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## *Review Essay*



# Remembering the Indonesian Genocide, 53 Years Later

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Djoko Sri Moeljono, *Pembuangan Pulau Buru: Dari Barter ke Hukum Pasar*. Bandung: Ultimus, 2017, x + 261 pp. ISBN: 9786028331647, price: IDR 75,000.00 (paperback).

Gregorius Soeharsojo Goenito, *Tiada Jalan Bertabur Bunga: Memoar Pulau Buru dalam Sketsa*. Yogyakarta: InsistPress, 2016, xviii + 248 pp. ISBN: 9786020857114, price: IDR 65,000.00 (paperback).

IPT 1965 Foundation, *Final Report of the International People's Tribunal on Crimes Against Humanity in Indonesia 1965 / Laporan akhir Pengadilan Rakyat Internasional 1965*. Bandung: Ultimus, 2017, 384 pp., ISBN: 9786028331791, price: IDR 75,000.00 (paperback).

Jess Melvin, *The Army and the Indonesian Genocide: Mechanics of Mass Murder*. New York: Routledge, 2018, xxv + 319 pp. ISBN: 9781138574694, price: GBP 80.50 (hardback).

Mars Noersmono, *Bertahan Hidup di Pulau Buru*. Bandung: Ultimus, 2017, viii + 368 pp. ISBN: 9786028331340, price: IDR 85,000.00 (paperback).

Putu Oka Sukanta, *Cahaya Mata sang Pewaris: Kisah Nyata Anak-Cucu Korban Tragedi '65*. Bandung: Ultimus, 2016, xviii + 422 pp. ISBN: 9786028331784, price: IDR 70,000.00 (paperback).

R. Nasution (writer), D.S.W. Yanar (producer), *Pulau Buru Tanah Air Beta*. 2016.

Soe Tjen Marching, *The End of Silence: Accounts of the 1965 Genocide in Indonesia*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017. 219 pp. ISBN: 9789462983908, price: EUR 85.00 (hardback).

Vannessa Hearman, *Unmarked Graves: Death and Survival in the Anti-Communist Violence in East Java, Indonesia*. Denmark: NIAS Press, 2018, xiii + 272 pp. ISBN: 9788776942274, price: GBP 25.00, USD 32.00 (paperback).

In 2016, I had the opportunity to talk to few high school history teachers in rural Malang, East Java. The teachers worked in a private and a religious Islamic school (*madrasah*) located in the southern part of the regency. Some of the area's sub-districts were famously known as the basis of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) and were heavily targeted during the anti-communist military operations of 1965 and 1968. In my conversation with these teachers, I asked how they teach about 1965 in class. The teachers explained that it is the most discussed and debated topic in the semester. The children expressed their curiosity by frequently asking the following question: who was guilty for the 30 September Movement (G30S), during which six high-rank and one low-rank army officers were killed? They asked it as an open question, not blaming PKI for the killings of the officers. More interestingly, some of the students engaged with the narratives of the anti-communist violence by sharing their family stories; about disappeared grandparents, violence experienced by neighbors, or mystical stories of a mass grave in the village. I imagine that this would not have happened thirty years ago, under the authoritarian Soeharto government.

Indonesia's official historiography focuses heavily on G30S and blames the PKI for the death of these army officers, while at the same time excluding all violence committed against the accused PKI members and other Leftists during what can be called a military's annihilation project in 1965–68. However, the discourse on the 1965 mass violence has been transforming rapidly compared to the regime of Soeharto's New Order, as shown in my conversation with the history teachers. Discussions do not revolve around G30S anymore, but have started to unravel the counter-narrative about the violence. This is our memory culture today: while the official narrative remains unchallenged, the violence is

gradually being acknowledged. There are still people who believe in the ongoing threat of communism and remain silent about the violence committed against communists in the past, yet Indonesians are increasingly engaging in discussions about this violence, although they are still in the minority (Eickhoff et al. 2017). Rather than competing with or negating each other, both narratives seem to coexist.

In fact, to some extent counter-narratives about the violence were recognized even under the repressive New Order. It was an 'open secret' that sometimes popped up in official statements, although it was never portrayed as part of a structural project by the military to eliminate the communists. For example, in a 1971 press conference, Soeharto stated that "thousands of victims fell in villages because people acted by themselves, and also because horrible prejudices between groups that have been maintained by shallow political practices" (Roosa et al 2004: 10). Even under a repressive state memory project, the discourse on these killings persists amongst Indonesians through various means. This article discusses how these counter-narratives persist until today, revealing in at least two ways. The first way is through place-related stories: throughout Indonesia, informally circulated stories of 1965–66 violence are attached to particular sites. The second is through the intergenerational transmission of stories of violence within families. Violence experienced by a generation of people travels to the second or third generation not only through verbal communication, but also through silence and people's psychological and narrative strategies of dealing with such silence. The books in this review article will show how sites and families become places where the memory of violence lingers. Before addressing the issue of memory, the article outlines the current debates on the 1965–66 violence.

## 1 The 1965–66 "genocide"

On a conceptual level, there have been substantial debates on the legal definition of genocide, namely as "acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group ...", as stated in The Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (Article II, adopted on December 9, 1948). Scholars in Critical Genocide Studies have reflected on the contextuality of genocide by interrogating the meaning of genocide in the society where it occurs, the victim-perpetrator labels, and the social construction of ethnicity and race (Hinton 2012: 9–10). As these debates continue, scholars investigating the events of 1965 in Indonesia have likewise tried to analyze the mass killings within the framework of critical

genocide. The pioneering work of Robert Cribb, for example, asserts that the definition of genocide should be interpreted critically, emphasizing how ethnic identities are constructed, and notes that Indonesia itself is a political project that does not refer to any specific ethnic character (in Eickhoff et al. 2017: 453). Viewing the 1965 violence as a form of genocide would define that violence as structural and systematically coordinated by the state. This perspective dismisses depictions of the mass killings as merely the result of horizontal conflict between Leftist and Rightist organizations, with a strong influence of religion. Such a group conflict approach emphasizes the passivity of the army, which in certain regions gave protagonists free reign to end pre-existing political conflicts with violence. The massacre continued uncoordinated when local Muslim youths, with the approval of their religious leaders, found an opportunity to kill communists (Sulistyo 200: 244). At the same time, as these previous studies indicate, violence was coordinated by other groups such as politicians, activists (Sudjatmiko 1992: 236–7), and Muslim youth. Other studies point out the regional variety of the roles of the army and civilians, rejecting the existence of general patterns of the killings and the idea of a single responsible party or institution (Roosa 2016: 2). However, these studies have failed to explain how an originally non-violent political rivalry between the Leftist and Rightist factions ended up in nation-wide killings (Farid 2005: 8).

Contrary to the above arguments, analyzing the 1965–66 killings as a genocide is putting forward the military's agency in executing the violence. Regional variation, in other words, did not depend on cultural or social conditions, but on the capability of the army to initiate or exploit local tensions with the aim of destroying the Left (Robinson 2018: 150–2). Sufficient troops, political consolidation between the army and local governments, and the intervention of external institutions—such as the Army Paracommando Regiment (RPKAD) in Central Java—determined the speed of the killings: early October 1965 in Aceh, and late October 1965 in East Java (*ibid.*). However, the biggest problem of this argument lies in the availability of evidence. This limitation has led several researchers to use oral history methods to reconstruct the violence in different parts of Indonesia. One example is the edited volume *Tahun yang Tak Pernah Berakhir* ['The Year that Never Ended'], particularly the chapter written by Rinto Trihasworo (Roosa et al 2004: 25–59). A current publication by Vanessa Hearman, *Unmarked Graves: Death and Survival in the Anti-Communist Violence in East Java, Indonesia* (2018), also used such methods to trace the 1965–66 violence and the Leftists' reactions to it. By examining experiences of survivors, perpetrators and communities in the areas where the violence occurred, she examines how the violence erupted. She highlights that although violence, particularly in East Java, was often portrayed as a horizontal conflict between

Rightists (religious organizations such as Indonesia's prominent Islamic organization Nahdlatul Ulama) and Leftists, the structure and organization of the army were crucial factors in the violence against the Left (Hearman 2018: 80). Besides oral history methods, other studies of 1965 analyze foreign documents to understand the army's involvement in the violence (Simpson 2008, Kammen & McGregor 2012, Robinson 2018). These documents also prove the support of international foreign powers for the Indonesian military to conduct these killings in order to ensure a capitalistic system in Indonesia.

A ground-breaking study came from Jess Melvin on the 1965 violence in Aceh. Her book, *The Army and the Indonesian Genocide: Mechanics of Mass Murder* (2018), presents a thorough analysis of more than 3000 pages of military documents, which she discovered unexpectedly in the Aceh Government Library and Archives. These documents, which Melvin describes as the Indonesian genocide files, proved that the military directed complete "annihilation of the 30 September Movement" (Melvin 2018: 41). The anti-communist military operation in Aceh was launched on October 1, 1965 with the name *Operation Berdikari*. It was conducted by the coerced recruitment of civilians to assist the military, the organization of public mass meetings ordering to kill people associated with PKI, the mobilization and arming of paramilitary members, and the establishment of death squads to assist the military's annihilation campaign (pp. 41–2). Melvin's findings also show that, rather than being the root of the violence itself, religious justifications were used and mobilized by the army in the 1965–66 killings. For example, on December 19, 1965, Sumatra's Inter-Regional Military Commander Ahmad Mokoginta publicly endorsed a *fatwa* released by Aceh's Ulama Council that declared PKI to be unbelievers whose killing was permitted (*kafir harbi*) (p. 47). Furthermore, Melvin points out that the military never mentioned religious rationalizations of these killings in their internal documents, strengthening the assumption that religious justifications were continuously maintained (even in the post-violence propaganda against the communists) to avoid accusations of military's agency. Based on this evidence, and a critical discussion on the definition of genocide, Melvin argued that the 1965–66 killings should be considered as a case of genocide due to the intentionality and structural nature of the military operation.

Outside the academic sphere, a similar argument was also made by the judges of the International People's Tribunal on Crimes Against Humanity in Indonesia in 1965 (IPT 1965). The tribunal took place in The Hague, Netherlands, from November 10–13, 2015. Initiated within the community of its victims (especially those living in the Netherlands) in collaboration with social and human rights activists in and outside Indonesia, they consolidated existing research data to build indictments for the Tribunal. The judges not only found

the “State of Indonesia responsible for and guilty of crimes against humanity”, but also that it had “failed to prevent the perpetration of these inhumane acts or punish those responsible for their commission”. These crimes against humanity include killings, imprisonment, enslavement, torture, enforced disappearance, sexual violence, exile, propaganda, complicity, and genocide. Moreover, the tribunal emphasized that all those acts fall into the category of genocide, because it was intentionally directed to “a significant and substantial section of the Indonesian nation or Indonesian national group”, including specifically to the Chinese ethnic minority (*ibid.* p. 121). Debates on the issue of genocide and the systematic nature of 1965–66 violence are ongoing, but there is mounting evidence supporting the structural command of the military between 1965–1966.

## 2 Sites of Violence, Sites of Memory

After the killings, Indonesia’s military continued to perpetuate the official narrative against communists by establishing numerous commemoration practices. One of them was the creation of a monument-museum complex, called the Sacred Pancasila Monument (*Monumen Pancasila Sakti*) in Jakarta. Opened in 1973 by Soeharto, this complex was intended to depict violence by PKI towards the seven army officers in G30S. Since its establishment, the *Pancasila Sakti* complex has been the center of official commemoration during the Sacred Pancasila Day (*Hari Kesaktian Pancasila*) on October first and also a destination for historical tours and school excursions. It also became a lens for Indonesians to view the successful military operations against communists in the name of defending the nation’s ideology. Similar anti-communist monuments can also be found elsewhere in Indonesia, such as in Blitar (East Java). Vanessa Hearman describes the Trisula monument in Blitar that was inaugurated in 1972. The monument serves as a remembrance of a successful cooperation between the army and civilians during the Trisula Operation to eliminate the remaining PKI members who tried to consolidate power in South Blitar in 1968. They were poorly organized and minimally armed, and therefore easily destroyed by the fully armed troops of the Trisula Operation. Victims were not only the PKI members, but also civilians living in the area (Hearman 2018: 189–191). These monuments can be considered ‘sites of memory’ or *lieux de mémoire*, a concept introduced by Pierre Nora, which are “sites where memory is crystallized, and a residual sense of continuity with the past remains” (Nora & Kritzman 1996: 1). The *lieux* can range from places to objects, but for Nora, an important element of the *lieux* is the intent to remember. Therefore, sites

of memory are not spontaneous but created to achieve a certain purpose. The *lieux* is not static, in the sense that it has the capacity to change, resurrect old meanings, and generate new ones along with new and unforeseeable connections (ibid. p. 15).

The intention of both monuments, in Jakarta and Blitar, was to remember the violence created by PKI, and not the opposite: the deaths of half a million Indonesians in the anti-communist operation. These state-created sites of memory only commemorate “the permissible aspects of the past”, as Klaus Schreiner (2005: 273) stresses. However, if we return to Nora’s concept of sites of memory, then there are also other places that convey narratives of 1965–66 violence. These sites might not be marked, formally commemorated, or acknowledge by the state, but they have become part of people’s everyday lives. Such sites include buildings destroyed in 1965 anti-communist mass demonstrations, mass graves created to dispose bodies after the mass killings, and public facilities constructed by the victims through forced labor (Razif 2004: 139–62). In Semarang (Central Java), the building of Sarekat Islam, the Karang Turi Chinese school, and a mass grave in Mangkang became sites of memory of the 1965–66 violence. The mass grave had been marked with a tombstone, which has engraved some of the victims’ names buried there. People consider the grave a spiritual place, too, because of the supernatural power of a Javanese singer (*sinden*) who was killed and buried there (Eickhoff et al. 2017: 537–41). It is through these sites that the narratives of 1965–66 violence have escaped the grip of the New Order memorialization project.

Another site of memory of violence is located in Buru Island. In 1969, a decree signed by the Senior Military Commander of Operations Command to Restore Security and Order (*Pangkopkamtib*) appointed the island as a temporary detention center for category-B political prisoners, defined as clearly indirectly involved in G30S (Adam 2014: 357). In the same year, around 10.000 prisoners were sent to Buru in different stages. With uncertainty about their detention period, the Indonesian government finally released the prisoners and closed the detention center in 1979 due to international pressure (ibid. pp. 351). After their release, some of the Buru survivors wrote memoirs, the most well-known of which are Pramoedya Ananta Toer’s *Nyanyi Sunyi Seorang Bisu* [‘The Mute’s Soliloquy’] (1995) and Hersri Setiawan’s *Memoar Pulau Buru* [‘Memoirs of Buru’] (2004). These publications describe the harsh conditions in the camp, including labor work to build barracks, roads, and farmland, physical punishment by the commanders, and starvation. As most of the detainees were intellectuals, teachers, artists or even politicians, they had a difficult time adapting to the conditions of the camp. Some of them managed to survive, but others died on the island.

Until now, Buru survivors continue to write memoirs, such as Djoko Sri Moeljono's *Pembuangan Pulau Buru: Dari Barter ke Hukum Pasar* ['Exile to Buru: From Bartering to the Law of the Market'] (2017). Moeljono was born in 1938 and studied metallurgy in Moscow. He worked in a steel factory in Cilegon before he was detained in the Serang prison and forced for six years to rehabilitate the roads in Banten. He was sent to Buru in 1971 and released in 1978. The book is a sequel to his previous memoir, *Banten Seabad Setelah Multatuli* ['Banten a Century after Multatuli'] (2013), which describes his childhood experiences until his imprisonment in Banten. An interesting part of his second book lies in the appendix, where Moeljono tried to build a list of detainees in unit xv between 1977–78, consisting of their names, numbers, birth year, education, religion, political category (B or C), and address. Moeljono (2017: 231–61) admitted the possibility of error in recalling the detainee's names. There are 625 names on Moeljono's list based on his and his friend's memories. Other lists include detainees of unit xv Indrapura, according to their barracks and a list of detainees released in 1978 from that unit.

Other publications on Buru exhibit a different yet equally compelling style. Two authors, Mars Noersmono and Gregorius Soeharsojo Goenito, present their sketches of everyday life during detention. Soeharsojo was born in 1936 and became active in Lekra (the Leftist cultural organization associated with PKI) in Surabaya, East Java. His book, *Tiada Jalan Bertabur Bunga: Memoar Pulau Buru Dalam Sketsa* ['No Flowery Road: Memoirs of Buru in Sketches'] (2016), describes his experience as a young activist and artist of Lekra, where he learned to paint from other artists in the organization. He was detained in 1966 in Surabaya and transferred to Nusakambangan. In 1969, he was sent to Buru along with around 500 other prisoners. Soeharsojo's sketches present a detailed visualization of the camp and its living condition. Even under this repressive situation, Soeharsojo manages to portray his and the other prisoner's agency to survive: from eating rats to creating cultural performances. Noersmono, born in 1939, was an student in architecture from the Bandung Institute of Technology, who became a sympathizer of the leftist student union CGMI (*Concentrasi Gerakan Mahasiswa Indonesia*) from 1959. His book, *Bertahan Hidup di Pulau Buru* ['Staying Alive in Buru'] (2017), tells the story of his days in Buru from 1971, following his detention in the Salemba and Tangerang prisons since 1965. The book contains 75 sketches by Noersmono himself, depicting details of his life in Buru. He describes some of the violence in the camp that occurred because of the illicit trade of timber and eucalyptus (*kayu putih*) by army officers in Buru. An interesting part of this book appears when Noersmono and some other detainees were instructed to build an irrigation system for their unit. Insufficient tools, especially measurement tools,



became the biggest challenge for them. Provided only with a water pass, a tool that can only measure short distances, Noersmono explains in detail his strategy to use this tool to build irrigation for his unit. Additional knowledge shared in Noersmono's memoir relates to different types of timber in Buru, especially how the prisoners used mangrove woods to build their barracks. Both memoirs visualize Buru not only as a site that conveys a narrative of violence, but also one of knowledge production—knowledge that the prisoners generated to survive and tackle the insufficient life necessities of the camp.

### 3 The Generation of Postmemory

In 2017, Buru was inhabited by a total of 132,100 people (BPS Kabupaten Buru 2018: 55). They consist of indigenous people, transmigrants, and former political prisoners who decided to continue living on the island. From being a 'place for utilization' (*tefaat*) of political prisoners, Buru gradually transformed to another national project: becoming Maluku's granary. In 2015, president Joko Widodo stated his reluctance to import various food products, including rice from Vietnam and Thailand. He underlined the necessity of self-reliance and the role of Buru of becoming the granary of the province Maluku (Suhartono 2015). This transformation is captured emotionally in the documentary *Pulau Buru Tanah Air Beta* ['Buru Island: My Homeland'], produced by Dolorosa Singa and Whisnu Yanar and directed by Rahung Nasution. The film follows two former political prisoners, Hersri Setiawan and Tedjabayu, in their journey to return to Buru. They travel to see former detainees still living on the island, and to several sites around the camp, such as the rebuilt cultural performance center and the church. Not only does the film depict the emotions of Setiawan and Tedjabayu during their trip, but also the reflections of the next generation, including the village secretary of Savanajaya and Setiawan's daughter, Ken Setiawan. These second-generation accounts show that narratives of violence also circulate within families, despite their silencing by the state. These interpretations of parents' or grandparents' experiences resemble *postmemory*, a term introduced by Marianne Hirsch in her work on second and third generations of Holocaust survivors. Hirsch describes postmemory as:

The relationship that the 'generation after' bears to the personal, collective and cultural trauma of those who came before—to experiences they 'remember' only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own

right. Postmemory's connection to the past is thus actually mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection and creation.

HIRSH 2012: 5

Applying this concept to 1965–66 violence, we can see the ways in which postmemory becomes more complicated. Exclusion of violence in the official narrative created different trajectories of postmemory. Narratives of violence remain dark secrets within some families, while they became shared knowledge in others. Even in the latter case, it can create resentment and distance between the second and third generations. One of Vanessa Hearman's respondents had to abandon her daughter during her imprisonment. Although they were reunited, their relationship shows no intimacy or warmth (Hearman 2018: 168). Empathy gained from such family narratives can also drive human rights activism (Conroe 2018: 199–214). Narratives of violence circulating in families are not only transferred through direct sharing, but can also emerge in silence. Silence does not simply mean being “traumatized” or having diminished memories, but can be an outcome of negotiation with the past. Carol Kidron's work (2009) on families of Holocaust survivors interrogates why most of her interviewees emphasize that they are not suffering from the effects of transmitted trauma and do not want to document their families' Holocaust history, nor testify in public. Kidron places this in contrast with the logocentric paradigm values silence as negative and a deviation of psychological norms. A common prescription to this perceived traumatic behavior usually involves testimony or talk therapy. Using ethnographic methods, Kidron zoom into the “presence of absence” of Holocaust memory in the family by looking at, for example, the way stories are embedded in objects or habits formed by experience of Holocaust violence.

Stories of children and grandchildren of 1965–66 survivors have been well-compiled in Soe Tjen Marching's *The End of Silence: Accounts of the 1965 Genocide in Indonesia* (2017) that contains the different narratives of first, second, and third generations. Marching herself also wrote of her experience, particularly about her father who was detained. She began with the silence in the family: Marching's father died in 1998 without her knowing who he was. Marching once overheard the news of her father's imprisonment. She recognized that something was being kept hidden, because the reasons for his detention constantly changed—from business fraud to critical journalism. Details of these reasons were missing, so Marching kept feeling suspicious about her father's story. Later on, she found out that her father was not involved in the Communist Party, but had assisted several human rights organizations, including in hiding a befriended PKI member during the anti-communist operations. He was taken

from his house in 1966 and released from imprisonment around 1969. Marching's mother eventually told the story of her father much later, after Soeharto's resignation and her father's death. Marching's story is part of seven other narratives of the children of survivors and four of their grandchildren, revealing various processes and strategies of dealing with silence and openness in their families.

Similar stories of children and grandchildren can be found in the book *Cahaya Mata Sang Pewaris: Kisah Nyata Anak-Cucu Korban Tragedi 65* ['Sparkles in the Eyes of the Heirs: True stories from Children and Grandchildren of the '65 Tragedy'] (2016). This publication is neatly compiled and edited by Putu Oka Sukanta, an ex-political prisoner and writer. In the foreword, Nani Nurachman Soetojo highlights how the narratives in the book transform a traumatic tragedy into a valuable asset to the nation on account of their importance in resisting the structural forgetting of the violence (Sukanta 2016: xiii). Most of these narratives describe their parents prior to 1965, among whom were important figures to Indonesia's nation-building such as Siauw Giok Tjhan, Pramodya Ananta Toer, Oey Hay Djoen, and D.A. Santosa (the former regent of Cilacap). For some who survived detention, reunification with their family presented an interesting process. For example, Mado's story about her experience in reuniting with her father Oey Hay Djoen, depicts her anger and disappointment when Djoen chose to care more about his friends than his own family (pp. 209–14). Wangi Indria, daughter of a local artist, encountered economic difficulty after her father's return. In order to continue her school, she transformed part of her father's fields into a vegetable (*kangkung*) garden (pp. 394–5). Both publications, from Sukanta and Marching, are intended to "end the silence", as Marching states in her epilogue (2017: 214). But it seems that the accounts in both volumes of the younger generation also show how narratives of 1965 can appear through silence.

#### 4 Revisiting Memories of the 1965 Violence

More than 50 years have passed since the tragedies of 1965. In Indonesia, the movement towards justice and reconciliation is facing many challenges. Yet, memorialization initiatives have gradually become more inclusive. Besides survivors and human rights organizations, Indonesia's young generations (even those whose family were not involved in the violence) are participating through popular means such as social media, a website that compile stories related to 1965 (*Ingat 65*), cultural performances such as the Papermoon Puppet Theatre, and local memorialization practices of mass grave sites such as the one in

Mangkang, Semarang (Damar Sinuko 2015). These initiatives show that memories of violence, although still largely excluded in formal narratives, persists rather than diminish. Sites and family stories have become the sources of their preservation. Furthermore, these phenomena also challenge the idea of the binary divisions one frequently encounters in existing studies of memories of 1965: between official and counter-memory, memory and forgetting, silence and openness, repression and resistance. As we proceed further in time, we will see more and more complexities, where one aspect of memory or memorialization does not necessarily weaken another. It is time, therefore, to study the 1965 violence and its ongoing legacies in ways that accommodate complexities—such as the ones outlined in this review article—rather than binaries.

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