (Simon et al 1998,4). The combination of these two forms of learning create the concept of ‘remembrance-learning’ which has been employed in this thesis to mean a practice of questioning ourselves, our identities, and our relationship to past and present others (Eppert, 2000, 216-17).

As Rassool and Minkley note, most recent work on oral history continues to have limited engagement with form, structure and social processes of memory. My assertion has been that these social processes are critical to examine, especially as a researcher who is involved in interpretation and knowledge production. Recording my own questions as I listened to the women’s testimonies was a
necessary part of studying the process of transformation and of studying responses to testimony. The process of remembrance-learning which I engaged in sheds light on how a researcher can influence or unwittingly impose her own biases or perceptions onto the text; in this case, how my own position as a white, foreign woman may have disavowed certain stories. As I have suggested, the questions I posed to myself as I listened to the women's testimonies signal the value behind oral narratives. The questions I listed in my research journal in Chapter Three provide the beginning of what it means to open up the past in a way that can reconfigure the present.

The Task of Testimony

The performance of testimony has much to offer the field of public history in its emphasis on multiple versions of the past, in its emphasis on process and in its attempt to open up and engage people in the meaning and motives of memory. Testimony as performed at the Cultural History Museum with the women of Ikamva Labantu, is not simply about seeking a truth of the past. Rather, as Sarah Nuttall writes, it might be “To see that one had not located the truth about the past, but only an ongoing narrative of self - to see the subjectivity of the versions of the past one has offered to oneself”. Testimony can be about filling in the divide between simple divisions or binaries such as black/white, apartheid/resistance

“perhaps which have been able to hold the weight of one’s sorrow, to guard against a void of meaning and understanding which one most fears - can be newly painful, in its allowance of the disjuncture that (Walter) Benjamin wanted us, perhaps too insistently, to see. But it can highlight in a newly self-conscious way the complexity of memory’s meanings and motives.” (Nuttall, 1998, 85)

Indeed there is meaning and purpose in fostering the notion of forgiveness and trying to create a unified country with the future, not the past, as its focus. However, as I described in Chapter One, the TRC left
much unfinished business in the nation-building process of South Africa. People are not ready to move onwards when the past still shadows their lives. While material signs and symbols of apartheid have been dismantled, old divides and attitudes have remained intact. To begin to rebuild community requires a host of remembrance practices; official, institutional, cultural and informal, all which must seek to address ways in which people might overcome social and cultural barriers.

Ingrid De Kok contends that there is a strong impulse in the country to 'forgive and forget' in order to contribute to the notion of 'settlement' and nation-building. Cultural institutions and artists face an especially challenging task, of permitting contradictory voices to be heard as testimony or in interpretation, not in order to 'resolve' the turbulence, but to recompose it. (De Kok, 1998, 61).

Such re-composing is the task of testimony as I have posited it in this thesis.

Australian scholar Jared Stark writes that the task of testimony

"might then entail an encounter not simply with a closed off past or a static, fossilized archive, but rather with a continuing history of testimony, a history that emerges and speaks to us from the interstices between various ways a single event might be told, between various modes of memorialization and between various modes of response. To assume a place in this history, then, might also be to allow the story to teach us how to listen to it, to teach us how to inhabit a moment without a predetermined future." (History & Memory, fall 1999, 37-59)

Contributions, Contestations and Findings

Along with other endeavors which seek to address a re-education and attempt the re-building of community, my research project has addressed such problems by providing a space with cultural legitimacy for a wider range of people to both speak, and to hear the stories of others. In order for
people's lives to matter to each other it is necessary to establish how people exist in relation to each other. The women of Ikamva Labantu have lived and worked together for many years, but the way they have related and spoken to each other is entrenched in the grammar of apartheid resistance. While these ways of being together worked well during the struggle years, in post apartheid they need to find new ways of relating as their identities and roles shift. As Helen came to terms with her marginalization she needed to hear what her colleagues had to say about her as much as she needed them to hear what she had to say about them. There were and still are boundaries to be crossed. Tutu and Avril managed to cross one during the event at the Cultural History Museum. Avril made a move to share Tutu’s pain and offered to play a part in Tutu’s healing process. Once again, while Avril knew she could not ‘belong’ in Tutu’s world, she could however begin to understand more about how she existed “in relation to her”. Establishing such a connection, like Lila’s connection to Helen and thus to her black neighbours goes beyond Lila and Avril’s own set of identifications to a place where they both begin to understand an experience, a story, a life on terms other than their own.

In Chapter Four, Lila’s response to hearing Helen’s testimony allowed her to implicate herself as a bystander and shifted her sense of identity as a non-actor in apartheid history to a that of ‘passive’ actor. Although Lila had heard testimonies from the TRC, and although she knew of people like Helen, the structure of the event at the Cultural History Museum and its performance of testimony engaged Lila in a dialogue with herself. Such testimonial performances are about asking questions first of ourselves, and then of others. Eventually, this performance can lead to broader interrogation and reflection of how our actions affect others and how our histories are connected.

Testimony of course, does not have to be oral. It can come in written form, through autobiographies such as Nelson Mandela’s, transcripts of testimonies from the TRC, or memoirs of
political prisoners and those in exile. Written testimony can offer a learning about history and can open up different forms of remembrance such as that included in Antjie Krog’s book *Country of My Skull* where she weaves her story of complicity as an Afrikaner, with the stories of the black victims of apartheid. Krog is transformed in the listening, and it is this kind of transformation that I argue is possible through the performance of testimony. Transformation is as possible with written testimony as it is with oral testimony, but there are perhaps certain necessary conditions that might allow for testimony’s educative effects. I posit three such conditions as being: 1) one must feel addressed by the testimony, 2) one must have the opportunity to exercise the capacity to respond to such an address, and 3) be in a situation with institutional/cultural support for maintaining this potential openness to rethinking and reconstituting roles and relationships. While these are somewhat abstract notions, they gesture towards to possible interventions (to a society constituted on racial politics) that can be in place to allow for the responsibility, or a summoning of a response to testimony.

When applying the practice of testimony in a practical way as my project attempted to do, there were some limitations and problems which are important to note. The limits of such performances of testimony are that for some, like Pumla, protective walls remain often for valid reasons. For others, the stories that are told like that of Pumla’s, do not necessarily open up dialogue, but shut it down. The logistics can also limit such a process; someone must organize the event and find space for it and, as such, that person may very well have a large impact on the nature of the whole process. Being a white, foreign woman, my role was certainly problematic in that certain stories were told to me and others omitted. Often, I was met with resistance from some and not taken seriously by others. Had it been run by a local black woman, what would have happened? Would a local white person be trusted? Would someone do this without getting paid? Where would the money come from? Can it be reproduced in
other areas, with other organizations? These are interesting and important questions to consider for a future project. I believe this type of process can be reproduced in other parts of South Africa, but it would require financial, political and social support, especially in the form of more cooperation from municipalities and non profit organizations such as the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation.

It is also necessary to point out that this study is not long term, and although it has covered a period of three years, its findings and claims cannot be conclusive. I would like to state that my work seeks to address and reconstruct the hegemony of racial constructs as the sole basis of constituting relationships and find alternatives for people to reconstitute such relationships. This kind of social change does not happen overnight, but through such small scale grass roots projects and through moments such as the ones I have described in this thesis - moments of insight and unsettling.

Suggestions for Further Research

When conducting research for this thesis, I found very little information on the pedagogical implications of practices of remembrance. I would suggest that more research should be done in this area, not only in South Africa, but elsewhere, especially post conflict communities.

Since my focus is on South Africa, some suggestions would be to look at the idea of creating more memory spaces, like the District Six Museum with opportunities for the performance of testimony and specifically an emphasis on the process of listening and responding to such testimonies. More engagement with form, structure and the social processes of memory are necessary in this area. Studying the effects of memory activities on participants is an important area of research for learning what brings
people together and allows for certain boundary crossings to occur. What also must be included in such research is to examine the process and note the subjectivity of those who initiate and coordinate memory spaces, as well as those who ask the questions and design practices of remembrance.

Another suggested area of research in the field of oral history and testimony is how new technology can be used to help represent people’s lives. Multimedia exhibits such as the Cell Stories Exhibition at the Robben Island Museum (ongoing) the Langa Histories (One City, Many Cultures Festival in Cape Town, 2000) and the Digging Deeper exhibit (District Six Museum, 2000) all used some form of new sound technology or digital recordings, photographs, objects/mementoes and text to create a full sensory experience of the past. Along with asking how the new technology might affect or change our understanding of the past is the question, how does such technology effect people’s ability to respond in real and significant ways? How might these types of representations be used to promote social change and not just become merely aesthetic or technological endeavors for their own sake? These multi media exhibits attempt to represent multiple versions of the past in new ways and to examine the implications of these projects on people’s relationships with each other is crucial in how they might teach us about, and encourage, new forms of listening.

Conclusion

Martha Minow writes that the task following mass atrocity is to talk of learning to remember, but also to live. “And if the form of memory is one that prevents people from going on with their lives, that’s not constructive. At the same time, failing to remember is not going on with your life, and so that’s the challenge.” (1999)
In this thesis I have argued that memory-spaces need to be created and used so multiple memories and voices can be spoken and heard, debated and wrestled with. It is through these memory spaces that the lives of people can begin to matter to each other in new and profound ways. Post conflict communities must find ways to define memory-spaces in all areas of public education - in schools, in media, in art practice, in Internet-based exchanges - where stories of speaking and hearing, remembering and learning are “exchanged, examined, and understood as the grounds for a critical pedagogical practice of remembrance” (Simon, 2001, 26).

It is critical to find new ways of creating dialogue between black and white South Africans as the country stumbles through the wreckage of the past. There must be spaces for all South Africans to continue to make and remake meanings from events and memories from apartheid, as they reconfigure and renegotiate their relationships with each other.
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Robben Island Museum: www.robben-island.org.za
District Six Museum: www.districtsix.co.za
Western Cape Oral History Project: www.uct.ac.za/depts/history/ohp
South African Museums Online: www.museums.org.za