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Memorialising the past : unveiling the present: How can memorial museums help us reflect on ‘contemporary forced removals’ in South Africa?

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Abstract

This paper interrogates the purpose of memorialising South Africa's past when the spatial and socioeconomic dynamics of apartheid are still a reality for many South Africans. Specifically, it looks at how memorial museums produce knowledge about apartheid's forced removals while many South Africans continue to face the reality of forced removals through processes of eviction and urban segregation. Can memorial museums actually help us reflect on 'contemporary forced removals', or have they just become 'a house for dead people'? This question is explored through a case study of the Sophiatown Heritage Centre, a museum dedicated to memorialising the stories and experiences of those who were forcibly removed from the suburb of Sophiatown by the apartheid regime in the 1950s and 1960s. The exploration of the Sophiatown Heritage Centre revolves around three central questions: what, how, and in whose interest is knowledge produced and disseminated in the museum space? Turning first to the museum's permanent exhibition, I argue that while the purpose of memorialising the past plays a key role in the South African context – given the deliberate attempt of the apartheid regime to erase the histories of black communities in the country – it is important that memorialisation practices are not restricted to celebrating the struggle against apartheid and the nation's reconciliation, for this may hide from view the continuity of historical processes. Second, drawing on concepts associated with the philosophy of critical pedagogy and the educational methods adopted by the Sophiatown Heritage Centre, I discuss how memorial museums can encourage the public to 'read the world' in which they exist. Finally, I analyse the mission, audience, and operating environment of the Sophiatown Heritage Centre arguing that museums can provide significant spaces for bridging the past and the present and unveiling contemporary forced removals. My main contention is that in memorialising traumatic histories, museums should not foreclose debates about why these events happened and how they may still manifest in the present.