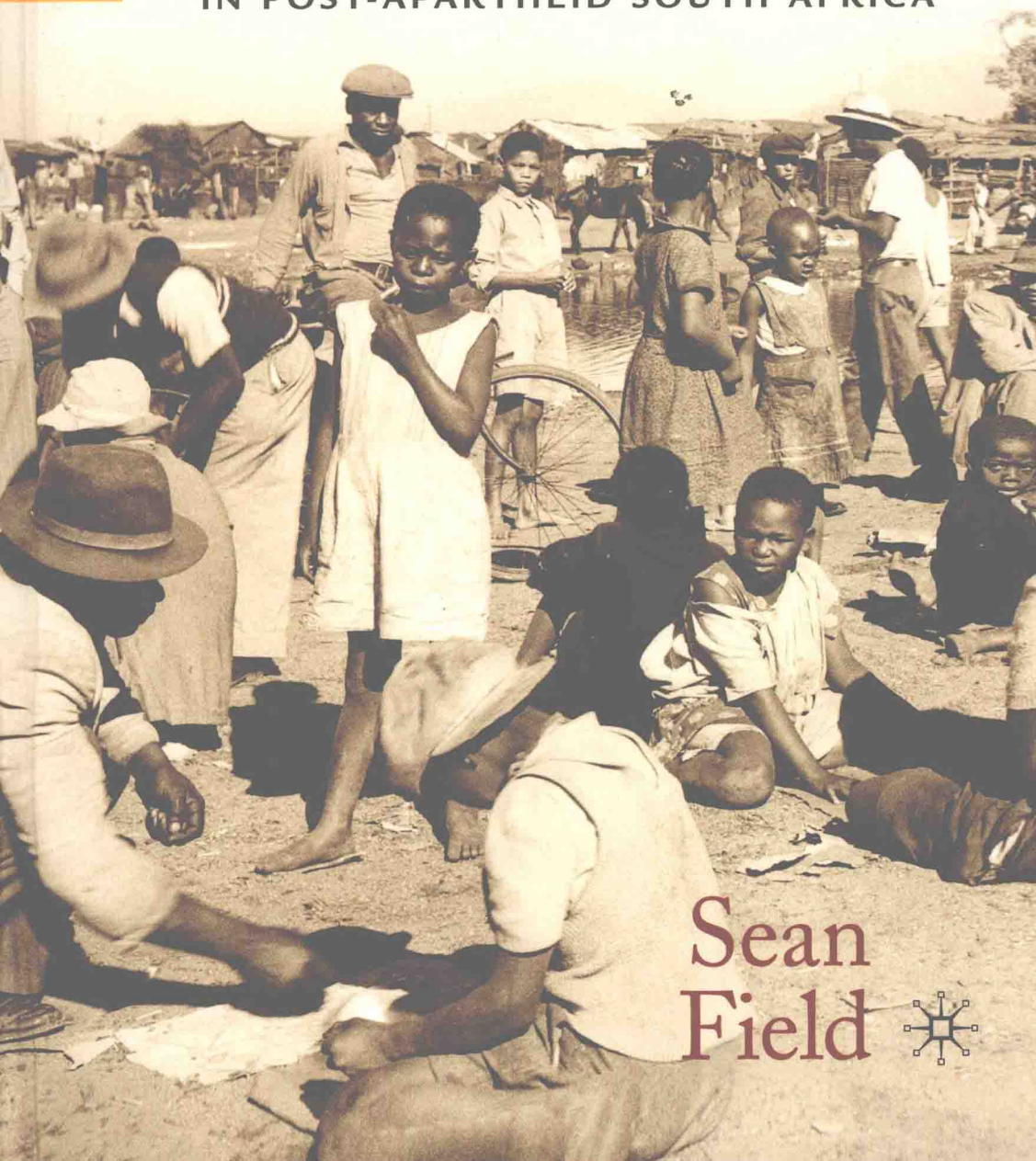


# Oral History, Community, and Displacement

IMAGINING MEMORIES  
IN POST-APARTHEID SOUTH AFRICA

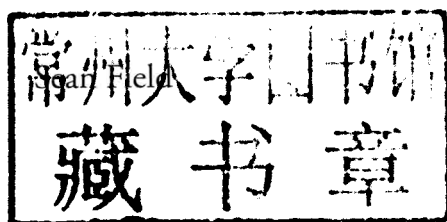


Sean  
Field

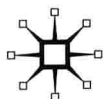


# Oral History, Community, and Displacement

Imagining Memories in Post-Apartheid  
South Africa



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ORAL HISTORY, COMMUNITY, AND DISPLACEMENT  
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*This book is dedicated to Vincent Kolbe and to all the interviewees*

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## Series Editors' Foreword

*Oral History, Community, and Displacement: Imagining Memories in Post-Apartheid South Africa* brings together eleven essays by South African oral historian Sean Field. Some are original to this volume; others have been published previously, but in books and journals not easily available to an international readership. Aided by what Field refers to as "Framing Notes" introducing each of the volume's three sections, the essays, taken together, demonstrate the evolution of his thinking on a number of key issues in oral history: the complex ways traumatic social changes inflect memories of the past; how imagination and memory, pictures in "the mind's eye," shape oral history narratives; the role of emotion, both the narrator's and the interviewer's, in an interview; the fluidity of identity and agency as they operate in an individual's life and life history; and the multiple meanings of community. Field brings insights from psychoanalytic theory to bear upon the interview process, even as his work uses the language of the humanities to decode what happens when one person asks another to talk about his or her past.

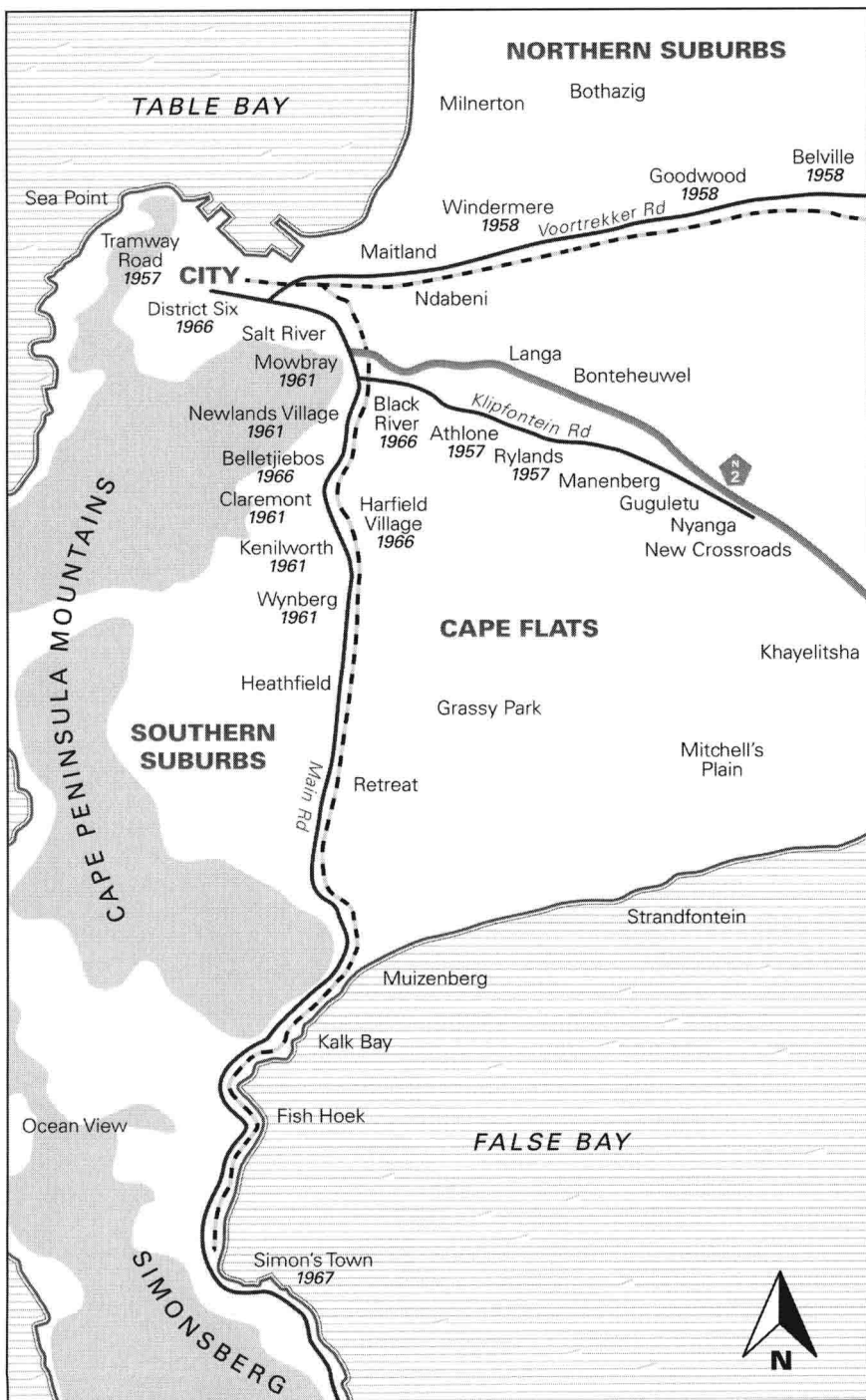
For all their broad significance, these essays are deeply grounded in the South African context; specifically, the Cape Town experience. They focus particularly on the displacements of the apartheid era and on the efforts to create a unified nation since the post-apartheid transition to democracy in the 1990s. The wounds of apartheid, as well as a sense of loss and longing, are evident in many of the interviews Field cites, and his own analysis addresses these issues with both sensitivity and rigor. Especially perceptive are his insights into the limits of South Africa's most well-known effort at an oral history, the Human Rights Victim hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Field avers that fundamental inequalities aren't healed by "telling the truth;" indeed, he notes that these public confessions were circumscribed by a political setting. An anti-apartheid activist in the 1980s and 1990s, Field also understands well the shifting politics of memory in South Africa and elsewhere: he concludes this provocative collection with a passionate argument for oral historians to continue as intellectual activists in ongoing struggles for social justice and human rights.

There is indeed much to ponder in these essays. *Oral History, Community, and Displacement* joins two other recent volumes in Palgrave's Studies in Oral History that make fresh contributions to the broad spectrum of ideas informing oral history practice: *Place, Writing, and Voice in Oral History*, edited by Shelley Trower (2011);

and *Oral History and Photography*, edited by Alexander Freund and Alistair Thomson (2011). In addition, books in the series bring topically oriented oral history out of the archives and into the hands of students, educators, scholars, and the reading public. These volumes are based extensively on interviews and present them in ways that aid readers to appreciate more fully their historical significance and cultural meaning.

LINDA SHOPES  
Carlisle, Pennsylvania

BRUCE M. STAVE  
University of Connecticut



Map of Cape Town with dates of forced removals

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## INTRODUCTION

# Imagining Memories

## Oral Histories of Place and Displacement in Post-Apartheid Cape Town

Dispossession and exclusion lie at the heart of apartheid.<sup>1</sup>

—Lauren Platsky and Cheryl Walker,  
*The Surplus People*

As with any city that has been truly lived in, loved and at times suffered, it is a space coloured by memory, ambivalences, disaffections and obsessions. But this is what is meant by a city *imagined*.<sup>2</sup>

—Stephen Watson, *A City Imagined*

Of course I remember the knock at the door, my grandmother, she looked after me. And I was next to her and two uniformed gentlemen... one of them just said, “Is Mr. Solomons here?” She did not say anything. She just burst out into tears.<sup>3</sup>

—quoted in Sue Valentine and Siviwe Minyi,  
“The Knock at the Door”

Apartheid displaced people. Apartheid killed people. Apartheid impoverished people. Apartheid assaulted their self-esteem through systemic racism and other forms of painful discrimination. This list of ways the apartheid system hurt people is infinite. These repetitions of the similar and not so similar hurts make the point that emotion and feeling, especially different forms and degrees of pain, need to be engaged with throughout analyses of the South African past. Histories of apartheid that exclude emotions, especially the feelings of people who suffered the oppressive