

BOOK REVIEW

Cullen Goldblatt. *Beyond Collective Memory: Structural Complicity and Future Freedoms in Senegalese and South African Narratives*. New York: Routledge, 2021. vii + 226 pp. Bibliography. Index. \$128.00. Cloth. ISBN: 978-0367443023.

Collective memory, oral tradition, and life histories are common means through which Africanist scholars access the past and reflect upon its reproduction in present-day contexts. Collective memory offers an alternative to the official historical narratives available in the written documents produced by colonial states. However, memory is no panacea for the biases of the written archive. African states and global heritage institutions co-opt collective memory for triumphalist narratives of resistance to oppression, smoothing the edges of historical dissonance to lend greater credibility to modern nation-building efforts. In *Beyond Collective Memory: Structural Complicity and Future Freedoms in Senegalese and South African Narratives*, Cullen Goldblatt uses “structural complicity” to move beyond the dyads of colonialism and apartheid to give prominence to the ambivalent positions that individuals occupied under these violent regimes. This concept highlights the “intermediary positions in state-created racialized hierarchies, rather than... the intentions or choices of the historical actors who occupied those positions” (2). Goldblatt finds that accounting for social and political complexity within structural historical violence opens up the possibility of more inclusive collective futures.

Beyond Collective Memory compares commemorative sites in Senegal and South Africa, focusing primarily on Thiaroye and District Six. Both sites are internationally renowned, due to the historical injustices they have come to symbolize—the massacre of African colonial soldiers at Thiaroye in 1944 and the demolition of multiracial neighborhoods in Cape Town during the 1960s and 1970s. These sites sync up with global historical narratives of racialized oppression that perpetuate binaries of colonizer vs. colonized in the present. Goldblatt uses an impressive repertoire of materials to amplify the discordant contents and varied stakeholders of collective memory. He is intentional in locating dissonant memories that are irreconcilable with dominant narratives concerning Thiaroye and District Six.

Goldblatt’s multilingual and multi-textual sources constitute a bricolage archive that raises numerous questions about what constitutes an archive and

the inherent instability of archives. This assemblage of texts follows the observation of an informant named El Haj, who stated, “Wherever you dip your hand, wherever you come away with a handful, those are archives” (157). Archival sources include literature, plays, films, defunct magazines, monuments, museum exhibits, historical sites, ethnography, interviews, tour guides, oral history, and urban geography. Goldblatt’s analysis telescopes in and out, weaving close textual readings with broad historical processes to highlight structural complicity in the reproduction of the past. The voices of intermediary figures and ambivalent portrayals of the past expose the tenuousness of dominant narratives of collective memory affiliated with both Thiaroye and District Six.

Beyond Collective Memory consists of an introduction, six content chapters, and a coda. Each chapter compares elements of collective memory across Senegal and South Africa. The chapters progress from popular texts and familiar narratives to the more obscure and esoteric materials concerned with the past. The book opens with a critique of the dominant narratives affiliated with the UNESCO World heritage sites of Gorée Island (Senegal) and Robben Island (South Africa). The second chapter demonstrates how Sembene’s *Camp de Thiaroye* and “Digging Deeper” (a permanent exhibit at the District Six Museum) traded their initial complexity for the simpler binaries of colonial oppressor and oppressed. Later chapters use cinema, movement, and geography to portray how grand narratives of injustice affiliated with these sites obscure the historical experiences of local communities. Interviews with residents portray how complicated pasts have greater local salience than the narratives of colonial exploitation on display at Thiaroye and District Six. These oral sources make it obvious that any analysis of historical sites or collective memory related to colonialism or apartheid in Africa should attend to structural complicity. The final chapter interrogates understudied fiction and magazines to encourage readers to contemplate radical yet ambivalent postcolonial and post-Apartheid futures.

Beyond Collective Memory showcases Goldblatt’s extensive knowledge of Thiaroye and District Six. His careful attention to structural complicity and dissonant memories provides a model for those scholars seeking to escape the gravitational pull of colonial dyads of oppression and resistance. This book serves a wide variety of disciplinary interests, from history and anthropology to comparative literature and heritage studies. A familiarity with the history of Senegal and South Africa would be helpful for prospective readers. In all other respects, this book is an excellent read and a welcome addition to the literature on memory, history, and the legacies of colonial and apartheid pasts in contemporary Africa.

Sarah J. Zimmerman 

Western Washington University
Bellingham, Washington, USA
sarah.zimmerman@wwu.edu

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