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INTRODUCTORY ARTICLE

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The case for oral histories of neoliberal Africa

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ABSTRACT

There has been a dearth of oral histories of work and earning a living in Africa, especially during the neoliberal period from the 1980s. Compared to scholarship published more than half a century ago, there seems to be a decline of the use of oral histories to explore the history of the living under capitalism, despite the acceptance of oral histories as an important source and methodology for reconstructing experiences of people. At the same time, the last few decades have seen unprecedented changes across the continent in the working lives of people across generations. Generating substantial bodies of oral historical accounts of working lives would offer invaluable and productive insights into these experiences of change. It would allow a critical analysis of neoliberalism at the incisive level of a person's biography. This collection aims to address this gap. The introductory article serves three purposes. First, it provides the intellectual background to this collective intervention and discusses the usefulness of oral histories in the reconstruction of economic life under neoliberalism. Second, it provides a historiography of oral history covering debates and developments in anthropology and history. Third, it provides an overview of the seven articles – covering South Africa, Zimbabwe, Uganda, and South Sudan – that constitute this volume. Overall, our opening text is a call for the re-engagement with and use of oral histories to document, understand, and discuss work and life under capitalism.

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Oral histories of contemporary economic life and change in Africa – including those of work or earning a living – have, it seems, fallen out of fashion. Notably, oral methodologies, ethnographic fieldwork, and the collection of life histories have become standard tools in the research repertories of scholars ranging from political scientists to cultural studies specialists, and far beyond the anthropologists and historians for whom they have long been a mainstay of research. Yet, there are precious few significant oral histories of the contemporary capitalist period. As far as we are aware, there is no recent, large body of work that collects and analyses oral histories concerning economic and particularly working lives on the continent during the

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neoliberal-capitalist era; that is, from the 1980s onwards. In particular, there is no body of work that resembles – in terms of focus, scope, depth, volume or format – the seminal work of Terkel (1970, 1972, 1980, 1992). Terkel published many oral histories of life under capitalism in the United States. His 1972 book *Working: People Talk About What They Do All Day and How They Feel About What They Do*, for example, has more than 120 entries, each ranging in length from three to six pages. Five decades later, these oral history accounts remain highly insightful. Herein lies the motivation behind our collection: Terkel's format – and the idea underpinning his intervention more generally – is useful for contemporary African contexts too. The richness of the accounts assembled in Terkel's books (and the fruitful debates they triggered, e.g. Frisch 1979) contrasts with the limited material available offering oral histories of work under neoliberal capitalism. This motivated us to re-engage with oral history as format, method, and data to document, understand, and discuss dynamics of life under contemporary capitalism. We thereby make a broader analytical (and political) case for the usefulness of oral histories of neoliberalism. In this volume we assemble articles that allow us to explore the contribution that oral histories can make to scholarly and public debates about neoliberal Africa.

A notable exception to the dearth of oral histories of working lives during neoliberalism is Alvarez's *The Work of Living: Working People Talk About Their Lives and the Year the World Broke* (2022). The book is based on interviews with ten different workers (of all stripes) in the US, focusing on their working lives and personal working experiences during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Alvarez asks how people's experiences of the pandemic will be remembered, what will be remembered, and whose voices will be recorded. The issues Alvarez raises are highly relevant to the history of neoliberalism as well:

> In the future, we'll need to remember how we felt about this a*s it was actually happening to us*. Because those who aim to capitalize on it will tell us to remember it differently, or they'll have us recall only very select parts of the experience. The question for us then . . . is: *What* will we remember, and *how* will we remember it? . . . [W]hose voices will go on the record? Who will tell the story of what happened here? How will they tell that story? What will they focus on? And what will we care to listen to? More importantly: How will we each see ourselves as participants in and shapers of this history? . . . I think we should all be deeply suspicious of any retelling of human history that leaves little room for, or deliberately excludes, the messy complex lives of the working people who lived and made it. (Ibid, 2022, ix-x, emphasis in original).

Given the above, the current lacuna is a scholarly problem for several reasons. Firstly, it is a problem of record and analysis. The last few decades have seen unprecedented changes across the continent in the everyday working lives of people. This applies across generations. Generating substantial oral historical accounts would offer invaluable insights into these experiences of change. They would show how protagonists manoeuvre around as well as understand, reflect on, and assess these changes and the resulting social order, and their place in it. This would record capitalist transformations – the reordering of the economy and society – unravelling at the level of a person's biography, as opposed to, for example, economic or social sector. Secondly, oral histories can re-open, and refocus attention upon questions of voice, self-making, and representation, and more broadly of inclusion, humanism, and equality, which profoundly animated Africanist scholarship

a generation ago through the works of scholars like Henige (1982), Miller (1980), Tonkin (1992), Ogot (1967), and Vansina (1965, 1985), among others. These questions are no less urgent, but receive less attention today (but see e.g. Benson 2007; Barber 2018; Česnulytė 2019).

Thirdly, such oral histories and their analysis could enrich debates about neoliberalism across Africa, extending, deepening, and nuancing them. Put differently: how can we expect to more effectively hear, listen, and understand the impacts of neoliberal transformations (and crises) without oral histories? Fourthly, we examine the effects of neoliberalism on the African continent. We argue that there is much to be learned about the character of global capitalism from experiences across Africa (Harrison 2010a; Comaroff and Comaroff 2011). This includes effects such as: mass unemployment; a growing demographic of people who face the prospect of a life without a formal job (Monteith, Vicol, and Williams 2021); the weakening of welfare-ism and the rise of austerity budgets; the advancement of privatisation and commercialisation; the evacuation of state responsibilities for education, healthcare, and workers' rights; the extensive destruction of public education, and so on. Significantly, some of these changes have become pronounced earlier in Africa than in, say, parts of the 'Global North'. This is another reason for the global significance of oral history material from African countries.

This collection offers a small step towards the larger need to address the highlighted lacuna, by presenting oral histories of work and economic life drawn from seven case studies in South Africa, Zimbabwe, Uganda, and South Sudan, from the late 1980s to the present. In the rest of this introduction, we will briefly consider the relationship between the collection of oral histories and changing theoretical foci in history, anthropology, and sociology and offer a brief overview of neoliberalism, before considering in more detail the specific articles in this collection.

What is neoliberalism?

Neoliberalism can be conceptualised as a current variant of capitalism comprising a set of ideas, ideologies, policies, techniques, and discourses that promote particular forms of governmentality and social, economic, and political practice. These are marked by an emphasis upon marketisation (and corresponding transactional logics), the transformation of class relations into a form where capital dominates labour, and through which capitalist social relations are universalised. Beyond merely an economic system that trumpets notions of the 'free market' above all other forms of value, it can be regarded as a social engineering project that seeks to forge a market society (and more broadly market civilisation) and advance the financialisation of (re-)production, and often highly exclusivist regimes of accumulation (Gill 1995; Harrison 2010a; Eagleton-Pierce 2016; Fine and Saad-Filho 2017).

While most accounts of neoliberalism agree that significant societal transformations are key features of neoliberalism (c.f. Harrison 2005; Brown 2017), different perspectives emphasise different core agencies responsible for effecting such changes (state, corporation, etc.) and/or the different aspects of the changes they can provoke (economic, political, cultural, and so on), and why. Neoliberalism has been promoted via policies, programmes, and discourses (including academic scholarship), but also through 'harder' measures, like targeted financial flows, infrastructural projects, and conditional loans and

debt relief. Whatever the particularities of specific contexts, neoliberalism has generally triggered profound changes across all realms of society, economy, polity, and culture (Harvey 2007; Bush 2007; Dardot and Laval 2013). The results of reforms are particularly evident and embodied in everyday practices, discourses, and imaginaries, which is why an analytical focus on neoliberalism in practice is regarded as useful (Harrison 2010a), and why, again, oral histories of neoliberalism across Africa matter.

Harrison (2005) argues that neoliberalisation is about the creation of a full-fledged market society, a process that is characterised by the marketisation of social relations (i.e. making them more exchange like), a power shift to and resulting hegemony of capital (especially large corporations), and a corresponding restructuring of people's subjectivities, relationships, and everyday practices (see also Hathaway 2020). Further, Cahill and Konings define neoliberalism as a 'new institutional architecture for managing capitalist social relations' (2017, 19). After over 30 years of embedding, locking-in and naturalising neoliberalism, scholars now also talk about a mature neoliberalism or 'instituted neoliberalism' (McMichael 2017).

The neoliberal state is conceptualised as a market, competition, corporate or governance state (Cerny 1997; Harrison 2004; Robison 2006); pro-capital and -marketisation. Its central role is to remove obstacles to capital accumulation (Gamble 2006) by restructuring of economy, society, and polity. Neoliberalism has tended to come with modalities of 'liberal democracy' in many countries, and also in some contexts, a recently-more-noticeable authoritarianism (Dean 2002; Bruff 2014; Boffo, Saad-Filho, and Fine 2019; Harrison 2019). Gago (2017) conceptualises a 'neoliberalism from below' to foreground how people on the margins are incorporated into neoliberalism (whilst also subverting it).

A strand of the literature focuses on the cultural and moral changes that neoliberalisation triggers (c.f. Muehlebach 2012; Wiegratz 2016; Bloom 2017). Scholars early on highlighted alterations in modes of thinking, feeling, and behaving (e.g. towards a more pronounced market-conforming thinking), making individual gain making and maximisation the core organising principles of economy and society, and self-interest a hegemonic moral norm. Harrison argues that neoliberal ideology envisages that reforms (via removing constraints on human agency) release 'immanent free-market like behaviour' (2005, 1307).

Finally, a common position in the literature is that markets are central institutions in neoliberal social order; that the 'end point' of neoliberal transformation (according to its ideology) is to organise and run all realms of society according to market-like principles. This envisages an all-encompassing transformation and ordering of society according to neoliberal social doctrine (Dean 2002; Harrison 2005). Gill (1995) coined the terms 'disciplinary neoliberalism' (and 'market individualism') to point to the disciplining effects of 'markets' on states and people. Likewise, Bernards reasons that 'marketisation' in the name of addressing social problems involves 'the conjoined processes by which markets are constructed and through which social processes are rendered subject to markets' (2022, 7).

The case for an oral history of neoliberalism in Africa and beyond

Oral histories of economic life under neoliberalism can make key contributions to scholarship of neoliberalism, including analyses of the forging of market civilisation,

neoliberal subjectivities, earning a living under neoliberal labour regimes, and work in/for the hallmark of neoliberal institutions: the corporation. Workers are prime witnesses of neoliberalism-in-practice. Such accounts can also enrich the oral history literature in general: notably, neoliberalism/capitalism does not feature as a topic in the list of 33 chapter titles in *The Oxford Handbook of Oral History* (Ritchie 2010).[1] Our contributors offer reflections on the usefulness of oral history for the study of neoliberalism.

Although many of neoliberalism's advocates envisage the movement to market economies and societies as a radical societal and cultural rupture of some kind, the forging of new kinds of behaviour, thought, and action centred on maximising individual gain-making and capital accumulation in order to release market compatible behaviour actually reveals neoliberalism's deeper roots in 'modern' European thought. Instead of radical ruptures, neoliberalism is shown to build upon and reify particular notions of personhood, moral-worth and individual responsibility whose descent can be traced back through a diversity of 20th- and 19th-century thought; from Hardin's 'tragedy of the commons' (1968) and Weber's 'protestant work ethic' (1958), to the 'social contract' and 'state of nature' theorists of the European enlightenment, like Locke and Rousseau. This serves as a useful reminder that across Africa and elsewhere, neoliberalism has nearly always been built upon earlier, 'modern' notions of personhood, moral propriety, responsibility, and economic value already in circulation in late colonial and early postcolonial contexts. Oral histories of working lives in the neoliberal period are useful in this regard as they reveal longer endurances (as well as ruptures) involved in the forging of new subjectivities, new forms of work, new notions of moral propriety, and new aspired-to imaginaries and futures.

In addition, we make our intervention against the background of several other debates. Firstly, there is a position in some academic and public discourses – articulated since the late 2000s – that neoliberalism is dead, has collapsed, has ended, and that we live in or are transitioning to a post-neoliberal era (Smith 2008; Comaroff 2011; Jacques 2016; Meadway 2021). This is a contested claim (Harrison 2010b; Crouch 2011; Madariaga 2020; Mirowski, Plehwe, and Slobodian 2020; Galbraith 2021; Šumonja 2021). We do not have space to engage with these arguments in detail (c.f. Davies and Gane 2021) but point out that whatever one's position on this question, oral histories of working lives during the 'neoliberal' period (including the height of the neoliberal turn in the 1990s-2010s) remain productive and much needed for reasons outlined above and below. We note too that fresh, nuancing accounts of the history and plurality of neoliberalism – of market civilisations and radical capitalisms – in the South are being published up to the present date, well into the 2020s (Slobodian and Plehwe 2022).

Further, many countries in Africa are not 'post-neoliberal' - however this might be defined – and continue to operate as neoliberal societies, in economic, cultural, social, and political terms, and perhaps much more so than countries in the 'Global North'. Various strands of scholarship – focusing on 'hustling', debt, entrepreneurship, and commercialisation, for example, as well as, mining capitalism, racial capitalism, neo-coloniality – offer evidence of expanded, deepened, and intensified capitalism across the continent; of economic worlds profoundly shaped by 'neoliberal' reforms, agendas, interests, ideas, and agencies (c.f. Amaeshi and Idemudia 2015; Donavan and Park 2019; Kimari and

Ernstson 2020; Bhagat 2020; Wiegratz et al. 2020; Oyedemi 2021; Al Dahdah 2022; Pier 2022; Langley and Rodima-Taylor 2022).

Secondly, there is another body of work which argues that scholarship on neoliberalism itself has become exhausted and futile; that everything there is to be said about it, already has been; and that neoliberalism's (causal) influence is overrated, so that further research will only result in marginal insights of relevance; and that we should move on analytically (c.f. Springer 2016). We disagree here as well (see also Dean 2014; Davies 2016a, 2016b). The conceptual lenses of neoliberalism remain highly relevant given that the political, moral, social, economic, cultural, and psychological worlds of millions of people continue, perhaps more than ever, to be impacted and structured by forces, programmes, institutions, techniques, ideologies, practices, values, and norms associated with 'neoliberalism' (Harrison 2010a; Ferguson 2010). What we face, see and study now is a 'late', (more) institutionalised and fully-fledged neoliberalism. It is also a more embedded and locked-in, and sometimes popular, common-sense kind of neoliberalism (Harrison 2010a; McMichael 2017; Wiegratz, Martiniello, and Greco 2018). African experiences are important for what they reveal about the vagaries of neoliberalism's multidimensional effects and transformations.

Thirdly, with the IMF (and its conditionalities) now 'back' in full force on the continent; Fintech and platform capitalism (Uber, TikToK, AirBnB et al.) the talk of the street in many African cities; life in debt increasingly the order of the day in many contexts; banks and other international corporations (now heralding from China, Russian, India and the Middle East as much as from the 'the West' or the 'North') dispossessing people at high-speed; can we identify this state of affairs as 'post-neoliberal'? Further, with tycoons/the rich/Big Business (i.e. key representatives and allies of the local and transnational business class) in positions of political power; and education, health, and arts sectors significantly privatised, marketised, commercialised (and often neglected by the state); can we conceptualise this as 'post-neoliberalism'?

We don't think so. Instead, we regard the present constellation and its key features as another phase of neoliberalism, after nearly four decades of neoliberalisation (as an overall frame and direction of travel) across Africa. A neoliberalism that has remained in place over generations yet has constantly transformed in particular contexts (bringing new differentiations, social forms, practices, etc.) points to matters of internal sequencing and patterning, rather than the emergence or existence of a 'post-neoliberal' Uganda or Kenya, for example (Harrison 2010a, 2010b; Wiegratz, Martiniello, and Greco 2018). Giving attention to such internal sequencing and patterning is obviously relevant for oral historical analysis.[2]

Given the above, strong oral histories of neoliberalism's broader societal and political as well as economic affects, abjections, and often undelivered promises, have much to offer. Oral histories of economic and working life can generate more nuanced understandings of ordinary people's experiences of the myriad challenges provoked by neoliberalism in Africa. The potency of such oral histories of the living lies in how, through the medium of oral interviews, both the interviewer and the research participant co-create knowledge. This results in the production of rich and nuanced knowledge about those mundane aspects of life that often get missed in or silenced by other sources. However, oral histories also present challenges to do with the politics of representation. It is

therefore important to reflect on and address concerns about whose voices, whose lives, whose experiences, and whose histories are represented in oral histories.

Why and how oral histories? Lessons from anthropology and history of Africa

Oral history has gone through several paradigmatic shifts since the post–Second World War period, influenced by developments in fields including history, literature, psychology, and memory studies (Thomson 2007). Meanwhile, proponents of oral history have defended it against critics who see its reliance on memory as its soft underbelly. This argument is based on the misplaced idea that written sources are more reliable than oral sources because text is 'fixed'. According to Thomson (2007, 54):

> the subjectivity of memory provided clues not only about the meanings of historical experience, but also the relationship between past and present, between memory and personal identity, and between individual and collective memory.

We regard this central contribution of oral histories as valuable for the study of neoliberalism in Africa.

Oral histories have continued to be useful as source and method in the reconstruction of ordinary people's experiences through life histories, testimony, and oral historical narratives. As Lamothe and Horowitz note, oral history can offer personal accounts 'that resonate with the broadest themes of human experience . . . [and stories that] insist on the inclusion of ordinary individuals in the historical record and force a democratic understanding of history' (Lamothe and Horowitz 2006, 173, quoted in Freund 2015, 123).

This is important because often accounts of major economic reforms – in Uganda, for example – have been written (at times in the format of biographies) by reform insiders and political, technocratic, or business elites, including current or former key state officials (Kuteesa et al. 2009; Seruma 2014); or published by reform-implicated organisations such as the World Bank (Reinikka and Collier 2001). Oral histories are valuable for generating more diverse, multiple, and often otherwise unheard accounts of people's experiences with neoliberal transformations, and thus can offer more critical accounts of neoliberalism's pasts and presents. Similar to the useful insights Yiwu offered in his book *The Corpse Walker: Real-Life Stories, China from the Bottom up* (Yiwu 2009), one can imagine the potential richness of 'Uganda from the Bottom up'. Such an undertaking – i.e. oral histories of the working poor, the universal class – not only offers a more specific and possibly incisive way to present neoliberalism, it can also offer accounts that differ from the 'storytelling' of corporations and governments, or on social media (Freund 2015), by privileging the voices of ordinary people, and unravelling quotidian aspects of everyday life. Commenting on Terkel's book, Frisch (1979, 76) argued that oral histories reveal 'patterns and choices that, taken together, begin to define the reinforcing and screening apparatus of the general culture, and the ways in which it encourages us to digest experience'.

It is important to highlight that oral histories are not 'out there' waiting to be 'collected' and analysed. An oral historian will have to consider how events and experiences are remembered and retold, or forgotten and silenced, as well as the cultural and political contexts in which the oral histories are produced. Greene (2003) reminds us of the

importance of whispers and silences in oral history and the 'un-remembered' histories that can only be revealed in specific contexts. As Portelli (2018, 248) puts it, oral history is 'a document that we do not find but rather cocreate inside the interview, and that we read and interpret on many levels'. The collection and generation of oral histories thus involve reciprocal processes that are characterised by affect and 'structures of feeling' (Williams 1977) as well as by 'an exchange of gazes' (Portelli 2018, 239). The key question we ask, therefore, is: How can oral histories of economic life during neoliberalism be co-created and help shed more light on the experiences of people of neoliberal processes in African countries from the 1980s? In attempting to answer this question, we draw particular inspiration from Alvarez (2022), Freund (2015), Terkel (1972, 1980, 1992), and others who have deployed oral histories to reconstruct quotidian everyday experiences of the economic life across the continent.

There is a long history of the use of oral histories collected or generated through in-depth, time-consuming, qualitative fieldwork across the African continent, using a diverse range of methodologies ranging from interviews and participant observation to the collection of grey literature and different kinds of unpublished personal writings by 'local intellectuals'. 'The Local Intellectuals Series' of the *Africa* journal provides an excellent model of how scholars can 'introduce and analyse' oral histories and other texts (diaries, journals, poetry, novels, etc.) produced by 'local intellectuals' operating outside the academic guild. Historical and anthropological research across the continent, in particular, has long championed oral techniques for generating and remaking African pasts and presents, albeit with notably different trajectories.

Anthropology had a long affinity to oral forms of knowledge through its adherence to ethnographic fieldwork as its core 'methodology' since the early 20th century. However, until the crisis of representation of the 1970s and 1980s, it remained largely obsessed with static, synchronic forms of cultural and social analysis (with a few notable exceptions, like Gluckman and the Manchester school – discussed below, see also Werbner 2020). Meanwhile, in the anti- and postcolonial context of the 1960s it was historians who first identified the value of oral histories for validating, celebrating, and recognising the complexities of African pasts.

More recently, in anthropology, an increasing weariness, if not exhaustion, with the postmodern angst of the 1970s and 1980s, has fuelled a rethinking of the relationships that are understood to pertain between people, technologies, animals and things. This has led to a surge of concern with questions of affect, materiality, actor-network theory, assemblages, phenomenology, and 'ontology', and reconsiderations of the notions of alterity and difference lying at the discipline's core. However fascinating and important the different aspects of this larger 'materiality turn' have been, much of which has driven our own research agendas (e.g. Fontein 2015, 2022), the potentialities of which are still to be fully realised (Fontein and Smith 2023), these new pre-occupations have sometimes had the effect of drawing attention away from the focus on life histories, biographies, and personal narratives that pre-occupied the earlier 'crisis of representation' generation. At the same time, discourses of 'development' and 'globalisation', and the varied critiques that have emerged of them (particularly in anthropology's uncomfortable sibling 'Development Studies') often seem to have replaced critical materialist analysis of neoliberalism and the complexities, dynamics, transformations, precarities, and brutalities of late capitalism, with (at times analytically bland) concerns about livelihoods, governance,

and accountability; or with celebrations of informality, entrepreneurship, and most recently 'hustling' (Thieme, Ference, and Van Stapele 2021), which sometimes lack a self-critical edge and obscure deepening dynamics of privilege and precarity experienced (often generationally) across the continent (Harrison 2010a; Rizzo 2016). This new focus is, of course, different from the earlier traditions of the 1960s and 1970s whose main concern was to justify the use of oral sources and to establish methodologies for collecting and analysing them.

Some scholars do use life histories of various economic actors to run their analysis, and there are, separately, moves towards new kinds of analysis of, for example, money and debt (James 2014; Graeber 2012); and of global articulations of inequality and precarity (Graeber 2018); as well as a new historiographical interest in biography as a form of doing history (Banner 2009). There are also attempts to readdress an emerging normalisation of narrow narratives of national liberation by focusing on less celebrated roots of anti-colonial resistance in mid-20th century, such as the role of African urban associations and labour movements in Southern Rhodesia (Scarnecchia 2008). There remains an urgency, however, to collect and generate oral histories of quotidian experiences of the neoliberalism period since the introduction of structural adjustment in the 1980s. Importantly, the lessons learnt about the 'politics of representation' and the constant 're-invention' or 're-imagination' of 'culture', 'identity', and 'the past' through the work of critical 'post-modern', 'crisis-of-representation' theorists, are still valid today. This means that any oral historical work about the on-the-ground experiences and memories, social relations and imaginaries of the last three decades, needs to remain critically aware of how remembered and re-imagined pasts inform understandings of present working lives and economic futures, and how 'past futures' inform not only how present lives are lived and understood, but also how pasts and futures entangle in everyday working and economic lives in specific historical, social, political, and cultural contexts.

We are cognisant, therefore, that it is necessary not only to understand how pasts shape and partly constitute presents and futures, but also that the manner in which people experience their presents and forge futures to aspire to, is always partly shaped by *how* pre-, colonial, and postcolonial pasts (and particularly the diverse 'past futures' these carried) are remembered and find recursive presence in continuing social relations, and structures of power and opportunity today. In other words, history and historiography are always intertwined, and this, we posit, is particularly true of life stories, biographies, and oral histories. By placing special focus on diverse oral histories of working lives we inevitable centre this proposition, revealing our concern to overcome a chasm that has long presented itself within the study of African history and society, between materialist and political economy approaches and those informed by post-structuralist, meaning-centred analysis; what in the discipline of history has sometimes been understood as a tension between economic and social history; and in anthropology has found traction through distinctions between Marxist, structuralist and symbolic analyses, as well as in ongoing conversations between a postmodern emphasis on the politics of representation and more recent turns towards phenomenology and materiality.

The role of oral history in the discipline of history has taken a somewhat different trajectory from that in anthropology. The work of an earlier generation of Africanist historians in the 1960s-1980s (e.g. at the University of Dar es Salam, the University of Ibadan, or the Centre of African Studies in Maputo) - which was later cemented

theoretically through the work of Vansina (1965, 1985), Henige (Doortmont 2011), Miller (1980) and others in the early 1980s – long ago established the methodological and conceptual basis for doing oral history as a way of accessing multiple, contingent, and emergent African pasts. Pasts that were contemporaneous and entangled with, rather than separated and distanced from, the so-called 'world' or rather European history.

Vansina's *De la tradition Orale* (1961) (translated to English in 1965) became both a manual for graduate students conducting oral history research and a justification for the use of oral sources as legitimate sources of history, and their recognition as part of the African heritage. Newbury (2007) describes the book as 'a manifesto' and 'a call to arms' that laid the groundwork for the professionalisation of the collection and use of oral traditions by historians. It is, however, important to highlight that the local intellectuals whom Vansina (1994) called 'community historians', were already collecting oral histories of their local communities even though they lacked professional training. Although initially sceptical of the value of oral traditions and oral histories collected by 'community historians', whom they accused of taking oral sources at face value and seeking to establish an authoritative text, historians gradually appreciated and made use of these oral sources (Newbury 2007; Vansina 1994). Vansina (1994, 173) later acknowledged that he learnt as much from 'community historians' as he learnt from his academic colleagues. This growing importance of oral sources was also central to and entangled with the debates about the development of African history as a discipline in the post-Second World War period. As White (2000, 11) argued, 'the creation of oral history as an established methodology taught in graduate schools justified the study of African history and gave it the professional credentials that were so essential to academic success in the 1960s and 1970s'. By the time Vansina published *Oral Tradition as History* (1985), oral sources had become an accepted source of history with an established methodology.

These important foundational movements effectively led historians out of the archives and into the field, raising new questions not only about the past but also about how it is constituted in the first place. In the wake of this trailblazing work, and increasingly self-conscious of their own discipline's complicities in colonial projects everywhere, anthropologists, for their part, became both more diachronically aware and much more historiographically anxious. This is what led to the period of ethnographic experimentation made famous by the 'writing culture' school of anthropology (Clifford and Marcus 1986) which produced a series of accounts, focused on the life histories of and conversations with individual ethnographic interlocutors, a surprising amount of whom came from Morocco (Beal 1995; Dwyer 1982; Rabinow 1977; Crapanzano 1985). Later this also led anthropologists to develop new kinds of ethnography in and of colonial archives, reading with and against the grain of partial fragments of written pasts, alongside or rather in critical engagement with, life histories and oral testimonies (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992).

As both history and anthropology grappled with their own crises of representation, and concerns about voice, life histories came to the fore. As a result, African Studies has built up a rich body of oral histories and biographies of the colonial and early postcolonial periods across the continent (see for example, van Onselen 1996). Albeit that these often placed disproportionate focus on single key individuals (who remain, too often, male politicians of an earlier generation), sometimes such critical perspectives merged effectively with Marxist analyses emergent from parallel analytical traditions, to produce new histories of labour and economic life in the colonial and early postcolonial period (for

example, Raftopoulous and Phimister 1997), particularly, for example, in the work of scholars influenced by Gluckman, the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute and later the Manchester school.

Historians and anthropologists have, however, continued to debate the nature and different repertoires of oral history. White's (2000) book on rumour and history in Central Africa highlighted the need to expand the definition of oral history. White demonstrated how rumour and its different repertoires can be an important historical source in the reconstruction of Africa's colonial experiences – such as labour, colonial medical practices, prostitution, Christianity, firefighting, and colonial technologies in general. White showed how rumours about the practices of all these kinds of workers revealed Africans' experiences and anxieties in ways that conventional archives could not. A few other works have made use of oral histories to reconstruct the economic experiences of women in different historical contexts (Gengenbach 2005; Barnes 1999; Bozzoli [with Nkotsoe] 1991). These works highlight the importance of memory (forgetful and mindful memory), family histories, personal reminiscences, and biography in the reconstruction of the past. Yet we are constantly reminded of the crisis of representation and the pertinent question: 'whose life is it, anyway?' (Hoppe 1993). Our collection connects with these scholarly traditions and discussions and extends the analysis to the neoliberal period.

This collection: oral histories of neoliberalism in Africa

There is a growing recognition of the interconnections, resonances, and entanglements between precarious lives forged in neoliberal contexts across the globe; for example, in the way that recent neoliberal contexts find their precursors in earlier postcolonial, colonial, and pre-colonial structures and mobilities, the legacies of which continue to be efficacious in complex ways today. This recognition of longer histories of connection, resonance, and dissonance – whose complexity we suggest is often manifest most clearly exactly through the complex biographies of working lives – also offers a challenge to conventional, spatial, and temporal orderings that assume the shape of labour relations, experiences of work, and economic lives in the 'south' must follow patterns set in the 'North'. It is already clear that such teleological schemas simply do not work now, if indeed they ever did.

As 'austerity' economics imposed in the Global North after 2008 finds significant echoes in the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) afflicted upon the 'Global South' a generation before (Comaroff and Comaroff 2011), so too an emergent, right-wing 'conservatism' centred around cultural and religious intolerance, racism and inflated anxieties about human mobility in the 'Global North',[3] finds increasing resonance in new forms of 'nativism', xenophobia, and exclusivist citizenship elsewhere. The oral histories of working and economic lives across Africa collected here are therefore of enormous significance not only to African history but also to global history. The need for historically informed understandings of the political economies of neoliberalism as manifest in peoples' everyday lives is therefore hard to overstate.

Yet, just as these biographies and oral histories of working lives do not emerge in the absence of longer histories, rather finding traction and resonance in the enduring presence of complicating pasts, so too do they not emerge in a historiographical vacuum. As Ferguson noted in the late 1990s, modernity's 'malcontents' make sense of their abjection

through their own histories, or more correctly, their own historiographies, in which futures and pasts collapse into or overtake each other; like those workers on Zambia's Copperbelt for whom 'modern futures' became the 'object of nostalgic reverie, and "backwardness" the anticipated (or dreaded) future' (Ferguson 1999, 13). Others working elsewhere in the region have discussed how older aspirations to middle-class respectability entangle in complex ways with the requirements of contemporary cosmopolitanism, just as desires towards 'conspicuous consumption' frequently intertwine with, or grate against, older but enduring motifs of rural belonging as often actualised, for example, through elaborate new funerary practices (Jindra and Noret 2011). As historians of Africa came to realise almost as soon as they embraced oral history, and as already discussed above, historiography and history can never, in the end, be disassembled. One always implies the other (Fontein 2015, 1–24), and in the process conventional, ordered temporalities are easily unsettled, reversed, or collapsed. It is for this reason that understanding contemporary working lives in the neoliberal period cannot, only, be a discussion framed by questions of political economy and 'materialist' analysis. The temporal schemas upon which such analysis is too often construed cannot bear the weight of time in its multiple forms and complexities; as it appears, in other words, in biographies, life stories, and oral histories.

Collecting oral histories of working lives in the neoliberal period therefore necessarily attends to questions about how the past informs, structures, resonates, and affords the present and falls into the future in significantly open-ended and indeterminate ways; and through this, the demands of materialist analysis of political economy necessarily merges with the insights of post-structural and meaning-oriented analysis. This indeterminacy reflects exactly the uncertainties and precarities of working lives on the margins, or rather in the wake or demise of modernity's promise – a promise that has scarcely survived and yet still often informs everyday understandings of working lives in the neoliberal period. It also points exactly to the need to critically explore actors' interpretations and diverse meaning-making regarding what analysts conventionally label and understand as 'neoliberalism'.

That said, we are concerned with the need to critically examine the salience of larger (national, regional, global) political and economic forces and structures across many different contexts, and the extremes of precarity and abjection that these engender, but also with the opportunities and space, however limited and fragile, for 'agency', autonomy, creativity, wealth, voice, and social mobility, that they sometimes offer. At the same time, we are compelled to recognise and properly account for the particularities and diversities of how these larger forces and structures are manifest, experienced, and understood in specific historical, social, economic, and political contexts. These include contexts of migration, urbanisation, conflict and post-conflict situations amid the ongoing expansion and intensification of global corporate capital and related large-scale economic and social transformations and change, incorporating recursive cycles of economic boom and bust.

Against the above background, this volume gathers seven articles exploring oral histories of economic life from different parts of the African continent during the neoliberal capitalist period. The issues that are explored include rural livelihoods, mobility, urbanisation, and change, conflict and precarity as well as postcolonial labour relations. While the first article speaks specifically to questions of how remembered and re-

imagined pasts inform understandings of present working lives and economic futures (i.e. entangled pasts and futures) in specific contexts, other articles speak to how larger political and economic forces and structures are manifested, experienced, and made sense of in the context of migration and urbanisation in South Africa; in the wake of conflicts in the border lands of Darfur and South Sudan, and in northern Uganda; and in the context of continuing struggles to organise labour relations, unions, and workers' rights in post-apartheid South Africa and postcolonial Zimbabwe. The centrality of oral history in the work collated here means that all of the articles speak to questions of entangled, incongruent pasts, presents, and futures in particular contexts.

The first article in the issue, by Kaur (2022, this issue), focuses on rural experiences of neoliberal South Africa through the empirical lens of farmworkers' experiences in the Western Cape. Building her argument around two ethnographic vignettes, Kaur shows how current inequalities between farm workers and farmers are re-shaped, depoliticised, and often reconstituted through discourses and practices of farmworker 'development'. Determined to 'interrogate poverty and development, not as a discourse, a policy, a practice, or even a project, but as a set of interpersonal interactions' (Ibid, 2). Kaur shows how experiences and understandings of present social and material inequalities are shaped by the 'imprints of past paternalism' through the very development projects ostensibly charged with challenging them (Ibid, 3). Far from offering a profound challenge to the structural inequalities of the past, she concludes that 'the neoliberal economy of development produces its own inequalities, perpetuating feelings of worthlessness among the working poor' (Ibid, 14).

The next article in the issue, by Barbosa (2022, this issue), echoes Kaur's discussion of rural Western Cape experiences of the failure of neoliberal 'development' to deliver upon its promises to readdress deep historical inequities. Barbosa's paper however is focused on dispossession and urban migration in Johannesburg, on the other side of the country, in its challenge to neoliberal claims to champion 'freedom'. Focusing on the biographies of two men who moved to Johannesburg at very different historical moments, separated by almost four decades (1976 vs. 2015), Barbosa argues that dispossession remains the most prominent form of 'unfreedom' generated by racial capitalism, which, despite neoliberalism's promises (and like the failures of 'development' that Kaur identifies) is 'reproduced every day in and through cities' and 'lived as alienation' (Barbosa 2022, this issue, 17).

Erwin and Marks (2021, this issue) explore the strategies and coping mechanisms deployed by migrant women to build economic lives in the South African city of Durban. The study is about how refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Uganda, Somalia, Nigeria and Zimbabwe, and from rural South Africa, are establishing and protecting life and livelihoods, making a home and a sense of belonging (including supporting family members back home), and navigating complex entanglements and intersectional identities (gender, race, foreign/migrant, resource-poor, etc.) in the city. They do this while facing hostile institutions, from state bureaucracy and the law to the labour market. They navigate the materiality of patriarchy and capitalism in both opposition/contestation and alignment/conformation with these structures. Dominant ideologies, relations and practices thus get subverted, pushed back, and reproduced. The women strive for agency, independence and freedom (personal and political) and search for predictability in their circumstances, while

facing daily attacks on their personhood, wellbeing, and livelihoods. The oral history data presented here reveals 'an economy that is fundamentally political, and that attempts to individualise responsibility generating further vulnerability and dislocation, and often amplified household burdens' (Ibid, 16). The assembled accounts remind us that working women are not only members of the proletariat. They are also mothers, daughters, friends, and lovers, care providers to fellow migrants, etc.

Moving away from the experiences of migrants who have to come to South Africa to make new lives, the next three articles take us to experiences of displacement, dispossession, and resettlement in the aftermaths of conflict in East Africa, particularly Darfur, South Sudan and Uganda. Kindersley and Majok's (2022, this issue) article examines the effects of cycles of wars that spawned displacements and resettlements in South Sudan and Darfur borderlands and led to the transformation of the economy. Kindersley and Majok examine how conflict, military mobilisation, displacement, and dispossession as well as post-war resettlement and reconstruction, 'created class stratification and individual accumulation and how new propertied and cash-rich classes have invested in exploiting marketisation and a cheap workforce via manipulating laws and controls on land labour' (Ibid, 3). They use oral histories as a resource in the reconstruction of histories of marginalised communities (day labourers, farm workers, charcoal sellers, soldiers, etc.) in a post-war context. They argue that economic transformation in the period between 1990 and 2012 was characterised by dispossession and repossession, mostly generated by the military and militia groups. Kindersley and Majok also highlight how reconstruction resulted in new forms of dispossession in the form of enclosure and privatisation of peri-urban land, and how, as refugees returned home after the conflict, they had to rely on wage labour and Non-governmental organisations to re-establish their livelihoods. The authors draw on different repertoires of narratives, life histories, reminiscences, songs, and poems to weave an analysis of the entanglement of conflict, borderland mobilities, dispossession, livelihoods, work, and inequalities in the context of 'militarised patronage and neoliberal development' (Ibid, 18).

Similarly, Ssali (2023, this issue) also tackles the theme of formerly displaced people's experiences of post-war reconstruction and the implementation of neoliberal policies in northern Uganda. The paper begins with a discussion of the implementation of neoliberal reforms in Uganda after the National Resistance Army (NRM) led by Yoweri Museveni seized power in Uganda in 1986, to transform the economy devastated by conflict. The IMF-/World Bank-initiated SAPs were implemented in phases from 1987. Just like elsewhere in Africa and Latin America, Ssali notes, the neoliberal reforms in Uganda 'emphasised deregulation, privatisation, decentralisation, civil service reform (accompanied by massive retrenchment) and cost-sharing' (Ibid, 3). She highlights how, because of circles of armed conflict, northern Uganda was spared the first phase of reforms and was only included in the second phase from the mid-2000s. This sets the stage for a discussion of the interface between conflict, post-conflict resettlement and reconstruction, and the implementation of neoliberal policies.

Ssali details how, when Uganda's conflict with the Lord Resistance Army ended in 2006 with the signing of the Juba Peace Deal, the country started a process of reconstruction by resettling formerly displaced people and implementing economic programmes which ushered them into a neoliberal economic environment. She argues that life history narratives of heads of households demonstrate the nature and transformations of

livelihood patterns before, during and after the war. Justifying the use of a life history approach to reconstruct poor people's experiences, she reasons that 'life histories empower the respondent to tell their story, deciding where to begin and end, which concepts to use' (Ibid, 7), thus yielding rich accounts that are hard to collect with a more regular mode of interviewing. Ssali demonstrates the efficacy of life history as both a source and a methodology of reconstructing poor people's experiences; her article shows how neoliberalism and the legacies of conflicts permeated all aspects of post-conflict northern Uganda; land, work, healthcare, and so on.

The last two articles in the issue return to the questions of labour relations which preoccupied Kaur's focus on Western Cape farm workers' experiences of inequality in the first article. Brandt (2022, this issue) examines women's experiences and navigations of a neoliberalised labour market in South Africa. These accounts reveal what it means to be a precarious worker, and why, how and to what effect workers struggle to change the problematic working conditions they encounter. She argues that the entire institutional set-up of the current system of labour relations – from employers, regulatory bodies, and bargaining councils and mainstream trade unions – creates conditions of unbelonging that workers face and negotiate.

Brandt employs the analytical categories unbelonging/belonging (that relate to matters of access, rejection and negotiation concerning resources and rights) and control/autonomy for the analysis of conditions created through externalisation, i.e. the use of contractors or intermediaries to employ workers (also known as 'outsourcing' or 'subcontracting'). Using oral histories to give insight into the experiences and ascribed meanings of workers regarding labour market realities and workplace struggles, as well as wider realities of violence and precarity in society, she argues that women workers try to 'reconstitute relations and spaces of belonging on their own terms' (Ibid, 1). Yet when workers do seek autonomy employers resist; defining their practice as 'misbehaviour' and responding through a system of codes of conduct, warnings, disciplinary hearings and dismissals (for 'illegal gatherings') rather than acknowledging the collective agency and interests of workers (Ibid, 7). This echoes Gill's (1995) notion of 'disciplinary neoliberalism'.

Building on the work of Theron and others, Brandt pays analytical attention to a fragmented labour market where people work under highly different regimes. Specifically, she focuses on the lives of 'externalised workers', the outsourced, the contractors – those individualised, casualised, precariatised workers who in today's factory do not work for their 'bosses'/employers but for 'clients'; under a commercial contract and on the client's premises. 'This arrangement changes the nature of the workplace and forms of labour control' and creates 'imposed conditions of fragmented belonging that divide workers and exclude them from formal bargaining processes' (2022, this issue, 5). In response, these workers self-organise, struggle for a departure from aspects of the neoliberal labour regime and demand permanency and recognition (permanent contracts, better working/pay conditions, etc.) from their shadow employer, the 'client': a multinational. Workers thus express the desire for predictability and stability as well as inclusion; that is, a sense of belonging to the corporation. Neoliberalism is analysed as

a system of belonging: a system that creates structures of inclusion and exclusion and punishes actions that are a threat to its chief mode of belonging.

This takes us to the final article in the collection. It is well known that African governments' adoption of the IMF-World Bank's SAPs and its neoliberal policies in the 1980s and 1990s led to the massive retrenchment of workers and the reduction of state subsidies on health, education, fuel, and other amenities. In some contexts, this led to labour unions becoming more radicalised in their engagements with governments with whom they had established a loose coalition at independence. The histories of labour unions, their radicalisation in the 1990s, and their transformation into political parties have received significant scholarly attention, particularly in Zimbabwe (Raftopoulos and Sachikonye, 1997, Raftopoulos and Phimister 1997). However, Gwande (2022, this issue) argues that such scholarship elevated the political unionism of the most prominent labour movement in Zimbabwe at the time, the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU), as the dominant lens through which to understand trade unions and resulted in an important mischaracterisation of other trade unions existing at the time.

Gwande uses biography to explore the history and contributions of an often less accounted-for veteran unionist, Alfred Makwarimba, and his labour centre, the Zimbabwe Federation of Trade Unions (ZFTU), to re-examine trade union politics in the context of neoliberal reform in Zimbabwe. A biographical or life history approach, he argues, helps us infer and draw conclusions as well as reveal unexplored aspects of the evolution of the labour movement and politics in post-independence Zimbabwe, and its reconfiguration under a new ideological thrust imposed by the government under the direction of IMF and the World Bank (Ibid, 4). As the dominant ZCTU radically transformed in response to neoliberal reforms, the Zimbabwean government formed alliances with new splinter unions who eventually established the ZFTU in 1998. Gwande contends that earlier scholarship either ignored Makwarimba's voice and perspective on the labour movement and the effects of neoliberalism or mischaracterised his contribution. Capturing and recovering Makwarimba's voice, he demonstrates how oral history can 'cast new light on unexplored areas of daily life' (Portelli 1991, 47) in addition to giving us information on ignored, neglected, marginalised, and sometimes overlooked people or individuals whose 'written history is either missing or distorted' (Ibid, 47, 50). Gwande uses oral testimony to demonstrate how Makwarimba navigated the tumultuous neoliberal period. He concludes that 'Makwarimba seized the neo-liberal moment, particularly the deregulation and democratisation of labour relations, to propel his trade union career during the 1990s' (2022, this issue, 12). This dimension is missing in accounts of labour's experience during neoliberalism as scholarship preoccupied itself with the ZCTU's role in national politics. Through Makwarimba's recollection of the evolution of trade unionism, Gwande challenges these existing accounts by demonstrating how, under neoliberalism, Makwarimba 'set his trade union career on a new trajectory' (Ibid, 3).

Conclusion

Although inspired by Terkel's seminal work, this collection does not approach Terkel's work in terms of scope, style or depth. It does, however, reopen debate about the efficacy of oral histories, life histories, biography, and personal reminiscences in the reconstruction of ordinary people's everyday experiences of neoliberalism in African contexts. Although neoliberalism has received considerable scholarly attention, particularly the contentious SAPs, there has been a dearth of works that draw on oral histories or seek to understand contemporary capitalism from the vantage point of ordinary people, i.e. working people/classes of labour. Oral histories as both a source and method allow researchers to co-create people's lived experiences of neoliberalism in different geographical and temporal contexts as well as revisiting debates about representation and voice. They allow us to shift the gaze from 'neoliberalism from above' and respond to Gago's (2017) call to explore 'neoliberalism from below' (i.e. people's resisting *and* succumbing to it). As Erwin and Marks (2021, this issue) note: oral histories bring to the forefront experiences of actors that get neglected and/or obscured by dominant discourses and narratives. They illustrate how 'there is no single and predetermined experience of livelihood making in the city' (Ibid, 3). One can arguably extend this (and as papers in this collections show): there is no 'single story', no single experience of neoliberalism (e.g. the neoliberal city, etc.).

Further, the articles in this volume indicate that actors navigate, are exposed to, interact with and negotiate multiple sites and aspects of neoliberalism over long periods of time. Oral histories provide detailed insight into respective matters of structure and context, as well as agency, subjectivity, and perception. They offer insights into the multi-faceted nature of options, choices, experiences, emotions, and practices of life unfolding over time, of complex social and personal worlds in motion and interaction.

In other words, oral histories help to recognise and understand better that capitalism is lived, experienced and assessed 'biographically' by protagonists (and their families), from childhood to youth and through adulthood. The biographical data presented in Brandt's paper (and in several of the other articles), for example, shows how people's family lives, relationships, and care responsibilities shape their economic lives and vice versa; how workers' subjectivities change over time in particular biographical contexts; and how conditions and changes in economic spheres affect household affairs and social reproduction, allowing deeper insight into relations between work, union/organising, and family life. By grounding analysis in biographical details, histories, and dynamics, we gain better understandings of the wider life contexts, challenges, and circumstances in which people's 'agency' takes place, unfolds, and gets (re)shaped; and, more broadly, a better grasp of the multiple, entangled layers and temporalties of life in neoliberal societies.

This in turn, we hope, will help generate further interdisciplinary dialogue about the efficacy of oral histories (in their various forms) for making sense of how ordinary people grapple with the effects of neoliberal policies, reforms, and transformations in different geographical and historical contexts across the continent, and beyond.

Notes

1. There are two chapters with a focus on Africa: on reconciliation and on HIV/AIDS, both in South Africa.
2. Note that policymakers (as well as aid agencies and 'donors') often respond to crises of neoliberalism with more neoliberalism (c.f. Bernards 2022).
3. C.f. oral histories accounts offered by Silva (2019) and Hochschild (2016) for some nuanced insights into the case of the US.

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