BOOK REVIEW

Christopher J. Lee. *Unreasonable Histories: Nativism, Multiracial Lives, and the Genealogical Imagination in British Africa*. Radical Perspectives: A Radical History Review. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014. xvii + 368 pp. Photographs. Bibliography. Index. $26.95. Paper. ISBN: 978-0-8223-5725-4.

Christopher Lee's important book on multiracial people in British Central Africa has insights that will be appreciated by scholars of historiography, method, colonialism, postcolonialism, racial thinking, and nativism. Indeed, Lee's book provides a model for conceptualizing research projects that use traditional disciplinary approaches and sources—such as interviews, private letters, government documents, and archival records—but are not trapped by colonial epistemologies into excluding histories on the colonial edge of racial visibility.

Lee titles his book *Unreasonable Histories* to call attention to the ways in which the histories of multiracial peoples upset "methodological, categorical, and sociopolitical" approaches to the African past (20). He emphasizes nativism over racism, connection rather than conflict, and ephemeral communities over bounded ethnic groups. Over eight chapters organized into three parts, Lee demonstrates how histories that work against received models can reveal new paths of inquiry and escape the colonial imprint on our thinking. His introduction lays out the conceptual issues at stake in this history, while his conclusion makes a case for reconceptualizing the African past as a matter of urgency.

In part one of the book, Lee frames his approach as writing a "history without groups" in place of the colonial scheme of a native/non-native binary. Lee's revision begins with an argument about the way colonial obsessions with groups has informed academic studies, a point that other scholars have made as well. Still, Lee's analysis is fresh and insightful. In chapter one, he makes the important point that "black peril" cases camouflaged more common, though still infrequent, multiracial sex. In turn, we lost sight of multiracial people. Lee pushes this critique further by writing a history out of ephemeral connections, contingency, and few sources. Lee's imaginative approach recreates a multiracial history grounded in genealogical connections and the opportunities such ties brought. To make this point, in chapter two Lee focuses on the story of an individual woman who exploited the sentimental ties her former lover had for their child to extract goods

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from him. The third chapter analyzes how impoverished and needy children appealed to colonial governments for assistance by identifying their white fathers. Multiracial people were colonial subjects without a group, and so they turned to racial ties and kinship to speak to the state.

The second part of the book contains two brisk chapters that examine the politics and social life emerging from these individual lives. Multiracial people posed intractable epistemological problems for colonial authorities, who could not reconcile their binary idea of native/non-native with the fact of multiracial lives, as seen in chapter four. Other groups of people, such as the "educated native" or the "urban native," also challenged colonial categories, but Lee argues that multiracial people undermined colonial categories more fundamentally by revealing the nativism that grounded the colonial state and its policies. Colonial officials acknowledged the obligations of colonial-era kinship, even as racial genealogies confused them. Still, there were limits to entitlements. In chapter five, Lee explains how colonial authorities established commissions of inquiry into the education and social welfare of multiracial communities rather than extend political rights to them.

The locally-conceived terms Anglo-African, Eurafrican, and Euro-African described the genealogical politics of family descent and imperial loyalty that marked multiracial politics, the subject of part three of the book. In chapter six, Lee discusses the ways that elites used racism and their connection to whites to divorce themselves from Africans, a strategy that was at odds with African elites' campaign against racial discrimination. Multiracial claims were convincing, to a point at least. Lee makes the point in chapter seven that colonial authorities agreed, however reluctantly, that the state had an obligation to multiracial communities. The rub was how to fulfill this obligation without antagonizing either the African or the white communities. In Lusaka, Anglo-Africans put their energy into the struggle for respectable housing, as seen in chapter eight. This scheme failed because low wages could not keep up with even modest rent.

Like the multi-layered project it is, Lee's book can be appreciated on several levels. At its most basic, Lee has inserted multiracial people squarely into the story of Central Africa despite their persistent marginalization by states and scholars alike. At its most ambitious, Lee's book is about how historians can (and should) rewrite the colonial history of Africa. For one, identities can appear and disappear, as happened with the Anglo-African group. Perhaps most significantly, Lee's study illuminates the nativism that guided the political logic of the colonial state, a problem he identifies as central to understanding and reacting to contemporary politics.

There are other gems in the book, such as the well-placed photos, that will attract readers. Above all, Lee's research suggests future projects. For example, Lee allows his characters to be cranky and even unlikeable without painting them as immoral. What does colonial history look like when

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we put people's messy emotional and social complexity at the core of our studies? Lee's book does not provide all the answers, but it should point us forward.

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For more reading on this subject, see:

Sansone, Livio. 2013. "The Dilemmas of Digital Patrimonialization: The Digital Museum of African and Afro-Brazilian Memory." *History in Africa* 40 (1): 257–73. doi:10.1017/hia.2013.4.

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