Isabel Hofmeyr. *We Spend Our Years as a Tale that is Told: Oral Historical Narrative in a South African Chiefdom.* Johannesburg: U of Witwatersrand P, 1993. Pp. xiv. 328.

Isabel Hofmeyr's *We Spend Our Years as a Tale that is Told: Oral Historical Narrative in a South African Chiefdom* brings together this author's keen and critical orientation towards place, fragments of historical narration, and memory. Hofmeyr's book rests upon a fairly simple proposition. As she suggests in her introduction, a very great deal of our sense of the past and of the stock of our own lives is expressed as a connected story, in the common determination that "we imagine the passing of time through the aid of narrative" (xi) or the rotations of storytelling. No less, obviously, historical narratives are not simply a constellation of inherited knowledge and "custom" or "tradition" which tell of past times and mediate a timeless understanding of the past: the stories, and those who transmit them, are also moulded, often buffeted, by the passage of time and the heavy gusts of changing social conditions.

Naturally, then, these considerations bear particularly heavily upon the Transvaal African chiefdom which forms the core of this book, where oral narrative and what Hofmeyr mystifyingly calls one of its "subsections," historical narrative, have been deeply scored by the footprints of colonialism and the grubby use-values of capitalism. "In such a community," notes Hofmeyr, "the relationship of story to history is particularly complex" (xi). What follows is an immensely learned and sensitive exploration in unravelling that relationship, in a text drawing on SeSotho or Sindebele, as well as Dutch, German, and Afrikaans in effective English translation. Hofmeyr's central theme of African oral storytelling, enculturing literacy, and the tangled construction of popular historical narrative is buttressed by thirty-four photographs of places and people, some of them by the talented University of the Witwatersrand social documentary photographer, Santu Mofokeng. Almost one hundred pages of this work are also given over to several lengthy appendices, in the form of full interview oral narratives. These are likely to be of additional interest to those wanting to follow the muses of folklore beyond the boundaries of Hofmeyr's analysis, but you would need to be as keen as mustard specialist to wade through this ponderous supplementary material.

Hofmeyr's overall understanding of the place of oral literature in South African studies is outlined cogently towards the end of this study (180-81). She points out, quite rightly, that racially constituted analyses of the development of South African society have, "with good reason," clasped "more materially based interpretations of inequality and apartheid," long on a habituating framework of "economic determinism." Understandably, this perspective on South African historical development has trouble in accepting "a detailed concern for words

and their impact in the world"; trouble in coming to terms with topics which are seemingly lightweight or elusive; trouble in bothering about "discourses" which are invariably pretty far removed from the obtrusive historical forces (social structures, economic relationships, and institutional power arrangements) which "shape people's lives;" and trouble (although Hofmeyr would not herself say this) in accepting the novelty of claims by "deconstructing" literary scholars that historians are deaf to the hidden rumblings of "texts." For the most part, this in effect often amounts to re-inventing the wheel at the expense of comprehensible syntax and grammar. For any historian worth his or her salt has always "read between the lines" in appraising sources.

This aside, it is moreover suggested by Hofmeyr that when one switches attention from orthodox historical research to "those whose business it is to interpret texts and words," one rapidly runs dry on a dreary combination of "a tradition of literary studies" hopelessly in love with the written page or "a canonical range of literary texts," and a new "array of reborn literary formalisms," uncontaminated by anything other than immersion in the text. Against this, she argues their case for tackling "questions of discourse and historical change" with level-headed persuasiveness and not a little committed passion. So, as a challenge to "the text-centred literary status quo in South Africa," her brand of literary scrutiny of oral historical narrative connects ineluctably with the currency of change over time which is at the heart of *real* history—how best to make sense of the material chaos of the past, what to select as decisive in political consciousness and conduct, how to sift the soil of language, norms, and values over the succession of generations.

Judiciously, Hofmeyr is at pains to underline the respect with which South Africa's black rural communities "view words as a form of eloquence and power," while at the same time insisting upon the need to encompass not just the imagined but the real: to "see context as a very material reality." An overarching insistence upon this correspondence lies at the middle of this book's coherence as a work of social history encased within a literary or cultural studies format. Taking as its central thrust the theme of African oral storytelling, the encroachments of missionary-driven literacy, and the constantly evolving construction of popular historical narrative, *We Spend Our Years as a Tale that is Told* ponders the engrossing symbolic modes and cultural attributes of oral storytelling in a clump of Northern Transvaal rural communities, within the sanctions and exchanges of a long and mostly agonizing historical context. This provides a way of grappling with a fascinating issue: essentially, what a set of regionally specific African understandings of local nineteenth- and twentieth-century history might be, and how these have changed across the encrustations of historical time. Naturally, Hofmeyr's concern is less with how predominantly oral communities can unearth submerged "facts" about their past through his-

torical memory, than with the drawn-out, frequently convoluted, ways in which the nostalgias, hopes, and resentments of the past are understood and interpreted by men and women along the transmission belts of paternal and maternal narrative.

This provides, apart from anything else, a substantial evocation of the vigour of intellectual traditions arising from within a precolonial, non-written Southern African culture, a "discourse" of inherited historical knowledge so deeply assumed that some of it lies almost beneath the level of articulacy. A large slice of this book, then, is devoted to unpicking the ambience and *mentalité* of an "active storytelling tradition" in Hofmeyr's chosen locality, Mokopane or Valtyn, a sickly Ndebele-Sotho chiefdom near Potgietersrus in the Transvaal. An agrarian society somewhat older than the Mauser or Martini-Henry rifle, Mokopane had its lands pinched by increasingly ascendant nineteenth-century Transvaal trekkers. Parties of mounted Boers in the 1850s mounted cattle and slave-raiding sorties, resulting in low-level warfare with the aroused Ndebele, with the Mokopane chiefdom resolving in 1854 "to pull out the nostril hairs" (as recalled in one version [43]) of the Boer commandant. Not easily curtailed, the Boers besieged Mokopane in a violent episode, out of which bubbled a pool of oral historical narrative, clustered around renditions of the Makapansgat Siege. Here, Hofmeyr shows quite brilliantly how the traffic of historical memory has passed between the literate and the oral, the institutionalization in print and the reflexes of remembrance through memorial and monument.

Most of all, this historical encounter has been an arena of conflictual perceptions—of Makapansgat as a grisly emblem of Boer violence against helpless Africans, or as a notably unsavoury example of African bloodlust in dealing with peace-loving Boers, inscribed in the popular nationalism of Afrikaner historical texts of the 1890s and beyond. And yet, for all this, we are also invited to identify striking similarities in the Makapansgat story traditions of dominant, chiefly, Ndebele and Boer traditions. Both Mokopane legend and Afrikaner traditions ground respective historical memories in the figurative importance of landscape or topography in knitting together their conceptualization of the Makapansgat Siege; equally, stories within both Boer and African worlds carry non-conflictual messages of mutual interaction and honourable transaction. The normally dyspeptic Boer leader, Hermanus Potgieter, trustingly leaves cattle in the care of Chief Mankopane. For his part, Mankopane preens himself in a suit donated by Potgieter. Against the grain of most historiography on rural Transvaal societies which has tended to focus exclusively on differences and inequality, this study argues that "despite their overt differences and unequal status, Boer and African societies do enter subtle forms of exchange that are not purely military and economic but are also cultural and intellectual" (159). Both rural societies were constrained within a com-

mon field-of-force which included levels of interdependence. Or, to put it more robustly, pot-bellied rural patriarchs of South Africa's nineteenth-century highveld could certainly find areas of commonality across racial lines.

Through the decades of the present century, up to the final years of the annual forced population removals figures with which the wretched National Party weighed the lives of its post-1950s Bantustan dwellers, Hofmeyr deftly traces stories and story elements which turned their instruction—of kin relations, say, or the morality of household obedience—within a shared communal space. Not all of their content has been "specifically concerned with recording information from the past," still less "overtly historical" (94), but they still carry the unavoidable residue of historically-inflected understandings. Thus, the command of hunting skills as a shaft of masculinity obviously forms landmark instructional stories, because that whole universe of usages, and the fierce taking of wild resources, is now just a wistful memory in an ageing rural Ndebele head.

While devoting due attention to such shrinking yet persistent strains of "traditional" oral narrative performance, *We Spend Our Years as a Tale That is Told* is especially vivid and interesting on orality and the oral performance culture of Valtyn in relation to its incremental engagement "with a literate culture" (43). The first vectors of literacy and education were nineteenth-century Boers and the Biblical copyholders of the Berlin Missionary Society, providing sections of the Mokopane population with a new habitus, or field of social play and schooling possibility, in which oral and literate culture could now co-exist, co-influence, and contend over community life and its meanings. In a fine chapter on "The Spoken Word and the Barbed Wire," Hofmeyr charts the workings of Mokopane's oral memory and rights of commons as a husk, whose kernel was being nibbled at by the written imperatives of state political authority. In proclaiming their rural betterment intentions through the letterhead and date stamp "durability and . . . fixity of the written word," white Native Commissioners of the 1920s confronted, in a myriad ways, exasperating opponents of capitalist "progress" who remained jealously possessive of their claim upon the traditional "flexibility of oral contract" (65). For, here in Valtyn, property understandings were "transmitted, conferred and negotiated by oral testimony and contract" (73), and not through the spiky grid of boundary fencing and enclosure, of the kind inscribed within the Union of South Africa's Fencing Act of 1912.

Inevitably, in the long run, the smouldering opposition between oral understandings of land boundaries and usages and that of pencil-driven Native Affairs officialdom was bound to prove an unequal contest. Any mediating dialogue was ultimately a dialogue of the deaf. But fencing out the social vocabulary of orality, or caging the spoken word within barbed wire (to use Hofmeyr's astringent metaphor) was not to

be lightly accomplished. However doomed the attempt, the inhabitants of the chiefdom gamely "mobilised" the porous "resources of an oral performance culture" against the hardening "literacy" of the fence (77). In this struggle, the often wily Ndebele chiefly elite did not shrink from annexing to their purposes the recognized forms of a documentary culture: characteristically, the letter from the chief to the Native Commissioner. And yet, while thereby inserting themselves into a literate universe, Mokopane chiefs and their loyal coteries deliberately dipped their documents "in the stream of orality," in effect subordinating them to what they considered to be the higher moral charter "of an oral world" (62). So the tendency was to write as one spoke, seeing the function of the letter as a conversation rooted in necessary reciprocity.

Finally, Hofmeyr's grasp of the manner in which the gradations of gender underscore and ultimately pervade the attributes of historical storytelling is everywhere present in this work. Taking as a postulate the notion that for precolonial and preindustrial South African societies the social sphere of storytelling "contributed much to the informal power of women" (30), the book shows how the socially lubricating circuits of female and male narratives have been stretched or broken by the traumatizing march of contemporary history. For men, by and large, the telling of folk tales of historical legends was the usual business of masculine lineage and the bonding of male custom, in which the older knights of the *kraal* handed down the real story of the chiefdom's past to adoring young initiates. Men gathered in the courtyard or *kgoro* to be mesmerized by stories of war or stories of the hunt.

On the other hand, women's storytelling not only ran alongside that of men's, but also transmitted a similar corpus of folktales and historical legends. While less portentously public, the tissue of its larger lifecycle focus (childhood, initiation, and marriage) actually made it a more fertile source of wider historical beliefs. Yet, while the so-called "true" historical stories related by Ndebele men and the imaginary narratives associated with women often ended up rubbing alongside each other significantly, female transmission of stories was judged a lesser craft, part of the subsidiary vocation of household and children. "Despite being similar to male storytelling," Hofmeyr concludes, "women's narrative labour was less valued, just as their cultivation work could never match the glamour and prestige of male cattle keeping" (36).

In terms of the longer run fate of Mokopane storytelling, these different gender paths have had a strikingly poignant outcome. The more muscular tradition of male oral narratives has been mostly damaged by the ruptures of labour migrancy and the mass forced removals of apartheid. The courtyards which had been the cockpit of male storytelling were remorselessly bulldozed by the Bantustans of the 1960s.

And, as a natural consequence, the old skilful theatre of their historical storytelling has been uprooted and transformed. Yet, while the social history of twentieth-century South Africa has seen women's cultural craft also change markedly, unlike men, women have been more adept at carrying bits of oral history and historical myth in a more active and influencing way.

What Isabel Hofmeyr's *We Spend Our Years as a Tale That is Told* provides, cumulatively, is a meditative reflection upon the uses of literary and historical methods, here bounded together fruitfully. With this book it is possible to appreciate historical process in terms of the notations of orality and narrative. It is, of course, a specific kind of "discourse" approach to understanding the South African past, but one remarkably close to the humanist materialism of a historian such as E. P. Thompson. Like Thompson in his seminal 1978 *The Poverty of Theory*, Hofmeyr's engagement is with arduously contested levels of articulacy, hierarchies of expressive need, and with the ways in which affective and moral consciousness discloses itself within real historical contexts. Remarkably thoughtful, consistently fascinating, this is a book built on superb and dedicated scholarship. Not least as a tribute to the cultural resilience of a rural black community, it cannot be too highly recommended.

BILL NASSON

Njabulo S. Ndebele. *South African Literature and Culture: Rediscovery of the Ordinary.* Introduction by Graham Pechey. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1994. Pp. ix, 161. US $59.95; $19.95 pb.

This collection of essays, written between 1984 and 1991, articulates Njabulo Ndebele's thinking about cultural imperatives in the shaping of a democratic South Africa. "The greatest challenge of the South African revolution," he writes, "is in the search for ways of thinking, ways of perception, that will help to break down the closed epistemological structures of South African oppression, structures which can severely compromise resistance by dominating thinking itself. The challenge is to free the entire social imagination of the oppressed from the laws of perception that have characterised apartheid society" (66-67). In these essays, Ndebele develops a critical analysis of the ideological effectivity of cultural institutions, maintaining a rigorous suspicion of both liberal institutions and solidarity work and the different ways in which each can "compromise resistance by dominating thinking itself." Historically Ndebele is poised at the point of epistemological rupture, looking backward to explore and explain the development of certain cultural ideologies, looking forward to signs of a democratic culture.

Ndebele's most sustained argument about the building of progressive culture is developed in relation to fiction, particularly in the first